

NEGOTIATING BLACK MASCULINITY AND AUDIENCE ACROSS HIGH SCHOOL  
CONTEXTS: A FEMINIST POSTSTRUCTURAL ANALYSIS OF THREE NON-DOMINANT  
STUDENTS' MULTILITERACY COMPOSITION PRACTICES DURING DIGITAL  
STORYTELLING

by

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## **Abstract**

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Negotiating Black Masculinity and Audience Across High School Contexts: A feminist poststructural analysis of three non-dominant students' multiliteracy composition practices during digital storytelling

Thesis directed by Professor Elizabeth Dutro

Autobiographical digital storytelling (DST) is a burgeoning multiliteracy practice in in- and out-of-school spaces. Recently, education researchers have explored DST's potential as a robust critical literacy tool for non-dominant youth to tell agentic counter narratives. A less explored area of youth DST practices relates to how authors account for audience (local and macro discourse) when composing digital autobiographies. Using feminist poststructural theory as a heuristic and analytical tool, I investigated the varying discourses youth authors engaged throughout their processes and products related to autobiographical DST.

The ethnographic data for this dissertation were collected in an English Language Arts high school classroom, African American Literature, over the course of four months across fall semester 2012. The three case study findings chapters illustrate three non-dominant students' approaches to negotiating their subjectivity within the school context across multiple school spaces. The findings from this study complicate notions of agency; namely the case studies demonstrate how diverse youth of color negotiated multiple and competing discourses when narrating stories of the self in relation to a perceived peer audience. More specifically, each case

provides a detailed analysis of how Darius, Malcolm, and Gabriel, negotiated local and macro discourses related to Black masculinity, salient intersecting subjectivities for each.

This study holds theoretical implications in establishing the importance of using poststructural feminist theories in combination with Critical Discourse Analysis of student processes and produced related to autobiographical storytelling by way of detecting the complex power relations youth navigate within the school context. Moreover, this study reports important implications regarding the utility of digital storytelling as a culturally responsive, multimodal, critical literacy practice that affords youth opportunities to draw on personally and culturally meaningful discourses (e.g., hip-hip music) as they compose digital representations in relation to local and macro discourse. Additionally, implications for English Language Arts practice encourage future examination of how youth author's attentiveness to peer audience discourse demonstrate students' facilities in composing narratives in relation to audience.



### **Dedication**

I dedicate this dissertation to my mother, Georgyann Wernikoff, my teacher in life. Thank you for being my cheerleader, my rock, and my sounding board. I am this woman because of you.

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## INTRODUCTION

Darius, Malcolm, and Gabriel were high school seniors at Regional High School, a large public school that embraced its identity as highly diverse. The school served students representing diversity across race, ethnicity, class, nationality, immigration experience and status, sexuality, and gender. The school celebrates its international diversity by hanging flags down its long hallways that stand for the forty countries of origin represented among students who make up Regional High's diverse student body. When I launched my dissertation study, the school had just approved veteran teacher, Dr. Kira Buchannan's proposal to teach the first African American and Hispanic Literature course at the school. In addition, that same year, the student body president was removed from his post for making racist comments on a public Facebook page. As I will show through the experiences of these three Black young men who engaged in digital storytelling through Kira's African American literature course, these were just two of the competing discourses these young men were negotiating within and outside of school that were embedded in both the products and processes of crafting digital, multimodal narratives. Digital storytelling, a multimodal form of storytelling, in which the author incorporates music, image, text, audio, voice, and video to create a digital narrative, has widely been considered as an artistic, narrative endeavor that allows for personal reflection and processing of a life event. Moreover, the autobiographical digital story has come to be viewed as a powerful tool of self-expression, often in a seemingly transparent way. In this respect, digital narratives can function as a process by which we make sense of experience. It can also potentially take on a form of self-representation that reifies, disrupts, troubles, or counters other's perceptions of the author.

Two notable features of digital storytelling when compared to other composition practices facilitate the tools' ability to have an impact beyond the point of production. First,

creating a movie designed to share with others axiomatically involves the very public aspect of revealing one's narrative with an audience. Through this public display of self, the author has a platform from which she can project whatever story she wishes for her audience to know about her. Second, the fixity, or sedimentation involved in making the movie solidifies a self-representation, effectively moving a malleable subjectivity into a static form. As I will discuss in the Theoretical chapter two, having a life beyond production does not always serve its author well.

In these respects, the current vision for the digital autobiographical text is that it takes on a new and weighty role in the classroom especially for those working with non-dominant students.

Positioning student texts as central texts in the classroom is both an exciting and a complex endeavor. It is exciting to think about centering students as knowers and as agents affecting other students' knowledge of them; this position has particular salience for non-dominant youth whose stories are so often already written for them. It is complex and potentially risky, due to the unknown consequences of sharing something new and by definition focused on the "self" with peers and teachers. Whether a student would choose to reveal all, or reveal nothing, through this invitation to agentive authorship, one's choices are not entirely one's own to make. In other words, just because an author is authoring a story *about* herself, does not mean she is authoring *herself*.

### **Road Map for this Dissertation**

At its core, this dissertation explores an intimate relationship between text and subjectivity in an effort to exploit opportunities for authorial agency in the English Language Arts classroom—opportunities scholarship asserts digital storytelling offers youth authors. The

significance of this relationship between text and self is predicated on the idea that texts form and represent the entities that hold storylines for possible selves; therefore, selves are textual formations and texts give rise to the language, gestures, ideas, beliefs, values, subject positions, storylines that one might author oneself through. A classroom organized around experiences with text, that is the Language Arts classroom, seems the apropos place to explore how one's identity is shaped through experiences with text. As I discuss in chapter one, exercising control, or agency over the choices one makes necessitates an investigation of how available choices are constrained by discourses resonant in language and other semiotic markers, or texts (Luke, 1995) in the way I discuss in chapter three.

Research on digital storytelling in afterschool settings, which I outline at length in the Literature chapter two, has demonstrated how marginalized youth have been able to author narratives of the self that bolster desirable aspects of themselves, while overtly and implicitly resisting dominant, oppressive discourses (Hull & Katz, 2006). Following these findings, scholars have recently begun exploring the affordances of digital storytelling as a critical classroom practice (Curwood & Gibbons, 2010) where students are encouraged to author counter master-narratives in their own digital stories by way of informing new narratives about non-dominant subjectivities.

In this dissertation, I argue that as we advocate for digital storytelling to be incorporated into the classroom curricula as a form of critical narrative practice, we must investigate the implications for placing the burden of disruption on youth authoring from vulnerable subject positions. This investigation leads me to attend centrally to the interlocking networks of power and discourse that implicate subjectivities and form the material realities for lived experiences

for those identifying with marginal subject positions. I discuss these networks at length in the Theoretical chapter, one.

Moreover, understanding the conditions for student authorial agency necessitates acknowledging that constructing selves happen in relation to other people, and other texts. Ruitenberg (2007) calls on educators to “conceive of students, and students of themselves, not as autonomous agents, nor as passive recipients of tradition, but rather as subjects whose actions and identities both depend on, and can make changes to, discourses that precede and exceed them” (p.8). When educators work to harness and center youth experience and knowledge as a way to subvert young people’s marginal positionings in school discourse, we need to understand youth’s hesitation, reluctance, resistance, or even seeming “failure” to follow us down this path (in addition to any other response).

In chapter three, I discuss how my Methods and Research Design are organized to access youth’s decision-making processes when engaging with text during digital storytelling composition and other interactions through which they construct and negotiate meaning in the contexts surrounding that process. This investigation is ultimately oriented towards building on scholarship that has conceptualized practices that have the potential to afford agentive authorship. However, I approach classrooms with a sober attention to the challenges involved in disrupting longstanding discourses that have deeply cleaved pathways that determine school successes and failures for youth.

In reiterating questions long posed by social science oriented scholars, Luke (1995) underscores the applicability of critical discourse analysis to research situated in schools. For those collectively investigating “Who succeeds and who fails in schools? How and why?” Luke (1995) posits, “...it is in this context that analyses of language, text, and discourse can address

issues of educational access to cultural and economic, symbolic and material resources (p. 7). Furthermore, for those of us interested in disrupting the oppressive positions residing within school discourses, it behooves us to attend carefully to normative discursive practices signaled in student and teacher talk. In the context of that focus of inquiry, I centrally ask, *how do subjects negotiate and transgress these norms? How does digital narrative authorship facilitate youth author's negotiation of norms towards agentive ends?* I end this Introduction chapter with the complete list of research questions, which follow this initial inquiry.

## **Study**

In the chapters that follow, I detail the specific contexts and spaces within and outside the classroom spaces where I sought to understand the multiplicity of discourses informing how youth experience and perform their subjectivities. I use these contexts as the backdrop for examining the complexities surrounding agency and audience in autobiographical digital identity narrative compositions in English language arts classrooms.

The findings chapters are organized according to the sequence in which I wrote them, beginning with Darius, then Malcolm, and ending with Gabriel. In the Methods chapter I explain the rationale for this ordering specific to how writing Darius's chapter informed my approach to digital story analysis in the subsequent findings chapters. I also describe throughout out how the conversations I had with Gabriel regarding his sense of his peer audience importantly shaped the conversations I had with Darius and Malcolm and gave rise to an important finding that resonates across pertaining to each students' perception of his audience. In Darius' chapter, I illustrate how Darius negotiated his composition choices in relation to his sense that his peers would judge him for his past life; yet, I discuss how Darius positioned his DMP protagonist as a heroic survivor of struggle as he drew on multiple literacies (e.g., song lyrics, quotations from

Hip-hop artists, and Western philosophers, and images from his past and present life) to tell a counter narrative that accomplished his expressed goal to show his happy childhood and his promising future.

Similar to Darius, Malcolm sensed that his audience would and did unfairly judge him for his recent past. Knowing that he was being judged, Malcolm took a different approach to digital self-representation and invited his peers to judge him in the opening frames. In this chapter, I discuss the complexities of how Malcolm managed his sense of his peer audience by presenting a counter narrative that he composed in relation to how he felt he was being judged. In other words, while his salient school identities were failure and criminal, his digital self-representation was that of a famous rap star; he juxtaposed this narrative with a more intimate insight into the life of a high school student who had at once enjoyed success as a high school athlete, and was going to make his comeback. Malcolm primarily used his own creations for his DMP, aside from the music, thereby concurrently illustrating his savvy with multiliteracies, despite failing his English Language Arts class.

I end the findings chapters with Gabriel's case. Gabriel and I became friends over the course of the project through which we met daily over several weeks to talk about Gabriel's life and construct his DMP. In this chapter, I discuss how Gabriel expressed a profound sense of mistrust in his peers to know him outside of the stereotypes he believed they held of him. Accordingly, I demonstrate how Gabriel told one version of his life narrative to me and constructed a truncated version for his peer audience's viewing. At the same time, while recognizing the dissonance that might be caused in his violation of gender norms in his song choices, Gabriel selected the song he liked best anyway. All three chapters illustrate the complex

approaches each student took to authoring a digital autobiographical narrative within the school context.

### **Research Questions.**

The following questions, which I crafted and revisited in an iterative process during data collection and analysis, guided my study:

1. How do non-dominant youth in an African American Literature course negotiate subjectivities in relation to and contestation with macro and micro discourses across conversational and compositional contexts in the classroom and other school spaces?
2. What do the process and products of autobiographical digital composition suggest about youth authors' access to and use of multiple literacies that may subvert, trouble, or disrupt normative (often dualistically organized) discourses of "self" in relation to audience and school literacies?
  - 2a. How do different audiences (e.g., author, peer, teacher, researcher, family) inform youth authors' decision-making processes for digital composition?
  - 2b. What are the intersections and/or disruptions between the discourses and subjectivities students engage in multimodal composition compositions?

## CHAPTER 1

### THEORETICAL FOUNDATION

My investigation into the meaning making spaces of autobiographical digital narratives is done against the backdrop of other storied practices in curricular and spatial contexts that are embedded in how the “self” is constructed in schools. Thus, narrative and identity or, to draw on the term most resonant with the theoretical perspectives I discuss in this chapter, subjectivity, are central foci in this study.

Feminist poststructural theory offers four key ideas that relate to how I conceptualize subjectivity and agency in my study. First, feminist poststructural epistemology actively rejects a humanist notion of ‘essential’ self through which actions follow from natural inclination (Butler, 1997). Rather, it views identity and subjectivity as constructed in relation to others through difference (Butler, 1997; Davies, 2000; Hall, 1996). Second, the theories elucidate the ways in which subjects take up and perform (Butler, 1990; Ruitenberg, 2007) subjectivities within discourses that give rise to recognizable categories of identity (Davies, 2000; Buckholtz & Hall, 2005). Discursive practices comprise people’s linguistic and corporal enactment of institutionalized discourses; thus, engaging discursive practices facilitates one’s active participation in creating existent “social and psychological realities” (Davies, 2000, p. 88). Third, poststructural feminist theory attends to how recognition (i.e., what is normal) aids in the stability granted some discursive practices and the concurrent marginalization of others (Foucault, 1995). This marginalization relates to how subject positions are constructed in dualistic pairings within discourses that render one position in the affirmative (i.e., male) and the other subject position (i.e., female) in the negative as will be discussed.



Finally, poststructural feminist theory conceptualizes agency as one's ability to appropriate language and other means of signification in a manner that allows her to refuse subject positions that do not serve her while forcing new positions through reworking what was previously unrelated in discourse (Davies, 2000). Because the stability of any categorically constructed identity resides in a delicate tandem with its binary pair, the thing that it is not—identities are perpetually fragile—even as they are constructed through differential power relations. Moreover, as people perform subject positions across a multiplicity of discourses they affect what discursive practices within any discourse signifies; in other words, people's discursive practices transform discourse. Agency involves coming to know non-dominant discourses that provide individuals access to previously unknown ways of being. By taking up new subject positions, in conversation, through writing, and bodily movements individuals can act agentively to dislodge, disrupt, and reject the hegemonic discourses that left limited and constrained options for subjectivity (Davies, 2000).

### **Discourse and Subjectivity**

Discourse is a central concept in the theories on which I draw. In this framework, discourse refers to “institutionalized language and language-like sign systems” (Davies & Harre, 1990, p. 88). For instance, discourses function as malleable containers, housing the networks of signs and symbols through which we “make sense of and construct our world and ourselves” (Davies & Harre, 1990, p.88). Discourses delineate the understood rules that organize talk and multimodal (e.g., corporeal, gesture, voice, face expression) communicative practices. Discursive practices, or the semiotic markers of discourse, resonate in political, social, cultural systems, and can be traced to locally specific practices (Davies & Harre, 1990, p.88).

Davies' framing of discourse and discursive practices is similar to what Gee discusses as the distinction between Discourses and discourses. For Gee (1990), discourses, like discursive practices, refer to language-in-use, while Discourse, akin to Davies' description of discourse, encompasses language in combination with other social practices (values, beliefs, ways of thinking) for socially recognizable groups, or Discourse communities. According to Gee (1990), people can occupy multiple Discourse communities. Luke (1995) contends, "all texts are multidiscursive in that they draw upon a range of discourses, fields of knowledge, and voices and are continuously cross fertilizing" (p.15). Luke's acknowledgement illuminates the complexity in identifying discourses in texts. Yet, we can locate discourses in texts because of how they manifest. Luke draws on Foucault (1972) in further defining discourses as "recurrent statements and wordings across texts" and Kress (1996) who established that discourses "mark out identifiable systems of meaning" which are tied back, as Gee (1990) has argued, "to ways of knowing and believing" (p.15).

To illustrate how I locate discourse and discursive practices in my study, I draw on an example from a class discussion in the African American Literature course. Interrogating "Black" identity was commonplace in Kira's class. Early on in the semester, Kira asked students to free-write on the prompt "What does it mean to be Black in America?" Kira then invited students to share their opinions. After several moments of vibrant discussion, the class arrived to a consensus that being Black in America means being poor, uneducated, and athletic. At this collectively derived conclusion, Kira threw her hands down on the desk, bringing them down with each word in a gesture to reinforce her point, she exclaimed, "But, you-guys-don't-fit-that-definition!" Gabriel, a young man of color who is one of the focal cases in this study, who was born in Liberia, was an active participant in class discussions, an honors student, star running

back for his high school football team, and arguably one of the most popular seniors in the school. He laughed and responded, “People don’t look at me and think, hey, he’s smart.” “I would!” Kira threw back. “But you’re not like everyone else,” Malcolm, another young African American man in the class who is also a focal case study responded and proceeded to list off all of the times he could recall being pulled over by police when walking around in his neighborhood, at malls, and elsewhere. This vignette illustrates youth’s awareness of a racist discourse that implicates young black men as criminals, as well as Kira’s attempts to disrupt this discourse by calling on the students’ lived narratives as exemplars that distort the dominant discourse resonant in Gabriel’s assertion and Malcolm’s anecdote. The discursive practices indexing race and racism and masculinity are illustrated by Gabriel positioning himself by naming aspects of his physicality as semiotic markers that signal his supposed lack of intelligence. Kira presents a counter discourse by pointing to the students themselves as embodying alternative truths about young black people when she says, “But you guys don’t fit that definition”. Despite their lived experiences that counter a racist discourse about youth of color, the conversation is dominated by examples that vividly illustrate the material realities of living as a racialized person implicated by racist discourse.

Foucault (1972) argues that discourses materialize as interlocking networks of power. In practice, discourses "systematically form the objects about which they speak," shaping grids and hierarchies for the institutional categorization and treatment of people” (as cited in Luke, 1995, p.9). It is both the framing of each subject position in relation to what it is not (Hall, 1996), as well as this hierarchical ordering that maintains a fragile semblance of truth about any given discursive category (Davies, 2000). Moreover, hegemonic discourses, those that dominate in

their efforts to control the stability of dualistically organized subject positions, inscribe bodies with their narratives.

The body, as a site of inscription, is multiply implicated by the discourses the body itself validates and contests through its very existence and subsequent performativity. For instance, in my own digital story, which I intended to present as a story about my journey to understanding my queer identity, I show several pictures of me with my arm around my girlfriend. The positioning of our bodies in relation to each other signifies our romantic relationship to a dominant Western-oriented audience. However, the fact that both of our bodies signify “female” challenges dominant, heteronormative notions of appropriate behavior for our bodies. Agency, which I will discuss in more detail below, necessitates cultivating a conscious awareness of how discourses inform our gestures, movement, words, values, beliefs, and behaviors. In other words, in order for one can only know “herself”—her voice, movements, skin, desires—through discourses that preceded her; however, revealing and analyzing those multiple storylines that make up subjectivity is a way to enact agency. The embodied nature of discourses is important in the context of digital narratives as agentive authorship relies on the author’s ability to understand the implications of representations of self and experience, such as voice and image alongside other modes like written text and music.

In my study, I also draw on feminist poststructural theory’s illumination and deconstruction of the logic informing hierarchical dualisms. Dualistic pairings create the divisions between subject positions that enable differential access to material power and privilege (i.e., man/woman; straight/queer; child/adult) (Weedon, 2004). For example, as the category of “male” gets imbedded with authoritative markers (ie. active, father, intelligible), woman’s storylines and metaphors emerge relationally to male as not active, but passive; not

father, but mother; not intelligible, but sensitive (Davies, 2000, p. 48-49). We see these same divisions occurring within cultural categories, ascribing disparate power relations across intersecting categories of race and gender. Kimberle Crenshaw's (1991) seminal work on intersectionality illustrates the importance of attending to, for instance, embedded race and gender identities as a way to understand the particular conditions of how violence specifically marginalizes women of color (p. 541). Hall (1996) underscores the implications of this fundamental aspect of identity maintenance when he writes, "it is only through the relation to the Other, the relation to what it is not, to precisely what it lacks, to what has been called its *constitutive outside* that the 'positive' meaning of any term—and thus its 'identity'—can be constructed" (p. 18). Hence, identity maintenance always occurs within this struggle over the more powerful, legitimate, unmarked position.

Exposing the ideological formation of storylines and subject positions allows researchers to conceptualize choices made by those performing from within normative subject positions "as more akin to 'forced choices'" or passive actions reflecting subjects merely playing out discursive practices outlined by particular storylines (Davies, 2000, p.60). Ruitenberg (2007) extends this discussion of the myth of unencumbered choice into the concept of performativity as theorized by Judith Butler (1993):

Discursive performativity means not that I, as autonomous subject, 'perform' my identity the way an actor performs a role, but rather that I, as subject, *am performatively produced* by the discourse in which I participate. (pp. 16-17)

For youth composing narratives of the self, their choices for subject positions are constrained by the storylines available in the discourses they already understand themselves through (i.e., student, gendered, racialized, ethnicized, parent, child, brother, sister). Further, whatever aspects

of these subjectivities that are present or accessible in their digital narratives are constrained by their awareness of what information is appropriate for this assignment, in this context, with this audience, and by the storyline itself which is regulated by these other factors, or “co authors” (Tierney, 2007, p.16).

Furthermore, while subject positions maintain ephemeral properties due to their constructed and contested nature, in their relatively normalized stability, they have material implications for one’s lived experience. For Butler (2004), as one’s “personhood is fundamentally dependent on...[granted, shifting] social norms” at particular historical moments and in particular spaces, “certain humans are not recognized as human at all” (p.2). Furthermore, Butler (1993) explains, “A subjects’ legitimacy is realized through reiterative processes that sediment identities through repetitive discursive performance.” It is under these conditions, Butler (1993) argues, “[that] the materiality of the body is framed and formed.” Through reiteration, bodies achieve and signify a ‘natural’ status not easily dislodged. In attending to the implications for these “lived narratives” (Davies, 2000), a poststructural feminist project inherently takes up a social justice project aimed at exploring “what maximizes the possibilities for a livable life, what minimizes the possibility of an unbearable life or, indeed, social or literal death” (Butler, 2004, p. 8).

A humanist discourse erects a dichotomy between the individual and the society that the individual acts within. Identity embedded within Western first person pronoun grammar, or the linguistic structure that signifies humanity through labels such as “I” and “me” and “myself”, “[give] a person an illusion of being a historically continuous, unitary entity separate from the social world” (Davies, 2000, p.44). This cleavage between individual and society places the burden and responsibility for action on the shoulders of the individual. The humanist perspective

conceptualizes choices as though they are made in a vacuum, and success or failures resulting from one's actions as belonging to the individual.

Furthermore, a humanist concept of the 'essential self' effectively masks actual constraints on individual choice. Bamberg (2010) illuminates the 'essential' qualities inherent to a humanist, and what she equates with a Western, sense of identity. She writes, "Identity and sense of self are something we are said to *have*, i.e., they are properties of an internal make-up as "who-we-are" as persons, not easy to shake off" (p. 4). Western logic presents "choices...[as though they are] based on rational thought" that should be made in congruence with who the individual is in society (Davies, 2000, p. 57). Those acting in violation of norms suffer "...strict punishments for contesting the script by performing out of turn or through unwarranted improvisations" (Butler, 1997, p.415). Such assumptions surrounding "choice" and norms permeate traditional English curriculum and instrumental approaches to literacy; these assumptions could threaten the integrity of digital storytelling as a new literacies practice specific to the relative liberty afforded those engaging the practice.

Although I did not observe what I would call a "strict" punishment for a violation of norms in Kira's classes, one of the key ideas that arose in my analyses related to students' perceptions of how peers did and could potentially police one another and how choices regarding what to share of themselves in their digital narratives were complexly related to students' perceptions about their classmates' reactions to certain information about them. These issues were salient for the case study students whose stories I share in detail in subsequent chapters, but also for other students who participated in my larger study. For instance, in composing her digital narrative, Oseye, a young woman who immigrated to the United States from Liberia in middle school, elected to leave out images of her parents and any mention of being from Liberia.

When I asked Oseye why this was the case (in response to her telling me that she had chosen to leave them out) she explain that she didn't want to hear "it" from her classmates. As we talked further, Oseye indicated that despite this being an African American Literature class, in a school that celebrates its international diversity (with a significant representation of students immigrating from African countries), and in a class that had several students who had immigrated from African countries, she did not want to address an ignorance regarding what Africa is actually like, which she felt resonated amongst her peers. In this respect, even when choices are not prescriptively constrained by academic discourses (curriculum for example) competing discourses regarding normalcy always complicate authorial agency.

Poststructural critique, according to St. Pierre (2000), "can be employed to examine any commonplace situation, any ordinary event or process, in order to think differently about that occurrence – to open up what seems "natural " to other possibilities" (p. 479). In this way, feminist poststructualism theorizes identity as a concept emerging from within an interrelated network of discourses (Davies, 2000). This stance rejects a humanist discourse, which situates the person as a free agent (Davies, 2000), in favor of viewing people as occupying subject positions rather than possessing identities. Stuart Hall (1996) explains this difference when he writes,

identification is constructed on the back of recognition of some common origin or shared characteristic with another person or group, or with an ideal, and with the natural closure of solidarity and allegiance established on this foundation. In contrast...the discursive approach sees identification as a construction, a process never completed—always 'in process'. (p. 16)



While ‘in process’ might suggest a constant undoing of the subject, these processes form within and through seemingly stable positions. Henriques et al. (1984) illustrate the implications for this process of becoming, writing, “in poststructuralist theory....the subject itself is the effect of production, caught in the mutually constitutive web of social practices, discourses, and subjectivity; its reality is the tissue of social relations” as cited in Davies, 2000, p. 55). These views on subjectivity inform how I examine youth’s subjectivity as arising through the different subject positions made available through the conversations they participate in, both spoken and written as well as their awareness and perceptions about the norms that regulate acceptable identities, as Oseye’s digital narrative choices illustrate. This includes an attention to the local, classroom audience, curricular materials, and teacher expectations as well as school discourses at large informing dominant conceptions of literacy.

### **Poststructuralism and its Tensions**

*Deconstruction and knowledge.* In bringing a deconstructive framework inherent to the poststructural project to bear on youth’s lived experiences, even with liberatory intentions in mind, I must also raise important tensions amongst postcolonial, feminist poststructuralist, and post structuralist scholarship.

Hall’s (1996) discussion of identity illuminates the appropriateness of a deconstructive analytic when studying the spaces of any discursively produced identities. This appropriateness resides in deconstructions’ objective to denaturalize the humanist discourse on natural ways of being. Regarding identity, Hall (1996) writes,

[this concept of identity] accepts that identities are never unified and...[are] increasingly fragmented and fractured; never singular, but multiply constructed against different,

often intersecting and antagonistic, discourses, practices and positions. They are...constantly in the process of change and transformation... (p. 17)

Stuart Hall (1996), a postcolonial theorist, explores the affordances of poststructuralism to conceptualize the racialized and ethnicized body through the work of Butler (1993), who takes gender and sexuality as her core sites of analysis. However, he warns that such a framework cannot be “simply grafted on” (p.29) to analysis of the discursive construction of the racialized and ethnicized body in how it has been constructed “through the regulatory normative ideal of a ‘compulsive Eurocentricism’” (p.29). In this respect, dominant discourses regulating on the basis of constructed race and ethnicity have their own set of binaristic subject pairings as well as regulatory mechanisms upholding what otherwise might be referred to as racist discourse. A failure to recognize these differences could lead to the misapplication of a supposedly liberatory framework effectively erasing subject positions. Much of this tension is located in a struggle over knowledge and the places for where alternative discourses might be located as well as the material implications for deconstruction.

Audre Lorde’s (1979) criticism of white feminists’ failure “to recognize difference as a cultural strength” (p.16) illustrates such an occurrence. Moreover, Patricia Hill Collins (2004), a black feminist scholar, extends this reservation in articulating a principal contention with poststructuralism’s deconstructive project to dislodge hegemonic holds on whose knowledge counts. She argues that deconstruction “makes it difficult to develop alternative knowledge claims because to do so violates the fundamental premise of a deconstructive approach” (p.55). Hill Collins’ critique about how deconstruction could work to limit spaces for Black women intellectuals in the academy resonates with my discussion about agency in relation to digital storytelling. She argues that despite efforts to “flatten existing power relations” via the strategic

privileging of marginalized voices in published scholarship, “some voices garner more credibility than others” (p.57). Hill Collins’ criticism illuminates the limitations of undoing binary logic locally when it remains intact institutionally. Moreover, that this argument arises from postcolonial and black feminist scholarship underscores how normativity differentially regulates within and across gendered and racialized discourses.

In this respect, identifying how discourses constitute different subject positions will look very different depending on one’s multiple positionalities. This difference is important to consider when achieving consciousness is done with the intention of freeing one to act on her own desires rather than according to given subject positions. For example, while some feminist scholarship pursues deconstruction to the point of dissolving the male/female binary (Davies, 2000, p. 48-54), applying such an approach to racializing and ethnicizing discursive practices is risky. Deconstructing racial discourses in absence of analysis of the material consequences of racialization, potentially borders dangerously close to a “color blind” approach to race. As critical scholars have long argued, color blind or “melting pot” approaches accomplish little more than collapsing race into whiteness in much the same way that dissolving a male/female binary would lead to the complete erasure of female leaving behind only the already unmarked category of maleness. In this respect, lived experiences and knowledge arising from non-dominant subject positions importantly inform new discourses.

As I look to youth authored digital narratives for so-called new discourses, I must be cognizant that indexers of race, ethnicity, and culture are not necessarily signaling subject positions within a dominant discourses. For instance, many youth identifying as African American include hip-hop, or in their words, “rap” music, because many argue it resonates with their experiences, and I would add offers a different discourse for black subjectivity. In this

respect, while I do not have space to elaborate here, I see stand point epistemologies (Denzin, 1997), which privilege the centrality of lived experiences as providing alternative basis for knowledge in the face of dominant discourse, as taking an important conceptual role for this dissertation specific to how I theorize the ways in which youth access, explore, relate to and take up non-dominant subject positions.

At the same time, feminist poststructuralism largely pursues a deconstructive project in its efforts to theorize a discursive space free from patriarchal discourse, yet leaves a theoretical gap regarding where to locate these new discourses, or how to go about constructing new discourses.

*Nomadic subjects.* Jasbir Puar (2007) has taken center stage as a vocal critic in feminist scholar's reliance on categories to inform theories of subjectivity. She argues that "no matter how attuned to locational politics of space, place, and scale, these formulations may still limit us if they assume the automatic primacy and singularity of the disciplinary subject and its identitarian interpellation" (Puar, 2007, p. 206). In other words, Puar argues for an epistemological dissolution of the subject, which is always a consequence of discursive construction, because any attempts at reconstruction that stops at the body fails to dismantle the complex network, or regimes of signs that constitute the subject. In this vein Puar continues, "in the stillness of position, bodies actually lose their capacity for movement...for (social) change" (p. 213).

Reflecting a postmodern approach to decentering, Puar and other queer theorists (Heckert, 2010) explore the potentials of assemblage, or "rhizomic thought" as theorized by Deleuze & Guattari (1999). They posit that with the erasure of the center, comes the erasure of hierarchy, and "correct" order, effectively "defying" the "subject/object multiplicity of relationships" where

the “independent subject” is rejected in favor of everything being multiply connected with everything else, rendering the project “creatively queer” (Heckert, 2010, pp. 47-48). While a queer approach to subjectivity suspends the application of reading text through a familiar discourse and consequently opens space for a “certain kind of sense that makes no sense...[staging] a performative opening for a new sense of the world (Munoz, 2011, p.150) relinquishing boundaries cannot be treated lightly (Braidotti, 1996; Hill Collins, 2004).

This attention to boundaries is of theoretical importance to my study, because agency within a poststructural feminist epistemology demands a troubling of dominant discourse (specifically a patriarchal discourse) and subsequent storylines for subject positions, which constitute the boundaries of subjectivity. In this respect, I anticipate encountering this tension with regard to agency—poststructural theory clearly outlines how to deconstruct discourses, but it leaves much to the imagination with regard to what agency beyond the patriarchy (or other dominant discourse for that matter) looks like.

In response to this tension, Braidotti (1996) envisions a fruitful relationship between Deleuze and feminism namely with regard to his approach in theorizing woman outside a patriarchal binary construct, or more generally his pursuit of “different modes of thinking” about subjectivity (p. 308). Where European feminism and Deleuze differ is in Deleuze’s break from “stable roots and fixed foundations” (p. 309). Braidotti is referring here to European feminism’s emphasis females’ lived experiences and how these experiences play out differently between males and females. However, she notes that feminists’ recent move towards poststructuralism “promotes the positivity of sexual difference as a way out of humanism” (p. 309) indicating a possible break with that center and by way of drawing parallels to stand point epistemology which views writing as a way out of the center, out of fear, to power (Anzaldua, 1987, p. 171).

Moreover, theorizing “women as other-than man’s Other” (Braidotti p. 309) outside of its binaristic construction implies that Deleuzian thought, in some respects, outlines the direction poststructural feminist thinking orients towards. Yet, feminism, as Braidotti discusses, has yet to completely abandon its allegiance to the female experience and it is Deleuze’s own failure to “conceptualize his own speaking position [as white and male]” that makes him the subject of feminist criticism. Braidotti (1996), reminding us of Hill Collins’ (2004) aforementioned criticisms of poststructuralism, explains,

Only a subject who historically has profited from the entitlements of subjectivity and the rights of citizenship can afford to put his ‘solidity’ into question. Marginal subjectivities, or social forces who historically have not yet been granted the entitlements of symbolic presence—and this includes women—cannot easily relinquish boundaries and rights which they have hardly gained as yet. (p. 310)

Yet, ruptures in binary logic exist. With these textual and corporeal violations in process, it behooves feminist poststructural scholars to continue exploring conceptual lenses and empirical work that illuminates the complexities of subjectivity and agency we may hope to realize and discover.

### **Narrative and Agency**

I hold these tensions in mind in this subsequent discussion of poststructural feminist approaches to agency. A feminist poststructuralist approach turns an analytic gaze towards the discursive processes through which subjects are storied with the intention of discovering how people might wrestle back control over their own stories primarily through narrative practices. In this respect, multimodality might be viewed as facilitating agency in its invitation for youth to draw on non-school (and therefore potentially non-dominant) discourses resonant in the music,

images, artifacts, and other narratives they draw on to compose their digital narratives. Yet, this conceptual lens concurrently illuminates how school discourses constrain and inform one's concept of narrative; and, how local audience members informs what authors are willing to and think they should be sharing about themselves.

Agentive action involves conceptualizing the space for purposeful authorship of the self, not outside of discourse, but from within and across discourses. In the case of traditional literacies, for instance, agency could involve engaging writing to come to know a self through “breaking the bonds of words and images and metaphors that have held one inside the male/female dualism” that have made an object of the subjected self (Davies, 2000, p. 53). In addition, feminist poststructural theory exposes normative storylines so that the constructed subject may come to see her subjectification. Choice, then, is realized through the dislodging of self from hegemonic narratives, making it possible for the speaking subject to “discover the possibility of *authority* [where she understands herself as]...a protagonist inside the storylines she is living out” (p. 67). Davies writes that it is “through stories [that] we each constitute ourselves and each other as beings with specificity” (Davies, 2000, p. 22). Thus, storytelling serves as an appropriate space for one to enact and authorial agency.

Agency is predicated on the idea that when we talk about ourselves, we are essentially writing the story of our “I” through a similar narrative process that a fiction author might construct a character in a story (Bamberg, 2010). This fictional story emerges through the process of telling—as one narrates a story of self, she effectively “disassociates the speaking/writing self” from the one who the story is about, thus, making a character of the self (Bamberg, 2010, p. 5). Yet, as poststructural feminist theory acknowledges, these narratives of self are always constructed cooperatively. Davies (2000) writes that we are both “agent

(producer/ director) as well as author and player and the other participants co-author and co-produce the drama” (p.96).

Coming to see how we make characters of ourselves facilitates an understanding of how we participate in constructing our own subjectivity. Of course, this awareness must be coupled with an understanding of how we have participated in performing subject positions that we affect but did not design. This understanding is crucial to informing how I, as a researcher, identify the discursive spaces, and the spaces of lived narratives in particular, where youth tell stories about themselves. These narratives provide a window into the psychological realities and discourses youth draws on to make sense of themselves in the world and what kinds of consciousness they have about the implications for their own subjectivities when taking on different subject positions.

For instance, identifying subject positions one takes up in conversation with others facilitates my insight into both how one views oneself, but also how one views oneself in relation to others. To identify positions, Davies (2000) writes, one must extract “the autobiographical aspects of a conversation in which it becomes possible to find out how each conversant conceives of themselves and of the other participants by seeing what position they take up and in what story, and how they are in turn positioned” (p. 91).

In this way, the subject positions one makes available for others provides information about how individuals conceptualize and concurrently implicate others through their own engaged discursive practices. This last insight provides a window into the particular discourses normatively availed by a classroom audience for publically shared self-narratives.

A digital narrative, as a sedimented narrative, is in part a product of conversations the author has had with others about the narrative and about various features of the narrative (i.e., modal



choices, and perhaps other design features such as sequencing). In this respect, the discourses resonant in modal choices and narrative reflect in part this co-authorship. Given that the digital stories that youth are composing in this class are autobiographical in nature and a majority of the modal and design choices are made by the author regarding what he wants to represent about himself to an audience, we might view digital narratives as partially representative of subject positions the author desires to constitute herself in relation to. Yet, as these digital narratives are also shared with an audience (or multiple audiences) the meanings ascribed to the narrative as a whole as well as to aspects of the narrative are always shifting according to how each individual interprets the text based on their own affiliations. The youth I have interviewed articulate varying levels of awareness and concern regarding their limited control over how their narratives might be interpreted by their audience.

I draw a parallel between this viewing audience to participants in a conversation to illustrate the concept of co-authorship. Conversations, Davies (2000) writes, consist of “a braided development of several storylines” in which people draw on “cultural resources”, or relationally paired subject positions, or roles” (ie. mother/child; student/teacher) each of which may signify similar or different meanings to the speakers. She continues, “a conversation will be univocal only if speakers each adopt complementary subject positions that are organized around shared interpretation of the relevant conversational locations” (p. 93). Of course, I expect, and have already witnessed youth taking on subject positions in their digital narratives not availed through previous conversations and am also aware that youth chose not to share particular details of their lives for fear of the consequences. These choices were made by youth who exercised their own agency about the existence of different discourses and their desire to take on particular subject positions within mutually constructed storylines.

Agency involves developing a conscious awareness of contradictions between external discursive constructs and one's desires—this awareness enables one to access “other ways of knowing” oneself (Davies, 2000, p. 59) that may not align neatly with normative storylines. It encompasses developing a consciousness about how discourses operate, manifest, and implicate subjectivity. This consciousness ideally leads a speaking subject towards accessing “a subject position in which [one acknowledges] a right to be heard;” speaking as an “author” from that position; it requires an openness to being able to envision oneself “as one who can forge something new, through a combination of previously unrelated discourses” (Davies, 2000, pp. 66-67). As I mentioned previously, I believe that digital storytelling affords authorial agency in that youth can tell a story by drawing on multiple modes (i.e., image, video, audio, music, voice, text) enables youth authors access to new discourses that might not be otherwise welcome or available in school contexts as well as produce new forms of subjectivity. Accordingly, as a composition tool, digital storytelling does not necessarily have to follow a prescribed narrative construction, and simply because it is a new form of storytelling, the rules for the genre have yet to be determined. This flexibility in autobiographical authorship opens up possibilities for the author to explore how he would like to tell a story about himself in addition to what he would like to share about himself.

### **Literacy and Identity as Mutually Constitutive Practices**

This study is grounded in a New Literacies Studies (NLS) framework, which understands literacies as being contextualized, ideologically informed social practices that are intricately linked to how individuals and communities identify themselves and are recognized by others (Street, 2003). Due to this inherent interconnectivity between literacy and identities, engaging literacy practices involves revealing and accessing traces of ourselves (Pahl & Roswell, 2005).

Conversely, the literacies we practice shape our subjectivities in that the linguistic structures we engage with are housed within discourses that avail subject positions, storylines, and the semiotic means through which one locates and performs one's subjectivity. As authors, and agents, our discursive performances inform discursive signification; in other words, our actions inform our literacy practices in a perpetually outward motion. With increasing consciousness about the multiplicity of discourses and the implications for our own subjectivity, we gain access to choice and agentive authorship for ourselves, even as pre-existing storylines constrain what choice and agency can mean.

NLS oriented scholarship, in advocating for an ideological (Street, 2003) approach to studying literacy, concurrently calls for new curricular approaches that harness youth's literacy practices. Due to the deep embeddedness of school grammars (Lankshear & Knobel, 2003), subverting dominant (i.e. skill based, teacher directed, autonomously conceptualized, and "curricular") literacy practices is not an easy task (p. 6). However, non-dominant students' access to meaningful learning and identities depends on this subversion. As I discuss in the literature chapter, scholars argue that digital storytelling is such an approach that privileges youth culture, interests, and digital literacy practices while offering a new compositional form. Largely conceptualized in out-of-school learning environments, digital storytelling as a composition practice maintains a resistance at least initially to school discourses imbuing it with the potential to subvert dominant literacy practices specific to form and content.

In reviewing scholarship on digital storytelling with youth, two significant features of that emergent body of work prompted me to pursue a feminist poststructuralist framework as a way to build on the scholarly efforts preceding this study. First, the teachers and researchers using digital storytelling with youth do so largely with the intention of facilitating student

centered choice, voice, and agency among non-dominant youth (Vasudevan, Schultz, & Bateman, 2010; Bing-Canar & Zerkel, 1998; Hull & Katz, 2006). Second, while the conceptual framing for these studies varied greatly in some instances, those interested in agency and authorship principally approach agentive authorship as an achievable outcome for non-dominant authors of digital narratives (Hull & Katz, 2006; DeGennaro, 2008). Feminist poststructural theory complicates some of the theoretical assumptions made about agency in ways that expand a conversation in the field.

Hull and Katz (2006) acknowledge the social inequities inherent to socially constructed identities, and articulate a notable qualification to students' agency in their use of digital narratives to express their identities. They explain that an author's "self determination at any given moment is tempered by the constraints of specific social, cultural, and historical contexts..." (p. 47), and these constraints are most salient for members of non-dominant groups. Moreover, they assert, "supportive social relationships and opportunities for participation" facilitate this agency (p. 48). As I consider the implications of my work, I have a heightened awareness that schools have historically been hostile spaces for non-dominant youth. This awareness is particularly salient when considering how this hostility has been directed towards language and literacy practices that have been marked as non-dominant in school discourse (Luke, 1995). Specifically, bilingualism (when one's first language is not English), rather than being an asset, currently signals a need for remedial instruction (Camarota & Aguilera, 2012) and essentially manifests as a modern day form of sanctioned segregation. And, at the instructional level teaching with non-Anglo (specifically Latino centric) materials has been outlawed in at least one state (Camarota & Aguilera, 2012).

These conditions demonstrate how engaging language and literacy practices that signal racial and ethnic otherness in schools result in profound material consequences for one's learning. However, because participating in dominant school practices for non-dominant youth currently coincides with silencing the very ways in which one has come to know oneself in the world, it is these very conditions that we seek to disrupt.

Within its focus on the power relations inherent to binaristically paired subject positions housed within dominant discourse, feminist poststructural theory illuminates the challenges involved in claiming one's subjectivity from a non-dominant subject position. I will elaborate on what is meant by hierarchically organized binaristically paired subject positions in the following pages, but for now, within these pairings, one position retains an affirmative, or normative position and the other the negative, or non-normative. In a negative, or othered position, the subject position maintains object status specific to how it is constituted and understood by what it is not (Moi, 1987). Thus, asserting one's subjectivity (in other words acting with agency) requires more than subversion, or an overturning a non-dominant position, because that move results in the erasure of what was not (i.e., woman), not what already is legitimate (i.e., male). Rather, agency demands that others participate in recognizing the legitimacy of new subject positions; it requires material networks of support that assert the legitimacy of these new subject positions; and, it necessitates that one has access to new subject positions that facilitate individuals to know a new way of understanding oneself.

Further, when the changes in literacy doctrine that educators advocate for relies on non-dominant youth spotlighting practices and knowledge that otherwise mark them as "other/not/deficient/delinquent" in other school contexts (perhaps even within the very classroom they author their digital narratives in), we have to acknowledge the tensions for youth engaging

these practices when school and dominant discourses remain largely in tact. Of course, at any given moment dominant discourses exist in tandem with other competing discourses; thus, in raising this tension I do not mean to erect a dichotomy between youth subjectivity and the subject positions school discourses avail. Rather, I look to poststructural feminist theory to facilitate an unearthing of the multiplicity of discourses circulating in individuals' performed discursive practices in different contexts. This work illuminates the possibilities for digital storytelling to serve as a school literacy practice that facilitates diverse youths' authorial agency.

## **Conclusion**

The feminist poststructural conceptual lens I presented in this chapter informs how I approach power as a regulatory mechanism that manifests through discourse within these spaces (Foucault, 1978). As Foucault (1978) adeptly reminds us, “where there is power, there is resistance” (p.95). This statement demands the question, *resistance to what end?* Understanding power relations will provide me insight into whether, how, and why some potentially critical practices, may fall flat upon entry into classrooms. More importantly, this understanding of power relations will better prepare us to work with educators and youth working to realize classroom spaces that support critical and transformative engagement with text, self, and the world (Freire, 1993) through which the self continuously unfolds.

## CHAPTER 2

### REVIEW OF LITERATURE

The goals for this project are two fold 1) to attend specifically to the larger instructional, social spaces of the classroom that inform important contexts in which subjectivity forms in relation to school literacies; 2) the need to develop analytic tools for digital stories that reveal the complexities involved in authoring identity narratives for public consumption. Ultimately, this understanding will better enable education researchers to support teachers in creating a curricular context that supports multimodal compositional practices in a way that facilitates youth's literacy engagement and opportunity for agentive authorship with digital storytelling.

#### **Identifying and Investigating the Discursive Spaces for Digital Storytelling**

In this section, I first discuss literacy scholarship that speaks to how I define literacy in the project. I then turn to research that has examined the process of engaging youth knowledge and practices via the multimodal composition tool digital storytelling, particularly in the context of youth's authoring of identity narratives.

Dominant literacy policy of the last decade has developed antithetically to a new literacies model that views language and literacy as fluid, dynamic, and in constant flux. As school curriculum is increasingly driven by narrow measures of literacy, opportunities for youth to represent and explore dynamic aspects of themselves, their interests, knowledge, and experiences diminish (Schultz & Hull, 2008). This is particularly the case for non-dominant<sup>1</sup> youth as will be discussed further in later sections of this chapter. Alternatively, the New

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<sup>1</sup>I follow Gutiérrez and Arzubiaga (2008) in employing the term non-dominant, in reference to, "communities or individuals who have less power, historically as well as in the present, vis-à-vis the dominant community, e.g., economically, socio-politically, educationally" (p. 215). This term preferences a focus on power and positioning within dominant discourses as an alternative to employing a label inscribed within a dominant discourse (ie. 'people of color').

Literacies Studies (NLS) acknowledges the interconnectivity of literacy to one's sense of self (Pahl & Roswell, 2005). Accordingly, literacies are contextualized, ideologically informed social practices (Street, 2003) that afford novel forms of signification via new and old technologies (Lankshear & Knobel, 2003). Moreover, digital storytelling has the potential to bridge print based literacy practices with new literacy practices. As researchers explore the affordances of the technology, this work must concurrently demonstrate how digital composition offers something new to school literacies.

As previously discussed in my theoretical framework chapter, feminist poststructural theories offer insight into the particular discourses arising in digital narratives that bear on subjectivity within this analytical "excavation work" (Pahl, 2011) that explores the outcomes of engaging digital composition for youth authors. If we accept that self-authored narratives materialize through individual subjects making characters of themselves, that subjectivity constitutes a perpetually evolving process, and that subjects materialize within a network of available discourses constructed through relations of power, then we cannot necessarily understand the story alone as a kind of representation of the subject. However, we can locate subject positions and discourses reflected in and complicated by modal choices authors make throughout the multimodal design process. Thus, we must understand and situate subjectivity as always being implicated within networks of power, even when the author's agency for choice in both content and form seem to be bolstered throughout the digital storytelling compositional process. For instance, we must consider other influences, such as how audience—as a concept and as actual members of the discursive and cultural community—informs the narrative when investigating implications for agency and identity in digital storytelling. I return to this discussion of audience at the end of this chapter.



## **New Literacies: Approaches and Pedagogy**

**New Literacy Studies: Privileging Local Practices.** Early NLS scholarship, emerging in the 1980s from the disciplines of linguistics, history, anthropology, rhetoric and composition studies, cultural psychology, and education, framed literacy as a social practice in opposition to a “traditional psychological approach to literacy” (Gee, 2010, p.1). That traditional approach, what Street (2003) referred to as the “autonomous” model of literacy, defines reading and writing as universally homogenous, “decontextualized” (Kim, 2003; Brandt & Clinton, 2002) activities that occur within one’s mind. Such a perspective lends itself to quantifiable evaluations of literacy proficiency, measures that perpetuate false dichotomies between literate and non-literate individuals and groups. Moreover, despite germinal work in the area of language socialization debunking such a claim (Baquedano-Lopez & Kattan, 2008; Scribner & Cole, 1981), so-called literacy proficiency continues to double as an index for cognitive capacity (Street, 2003). Alternatively, NLS challenges dominant notions of what it means to be “fully literate” in documenting the diversity of localized, situated meaning making practices (Hull, 2003). Literacy, Gee (2010) writes, “is integrated with different ways of using oral language...acting and interacting...ways of knowing, valuing, and believing; and...of using various sorts of tools and technologies” (p. 2). Literacy is not neutral. In juxtaposition to the autonomous mode, Street (2003) proffers the ideological model for literacy, in which literacy is understood as an engaged social practice “...embedded in socially constructed epistemological principals” (p. 77). In this way, literacy and language practices are intimately tied to people’s “knowledge, identity, and being” (p. 78). The ideological model makes clear the implications for how literacy disparities are created in educational contexts where school discourses shape and define the language and literacy practices of value in that context (Street, 2003).

Street (2003) additionally develops earlier sociolinguistic notions of “literacy events” (Heath, 1982; Anderson et al., 1980) and “literacy practices” to conceptualize methodological and empirical applications of the model. I employ each of these terms in my study. The term “literacy event”, Anderson et al., (1980) explain, originated from a broad conceptual framing of “attempts to comprehend graphic signs” (as cited in Street, 2003, p. 78). Since then, literacy scholars have used the term to designate, occasions in which writing informs people’s relational interactions and how they make meaning from these interactions (Heath, 1982). Following Vasudevan, Schultz, and Bateman (2010), I understand digital storytelling “as a [series of] discrete literacy [events] and a composing practice that occurs across space, time, and modes” (p. 448). Such an understanding implies that I examine the particular spatial contexts in which students engage literacy practices both in and outside of the classroom context as they construct their digital stories.

My own and others’ studies suggest that the practice of constructing multimodal narratives that include voice, text, audio, and visual, invites into classrooms literacy practices that youth typically take up for non-academic purposes outside of school spaces. For this reason, I met and communicated with youth outside of class time as a way to document how digital storytelling as a literacy event leverages youth’s literacy practices. In line with Street’s (2003) suggestion, I use the term “literacy practices” to convey this focus on “the broader cultural conception of particular ways of thinking about and doing reading and writing” exhibited by youth across the particular “cultural contexts” they occupy and other discursive spaces such as essay writing, informal responses, and class discussions, contexts which I further delineate in the methods chapter for this study (Street, 2003, p. 79). NLS, in large part due to its theoretical underpinnings, which focus on local literacy practices in situ, maintains a commitment to

disrupting the mechanisms perpetuating the oppression of historically marginalized cultural communities in and out of schools. These commitments can be heard in calls for educators to design learning experiences that harness hybrid, polycultural, polylingual literacy and language practices engaged by youth (Gutiérrez, Bien, Selland, & Pierce, 2011; New London Group, 1996).

Deeply embedded school grammars (i.e. teacher directed, skill based, “curricular”, English only) reify and bolster an autonomous approach to literacy instruction consequently restricting opportunities for youth access to diverse discourses. Institutionalized, hegemonic school discourses exert tight control over *what counts* as well as *whose knowledge* counts in schools. Evidence of this control over *whose knowledge* counts in schools appears in pervasive teacher directed instruction in many classrooms. Teacher-centered instruction is often coupled with the privileging of “learning as ‘curricular’, [meaning] that classroom learning proceeds in accordance with a formally imposed/officially sanctioned sequenced curriculum which is founded on texts as information sources” (Lankshear & Knobel, 2003, p. 6). Privileging a sequential approach to learning works in tandem with autonomously oriented approaches to literacy acquisition. Thus, literacy instruction ranging across elementary through secondary levels places emphasis on strategies and skills such as: “summarizing, determining main idea...identifying fact vs. opinion...using signal words” (Fang & Schleppergrell, 2010, p. 588). In addition, curriculum and instruction often largely promote an ‘English only’ dogma at the cost of developing student’s first languages (Gandara & Contreras, 2009).

Already, scholarship on digital storytelling as a curricular practice elucidates its capacity as a rhetorically sophisticated (Ranker, 2007), culturally responsive (Nixon and Gutiérrez, 2007; Vasudevan, 2006) pedagogical tool. Moreover, in both out-of and in school learning

environments, the literacy practice itself has enabled authorial subversion of damaging and imposed identities (Curwood & Gibbons, 2010; Hull & Katz, 2006) and to the narrative form (Hull & Nelson, 2005; Vasudevan, Schultz, & Bateman, 2010). However, while the affordances of empowering young authors to develop a style and voice that feels authentic is important, researchers also need to attend to how factors such as who the story is going to be shared with and assumptions about what makes for a quality narrative complicate authorial agency and autonomy related to content and form. Ultimately, these factors demand a nuanced investigation of the author's reasoning processes during digital narrative construction as well as an examination of the context in which the story is composed and will be shared.

I situate this study in an emergent body of research on digital storytelling. I will begin with a discussion of the affordances for youth identity development and learning when youth culture and language practices are strategically integrated into in and out of school learning experiences. I follow with a discussion of how NLS practices and specifically digital storytelling builds on past scholarship advocating for the harnessing of youth cultural practices in school curricula. In this respect, I discuss how digital storytelling can be harnessed as a tool to subvert normative conceptions of knowledge and knowledge production. This assertion stems from scholarship on digital storytelling, which I subsequently review, specifically attending to the ways in which digital storytelling has been used to center and privilege youth experience, voice, and multimodal composition practices. In the remaining pages, I raise concerns about the epistemological constraints of a methodological analysis that fixes subjectivities and dislocates narrative production from the discursive spaces and contexts in which they materialized.

### **Culturally Responsive Pedagogical Approach to Literacy Instruction**

Following a ten year ethnographic study of literacy practices across two diverse communities in Piedmont Carolinas, in which she found that discrepancies between home and school literacies manifested in academic literacy disparities, Shirley Brice Heath (1983) argued that “the boundaries between classrooms and communities [must] be broken . . . and the flow of cultural patterns between them encouraged” (p. 369). Heath’s work in many respects laid the groundwork for culturally responsive models of literacy instruction in schools. Attention directed to the various ways in which people make meaning, as opposed to documenting adherence to a dominant model, holds particular salience for those whose language, literacy, and cultural practices currently are marked as cognitive deficiencies within institutions such as schools. In developing a theory of Cultural Modeling in which learning harnesses linguistic diversity rather than sanctions it, Lee (2007) posits that a culturally relevant pedagogy stands to demonstrate how “...practices and ways of using language in the world that are typically vilified in academic settings may actually be generative resources for both generic learning as well as rigorous disciplinary reasoning” (p.7). In this respect, for decades now researchers have called for an ideological shift in how educators approach literacy instruction that is oriented towards harnessing the ways in which non-dominant youth already engage with reading and writing; researchers posit harnessing culturally imbedded literacy practices both as conduits to school literacies and as efforts to transform valued practices in schools.

Furthermore, instruction that aligns with students’ cultural practices enables youth to take on an academic identity while maintaining a positive attitude towards the cultural practices through which they identify themselves (Ladson-Billings, 1994; Ladson-Billings, 2014; Lewis, Enciso, & Moje, 2007). Identifying and leveraging culturally specific repertoires of literacy

practice (Gutiérrez & Rogoff, 2003) provides a favorable alternative to mainstream approaches that largely view non- dominant literacy practices as hindrances rather than assets to communication. In this respect, my study builds on scholarship oriented towards documenting students' hybrid literacy practices as opposed to a dichotomous view that divides literacies into home and school (Gutiérrez, Morales, & Martinez, 2009). Moreover, while the scope of this paper does not allow room for me to delineate between the various approaches to culturally attentive instruction and pedagogy, I follow Ladson-Billings' (1994) focus on students' cultural strengths as a basis for designing pedagogy and instruction that is grounded in student's repertoires of practice.

For instance, in my study I found that music plays a central, and multiply salient role in the youth participant's lives. In interviews following the digital storytelling project with both the case study students I discuss in depth in the dissertation and students in the larger study, students voiced the emotive, intellectual, and social associations resonant in the lyrics, sounds, beats, and artists. Similar to other scholars' findings, as discussed below, the digital storytelling project served to harness this typically extracurricular practice by re-centering it as a necessary mode for digital composition. In this way, student digital composition practices blurred typical boundaries between home and school literacies.

Nasir (2012) looks to out of school practices to elucidate how learning and identity align for African American youth participating in extracurricular activities. She argues that this alignment, sparsely observed in schools, is enabled by the "roles available" within each activity, coupled with the opportunity for youth "to have something of themselves taken up and valued" (p.35). For instance, in studying youth enculturation into sports activities, she documented how a young woman, Octavia who initially had no interest in sports before joining the team, came to

view herself as a hurdler and participated in track meets and worked hard to improve (p. 32).

Nasir's work importantly challenges deficit perspectives (Ladson-Billings, 1995) that implicate youth for their so-called school failures by shifting the gaze to the organization system itself. Simultaneously, her findings underscore the power of making learning experiences relevant to the learner.

Within literacy instruction, leading scholars have pioneered curricular innovations in which learning experiences get organized around youth culture—both as a bridge to mainstream practices as well as central components of the curriculum. For instance, in designing literacy instruction intended for African American students, Lee (2007) demonstrates how combining African American Vernacular English (AAVE) discourse and hip-hop culture supports student engagement with canonical texts. In a similar vein, scholars have argued extensively for harnessing African American youth Hip-hop culture in the English Language Arts classroom (Mahiri, 1988/1996/ 2006; Morrell, & Duncan-Andrade, 2002; Paris, & Alim, 2014).

As long as mainstream literacy practices maintain a dominant cultural position, educators must continue developing instruction that facilitates access to the “culture of power” (Delpit, 1988, p.24) while crafting humanizing educational spaces that sustain and nurture students cultural practices (e.g, Paris & Winn, 2014; Salazar, 2013). In this respect, early culturally sensitive pedagogical models (Heath, 1983) designed to address “sociolinguistic discontinuities between home and school” (Villegas, 1988, p. 254) play an important role in education research.

At the same time, more recent scholarship that challenges the language and literacy practices inherent to a culture of power opens possibilities for transgressive instructional practices. Gutiérrez, Bien, Selland, and Pierce (2011) theorize a transgressive approach to language and literacy instruction that supports the development of academic literacies through

“leveraging [dual language learners’] linguistic repertoires...while promoting their identities as imaginative and productive meaning-makers” (p.235). This transgression relies on an understanding “...that school-based literacies and everyday literacies grow into one another,” (p. 236) as opposed to developing separately. In this respect, rather than treat the polycultural and polylingual language and literacy practices performed by youth in this space as deficiencies, Gutiérrez, et al., (2009) assert,

...our learning environments are designed to exploit the hybridity inherent in any activity system, as well as the particular hybrid nature of contexts like Las Redes; that is, activity settings having the properties of both formal and informal settings. In privileging hybridity and polyculturality, the traditional barriers of age, educational experience, social class, and language differences are re-mediated through new forms of participation and assistance. (as cited in Gutiérrez, Bien, Seland, & Pierce, 2011, p. 237)

The strategic organization of these spaces provides a supportive environment for non- dominant youth to develop their expansive literacy and language skills “[affording youth to take up] multiple roles/identities” as they “[draw] on their full linguistic [toolkits] to learn and make meaning” (Gutiérrez, et al., 2011, p. 237). Moreover, marked practices are given new meaning and purpose through the processes of re-mediation.

Approaching design in this manner attends to the ways in which institutional organization informs learning and identity development. Designing in out of school learning environment where language practices might be conceptually approached more expansively is a liberty not granted those designing curriculum within schools. Villegas (1988) posits that a culturally sensitive model that fails to interrogate “the political nature of schooling and its relation to dominant society” effectively perpetuates inequalities by leaving the oppressive structure intact



(p. 258). Viewing literacy instruction as a subversive practice follows the arguments of critical theorists who view schools as sites of and for struggles for power over hegemonic ideologies of literacy (Giroux, 1983; Giroux & McLaren, 2014; McLaren, 1989) where dominant discourse reified normative storylines around race, class, gender, sexuality, and other identity categories. Such calls for the engagement of critical literacies in schools was largely influenced by the work of Paulo Halverson, Lewenhaupt, whose approach to critical literacy concerns the transformative possibilities inherent to how people inquisitively engage with and concurrently shape the world. Freire and Macedo (1987) explain how *critical* literacy informs this engagement, writing, “Reading the world always precedes reading the word, and reading the word implies continually reading the world...[and] transforming it by means of conscious practical work” (as cited in Hull & Katz, 2002, p.25).

Indeed, as I discuss in more detail below, a critical literacy lens has been taken up by researchers of digital literacies who argue that developing an awareness of multiliteracies (New London Group, 1996) transforms one’s engagement with the world, moving a perceptibly flat world to one with multi dimensions where endless possibilities for being might be created and accessed (e.g., Hull & Katz, 2002). Some scholarship has explored how digital storytelling might be used as a critical literacy practice in its ability to facilitate student voice in relation to dominant storylines. Specifically, Curwood and Gibbons (2010) investigate how a non-dominant youth responds to a call to use digital storytelling to author a counter narrative that subverts normative storylines about his multiply marginal subject positionings. With this scholarship in mind, I argue that as digital storytelling gets taken up in the classroom as a critical literacy practice, educators must take pause and consider the implications of what it means to place student stories, self representations, and experiences not only at the center of classroom

instruction, but also at a point of rupture. Rupture, in that the digital self-narratives, as counter and critical narratives, inherently challenge both what knowledge counts, and as a digital literacy practice, concurrently challenges the predominance of print as the privileged form for summative knowledge. Moreover, if students are to be asked to interrogate the discourses they take up in their own narratives, this engagement with critical literacy opens up another line of concern when self-representational text becomes the text to interrogate.

In this way, digital storytelling has been explored as a powerful tool for how it affords an access that is not only different than what youth typically have had access to in typical school curricula. However, as I argue in my study, because digital narrative authorship can be accomplished via a multiplicity of pathways and design decisions are left largely up to the students, the entire project privileges and centralizes select youth experiences and practices. What digital storytelling practices too often leave out from a critical engagement with literacy, similar to what Giroux (1991) argued decades ago about print literacies, is an interrogation of “the language forms, modes of reasoning, dispositions, and histories that give students an active voice in defining the world” (as cited in Lensmire, 1998, p. 270).

These concerns maintain particular salience for those of us working with youth occupying already socially vulnerable positions, as is often the case for those invested in engaging work disruptive of the status quo. My study builds on a groundwork laid out by a critically-oriented community. I join other scholars in applauding the bravery and creativity youth exhibit in authoring counter-digital-narratives in the face of hostile school contexts. I, however, argue that it is imperative for educators to exercise caution when designing curricular experiences that invite youth to position their narratives and, through multimodal instantiation, their bodies (e.g., images of themselves, audio of their voices), as sites of resistance and as

potential sites for interrogation. This caution is of particular import when this disruption is enacted in institutional contexts where hegemonic school discourses remain largely in tact.

### **Digital Literacies**

Digital technologies' increased presence in schools follows youth's already prolific engagement with multimedia (Ito et al., 2008). Youth's proactive engagement with digital literacies reveals ways in which young people manage their own language acquisition and literacy development through exploiting the communicative capacities of available technologies. For instance, Lam (2009) traces how a youth initiates a second language study via multimodal "chatting" on IM with her multilingual peers in a culturally sensitive, peer supported online environment, resulting in her acquisition of both written and spoken Cantonese and English. In a similar vein, Black (2009) documents how online fan fiction provides a supportive peer review platform for emerging bilingual, Spanish speaking youth.

Studies of youth's productive engagement with digital technologies outside of school have proliferated, underscoring a growing need for school sanctioned literacy practices to adjust to changing times (Kress, 2003). However, print based literacy practices dominate in schools (Lankshear & Knobel, 2011), often regardless of what digital technologies are available in schools. For these reasons, researching the affordances of digital technologies in educational settings necessitates keeping an eye towards innovative uses specific to the technology itself.

**Digital Storytelling.** Digital storytelling consists of multimodal composition in which authors actively and purposefully layer various semiotic modes (e.g., image, audio, gesture, text, and voice) with the intention of telling a story. The final step of the composition process involves encoding, or merging the component parts into a digitized narrative, or movie. Digital storytelling, in its *specific*, standardized form is often composed in a workshop setting and

consists of a, 2-5 minute digital film consisting of voice over, coupled with image, text and audio. The genre can also refer, in its *genetic* form, to a composition that includes any digital, interactive storytelling (Miller, 2004). Digital storytelling traces its genesis back to the work of Joe Lambert, Nina Mullen and the late Dana Atchley, originators of The Center for Digital Storytelling, first appearing in Berkeley, California ([www.storycenter.org](http://www.storycenter.org)). These locally based artists, in an effort to facilitate artistic production among socially marginalized individuals, leveraged technology emerging in the early 1990's, combined with their knowledge of visual and creative art, to design a curriculum around digital, personal narrative authorship.

The approach has taken different manifestations over time. While the scope of this paper does not allow for a thorough discussion of the many different ways digital storytelling has been used since its origination, a predominant use follows a primary objective set out by its originators—namely, how people identifying with marginal cultural positions can utilize the multimodal tool towards agentic, expressive ends. A basis for this agency harkens back to previously discussed models of culturally relevant pedagogy that privileges student culture and experience.

Digital storytelling as a tool for harnessing culture and identity has been used widely in out of school settings (Gibbons, Drift, & Drift, 2010; Halverson, Lewenhaupt, Gibbons, & Bass, 2009). For instance, one early study on digital storytelling in an out of school club organized to harness hybrid literacy and language practices demonstrated the power of positioning students as drivers of their own self-narrative construction. Nixon and Gutiérrez (2007) found digital storytelling to be an effective literacy practice for young, emerging bilingual youth in that it created novel opportunities for expression and identity exploration.

Following work initiated in after-school clubs, researchers working with classroom teachers have investigated how digital storytelling can be used to shift authority from teacher to

student as author (Erstad & Silseth, 2008), and ultimately towards a more “student centered” approach to learning (Churchill, Ping, Cowan, & Churchill, 2008). In this respect, digital storytelling might be viewed as a tool that reveals students’ capacity for self-directed learning (Erstad & Silseth, 2008; Damico & Riddle, 2006). For instance, Damico and Riddle (2006) documented how fifth grade students exerted ownership over their learning when allowed to make choices about the content and design of their class films in which students explored social injustices during the time of slavery. It was student’s comfort with the technology following a unit on poetry and slavery that left the teacher open to allowing students freedom in creating their multimodal projects. Overall, these studies on digital storytelling in both in and out of school learning environments reveal how students frequently enjoy a great deal of autonomy in electing what story to tell as well as how to tell it.

While digital storytelling can be viewed as a tool that supports school sanctioned district curricula (Czarnecki, 2009), multimodal composition offers a design platform that allows for multiple entry points regarding any task specific to multimodal composition. In this way, students authoring via digital storytelling will be invited to embrace digital environments, which contain “texts of all kinds with colour [with] different fonts” where designing happens on digital platforms such as “on monitors, or mobile phones, with sound, gesture and movement” (Pahl & Roswell, 2005, p.4). Composing via multimodality, Hughes (2009) asserts, enables students to manipulate modes and playfully negotiate in digital design spaces through their newly afforded ability to,

[change] size and colour, they can rotate, jump, twirl and fly in, and they can fade and intensify...[and] this change in the materiality of text inevitably changes the way we read

or receive the text and has important implications for the way we construct or write our own texts. (p. 261)

Having different options for how to compose a story increases the chances that digital stories can allow student authors to accomplish the same assignment differently. For instance, following composing digital narratives in their rural middle school classroom, students reported that digital composition allowed them to create “customized” narratives that each stood out as unique among the others (Mullen & Wedwick, 2008). Furthermore, research on youth engagement during a middle school digital story project reveals how digital storytelling software fundamentally informs the narrative’s form (Ranker, 2007). Moreover, multimodality facilitates the production of novel forms of signification (Nelson & Hull, 2008), and supports emerging bilingual students in composing richly detailed narratives of the self (Vasudevan, Schultz, & Bateman, 2010).

Digital storytelling, as a curricular tool, has important implications for how educators might leverage technology to facilitate the repositioning youth, who are too often constructed as “at-risk” and “struggling” by standard measures of school literacy. The strength of digital storytelling, then, arguably resides in its ability to both enable marginalized youth to take ownership over how their identity or self is represented, as well as demonstrate a capacity and mastery with multiple literacy and language practices not readily available via traditional print practices. However, although studies demonstrate a variety of affordances of digital storytelling, some believe that challenging oppressive practices must necessarily involve a critical examination of the structures that segregate, marginalize, and oppress.

There is a growing body of literature on digital storytelling as a critical literacy practice specific to how it might be used to enable authorial response to oppressive discourses (Bing-Canar & Zerkel, 1998) and more broadly as an educational tool to facilitate an awareness among

those unfamiliar with the author's cultural practices (Lavia & Moore, 2010). Particularly because youth authored digital stories are coming to be viewed as not only subversive practices, but also tools for subversion, we need to attend to the curricular structures we build to support such an engagement with text and narrative that deals so closely with one's identity.

**Agency and Identity.** When digital storytelling is utilized as a form of autobiography, authors encounter an opportunity to construct a multimodal, or assembled representation of the self. Pahl (2011) asserts that the "process of making digital stories harnesses I/identities, including affect, emotion, and home funds of knowledge", as well as "ways of acting, interacting, feeling, believing, valuing" (p. 19). In this respect, digital narrative authorship involves approaching the self as text as the author constructs a digitized self-representation. Moreover, Pahl (2011) argues, "Digital stories provide spaces for people whose voices often go unheard to create their own narratives" (p. 24). In this respect, digital storytelling is coming to be viewed as a space for authors to instantiate otherwise silent voices.

In a similar vein, agency, for Hull and Katz (2006) extends from a theoretically informed belief that people have the capacity, albeit constrained by social, cultural, and historical forces, to "learn to fashion identities as competent actors in the world able to influence the direction and course of their lives" (p. 47). This "fashioning" of the self, researchers assert, occurs in relation—both in concert and in opposition—to others. Moreover, they believe that agentive self-representation and actualization are facilitated through the use of "the unique repertoire of tools, resources, relationships, and cultural artifacts—that are available at particular historical moments in particular social and cultural contexts" (p. 48). Although Hull and Katz (2006) importantly acknowledge that powerful social constraints render self-actualization especially challenging for "members of oppressed or disadvantaged groups", in their seminal paper on digital storytelling

and agentive identity they also draw on two case studies to show how two non-dominant youths achieve agentive self-representations via their self authored digital stories at the nonprofit organization, Digital Underground Storytelling for Youth, or DUSTY, located in Berkeley, California (p. 48).

In the first case of Randy, the authors discuss how this young African American man demonstrated “authorial agency” through his digital story in which he subverted identities imposed on him by government institutions through his digital composition prowess. Hull and Katz argue that the police who frequently harassed him compromised his “sense of agency,” and he had found minimal opportunities in school to showcase his love of writing poetry and rap. The scope of this chapter does not allow for a complete discussion of the researcher’s entire analysis of this story that spans several pages. However, as an example of how Randy cast off the imposed identities of “illiterate” and “delinquent” in exchange for those of a “social critic, digital artist, and loyal son” (p. 56), researchers discuss how Randy’s modal choices and compositional organization facilitated an agentive authorship. They explain,

Randy connected older African American political leaders with the rap artists closer to his own historical moment (and by implication, musicians like Miles Davis and himself), and positioned himself not only as continuing their lineage, but adding to it and even surpassing their considerable achievements. Significantly, this entire level of meaning resides in the juxtaposition of the words of his narrative with the images that he selected, or the combination of multiple forms of signification. (p. 58)

While Randy’s story was less technologically complex than other stories at the site, in this statement, researchers note their intrigue in his strategic approach to modal choice and ordering as a way to resituate a narrative about himself. His ordering technique involved juxtaposing



image, text, and audio in a logical order where an understanding subsequent slides was predicated on what had come before. In this way, the narrative's messaging was fundamentally tied to its medium whereby a similar narrative could not be told in print form. Moreover, while the presentation of the African American leaders themselves signify meanings on their own, by presenting them in an ordered manner juxtaposed with Randy's voice reading original lyrics enables Randy to inscribe his subjectivity with the discursive meanings signified through the multimodal digital narrative.

In the second case study, Hull and Katz (2006) present the case of Dara, a thirteen-year-old girl of Guatemalan American heritage, whose case revealed important insight regarding the necessary social context to facilitate agentive authorship. Researchers note the stark contrast between Dara's meek presentation of a self who didn't like school in the context of the classroom with a vibrant and confident digital story author emerging at DUSTY. Moreover, the digital storytelling process and project at DUSTY enabled Dara to articulate her discontent with school, the cancellation of her favorite show, and the untimely death of an iconic singer. In these ways, digital storytelling is presented as a tool that enables youth authors to represent their identities differently than they are labeled and constructed in other contexts.

Each of these cases demonstrate the signification for the control youth can enact over their own narrative representation when they drive the decision making processes regarding what their stories should be about as well as how their stories should be organized. Secondly, these examples reveal both that youth draw heavily on meaningful pop culture icons to convey identities and their life experiences and this practice facilitates youth authors' ability to realign and subvert narratives that did not serve them previously. Finally, these cases offer insight for

how the spaces and social relationships within these sites matter for the types of stories that youth produce.

DeGennaro (2008) also studied the concepts of agency and identity in youth authored digital storytelling in an after school program called Silk City Media Workshop. Her specific focus attended to how identities get formed in relation to others and how examining these connections through digital storytelling can inform one's agentive actions towards shaping their own and other's future life trajectories. DeGennaro draws on other scholars to conceptualize identity as an "individuals' perception of [her] characteristics, abilities, beliefs and values integrated with perceptions of future development" (Arnett, 2007, p. 164), along with an "awareness of group membership expectations, social responsibilities, and privileges according to group membership" (Thomas & Speight, 1999, p. 152). Furthermore, she defines agency as, "...the proactive actions that individuals take in a social context" (p. 429).

DeGennaro specifically discusses how Sagan, a bilingual, high school student born in the Dominican Republic, exhibits her strength, resilience and resolve to learn from others' mistakes as a way to embark on a different life path in her community. In this respect, the digital story, in inviting youth to share a story of their own and offering multiple pathways for how to accomplish creating a digital narrative, reveals how youth "identify themselves and how those identities relate to a set of organized actions that form and re-form over lifetimes, and through collective histories" (DeGennaro, 2008, p. 441). Moreover, examining digital storytelling processes and products through a social practice framework, Holland et al., (1998) argue, "also aids us in exploring how an evolving identity links to agency or opportunity for individuals to shape their worlds" (as cited in DeGennaro, 2008, p.441).

In her digital narrative titled, “A Clean Slate,” Sagan tells a multimodal story of her brother’s incarceration following his arrest for robbery. Her story centers on the pain her family suffered during this time and concludes with her brother being released from jail and successively recuperating his life, finding a job, marrying his girlfriend, and becoming a father. DeGennaro (2008) argues that the digital story both “seems to inspire [Sagan] to envision a different path for herself” (p. 438) as well as “[produce] and [reproduce] herself in the interrelation between self and other” (p. 439). Moreover, DeGenerro (2008) finds that Sagan believes that through sharing the story of her brother’s experiences she might affect changes in other’s life trajectories in the same way she believes learning from her brother’s experience affects the direction she is taking her life. DeGennaro (2008) concludes that through selective modal choices regarding which music, images, sequencing, sound effects, image movement, transitions, and voice over, Sagan has the opportunity to evoke an emotive response amongst her audience members, whom she aims to impact with her narratives’ messages.

In each of these case study examples, multimodality and public display of one’s self and voice, both unique features of digital storytelling, enable authors an opportunity to shape and display their own self-representations and in case of Sagan, a vision for her future. In each example, researchers emphasize how authors draw on culturally and personally meaningful artifacts and narratives in constructing their own multimodal narratives. Furthermore, the researchers argue that choice in content, sequencing, and presentation represent key features lending to authors’ agency through digital narrative production. What is missing is an interrogation of the social relationships complicating agentive choices available in the discursive spaces of composition as a discussion of how learning is organized toward facilitating an orientation towards realizing imagined future trajectories (O’Connor & Ruth-Allan, 2010).

**Transgressing the home-school divide.** As the norms of digital storytelling are developed, digital storytelling may serve an important function in schools as a conduit between home and school literacies, beliefs, and values. Vasudevan, Schultz, and Bateman (2010) studied the implications of how multimodal storytelling shifted the identities of two featured fifth graders, Michael and Saima, in their urban classroom. Specifically, multimodal composing facilitated an invitation to harness students' home knowledge and interests into the classroom. The researchers argue that this shift in teacher and student practice towards a transgression of school norms, which more typically erect a false dichotomy between home and school (Gutiérrez et al., 2011) that facilitates Michael's engagement with school activities. Some of these transgressions included: making home visits with youth, inviting youth to take pictures of their home and neighborhood spaces, and to audio record their voices throughout the digital storytelling drafting process. These transgressions subsequently impact how educators, the researchers and Michael's peers view him. For instance, Michael, whom teachers had labeled as "disengaged" in academic tasks, actively told and retold stories about his life following a home visit to gather artifacts for the digital story, and made relevant connections between his out-of-school interests in playing football and basketball and his academic task of creating a digital story.

Moreover, Saima, a studios young girl who had recently immigrated from Bangladesh, and was learning a new language and culture concurrently excelled in the digital storytelling project. Vasudevan, Schultz, and, Bateman (2010) note the stark differences between Saima's early written drafts of her "Where I'm From" poem with her final digital narrative. Researchers note that Saima's written composition "lacked intimacy and specificity that were present in her later [digital] compositions" (p. 458). Accordingly, coupling writing with image enabled Saima

to break the simple grammar invited by the writing prompt in the form of a sentence stem to create a more detailed and therefore sophisticated personalized story in which she incorporated multiple narrative strands, image, music, and notably her own voice.

These cases demonstrate how multimodal personal narrative composition invited youth to draw on meaningful artifacts from their lives. Moreover, studying youth digital literacy practices reveals their ability to produce new forms of signification via strategic layering of modes. As I discuss in the section below, my study builds on this research to deeply examine the complexities of digital storytelling in highly diverse classrooms. While these studies rightly assert the affordances following inviting youth to draw on their home lives, experiences, and artifacts, my study attends to the complexities involved in asserting identities that are locally contested. This focus illustrates a need to situate digital storytelling practices in the larger instructional context and social spaces of the classroom. Moreover this focus includes an attention to the opportunities available and constraints on youth identities in relation to school literacies.

### **Extending the Field: Fixity, Audience, and Subversion for Digital Storytelling**

My study and others examine the in-school use of digital storytelling. In this study, I attend closely to how this digital literacy practice co-exists and interacts with other classroom literacy practices. Inevitably, as digital literacy practices get introduced to school curricula, we subject them to school discourses, which threaten to coopt and repurpose a new literacy practice into something that replicates standardized school literacy expectations. Thus, research needs to be done to translate this form of analysis for the purposes of considering how digital storytelling as a classroom literacy practice should be conceptualized in terms of what the practice lends to facilitating youth authorial agency in relation to other complex factors.

While school discourses maintain a stronghold on school literacies, always working to silence, coopt, or undo new literacies that threaten to dismantle their hegemonic domain, digital autobiographical storytelling stands as a resilient new literacy practice. First, the multimodal, digital platform offers multiple pathways to composition (rather than singular approaches designated by school literacies). Second, digital storytelling's content focus on youth knowledge, experience, and values—commonplace facets of digital storytelling—effectively establishes the student narrative as a legitimate 'text' in the classroom. Below, I discuss three important features of the practice that must be examined further if digital storytelling's resiliencies are to be realized: first, identity narratives and fixity; second, the relationships between audience, content, and form; and third, its suitability as a subversive literacy practice.

**Identity and Fixity.** Researchers studying digital storytelling have employed multimodal microanalysis as way to investigate how digital stories reflect aspects of the author's identity. This approach to analysis asserts that one can look to modal choices to make identity claims about the author. These claims are made on the basis that modes, as Kress (2010) argues, are already "socially shaped and culturally given semiotic [resources]" that one takes up to make meaning (as cited in Pahl, 2011, p.18). Thus, Pahl posits that closely studying children's "modal choices" for the purposes of personal digital storytelling reveals signifying aspects of the author's "identity in practice" (Pahl, 2011, p.18).

Furthermore, Pahl's (2011) attentiveness to modal choice stems from her assertion that youth draw on modes which they have an emotive connection to; in this way, she argues that it is the author's "...connection with modes that links to subjectivity and felt emotion" (p.18). Certainly, other scholarship (e.g., Hull & Katz, 2006) has documented how youth authors like Randy and Dara made modal choices that privileged their own emotive relationships to those

modes. However, their decisions to draw in part on popular cultural references rendered their texts accessible to a scholarly audience deriving meaning from their modal choices (Hull & Nelson, 2005). Alternatively, other scholarship on modal choices in youth authored digital stories reflects how an author's awareness of audience affects her modal choices. For instance, Sagan (DeGennero, 2008) selected specific images and music for the purposes of achieving emotive affect amongst audience members, and Mutsuko (Hull & Nelson, 2008) privileged images, which she felt resonated with her imagined audience's cultural knowledge in favor of images that had more poignant relevance for her.

Multimodal analyses theorized through a social practice perspective accounts for how identities form in relation to social practices; in this way, identities represented in texts are understood as only partial representations. Yet, locating even traces of identities—particularly for the purpose of making claims about the author—leads to a sedimentation of everyday identities and practices (Pahl, 2011). From this analytic perspective, autobiographical digital narratives denote a reified version of one's everyday identities and practices. Pahl (2011) expands on the consequences that befall digital narrative representations of the self when she explains,

As a form of representation, digital stories are in process, but they can also become sedimented. Like old photographs, these stories can then become a record of a life, a moment frozen in time as a CD-ROM. (p. 24)

While this sedimentation makes digital stories easier for analysis, we must tread carefully when making claims from these analyses about the author's subjectivity, due to this fixity.

Research on digital storytelling in and out of schools have generally been presented as celebrations of how non-dominant youth authors utilize multimodal composition to assert their

own self-representations. Researchers performing multimodal analyses on youth-authored digital stories for the purposes of making claims about author identity and agency contextualize their discussions with information about the author from interview and observation data. Moreover, these analyses concurrently consider the social environment that facilitated choices afforded to the author when composing a digital narrative. However, many of these analyses leading to claims about youth author's agency and identity direct an analytic gaze to the features of the story itself; that is they are analyzing the story as a form of representation in the absence of the multiply constituted author. Thus, multimodal analysis directed towards making claims about the author's subjectivity suggests an internally sound and stable form of meaning contained within the digital story itself, in which it effectively retains its own expressive qualities over time. In this respect, as digital narratives exist beyond the point of production, their existence risks fixing and imposing identities onto a subject who may not identify according to previous interpretations (Nelson, Hull, & Roche-Smith, 2008).

These findings demand pause when we consider what we mean when we claim that an author exercises and enjoys a particular kind of agency with digital storytelling, both during and past the point of production. Just because an author is authoring a story about herself, doesn't mean she is authoring herself. Following her own analysis of an author's modal choices, Pahl (2011) concludes,

Digital stories are representations that appear to be fixed but need to be recognized as fluid in order for them to be analyzed and recognized as being in process. Understanding the fluid and transitory nature of a digital story, as well as its apparent fixity, is vital to allow a more nuanced understanding of authorial intention. (p. 33)



As I imagine those studying identity in digital narrative construction would agree, each author designs her story with particular motivations informing the design; however, the author's motivations and intentions are shaped by immediate and distal others' expectations, assumptions, and ideas regarding narrative. In this respect, we must account for the multiple factors informing the parameters within which one designs and whom one imagines is responding.

**Digital Storytelling and Audience.** These parameters might be thought of as the discursively informed constraints for storytelling. Parameters exist within the options for narrative that the digital storytelling software avails. For instance, research on modal choices reveals information about how youth are responding to the software (Ranker, 2007). At the same time, research investigating the affordances of digital storytelling argue that the multimodal properties, or authoring through multiple modes enables youth authors to produce new forms of meaning (Hull & Nelson, 2005) and digital literacies at large facilitate 'voices' reaching new audiences (Bratteteig, 2008), effectively propelling multiple voices into public spaces. To date, constraints are largely conceptualized in terms of one's ability to navigate the technology demands of digital literacies (Bratteteig, 2008).

Gibbons (2010) argues for a more nuanced investigation of youth authors' digital storytelling processes as a means to access identities across modal choices across the time and spaces of production. Her investigation revealed that youth composition processes are riddled by complex cultural factors that are not clearly available to observers without such an investigation. Moreover, discursive constraints on narrative also resonate globally in school discourses informing how youth understand composition for academic purposes (Lensmire, 1998). Within the classroom, school discourses can be supported and subverted by the subject positions taken on by the teacher, students, and the author (Davies, 2000).

Nelson and Hull (2008) found that youth authors actively negotiate tensions around modal choice arising when authoring personal narratives for public consumption. For instance, they found that one author abandoned a personally meaningful and culturally specific images in favor of “superficial” images she assumed would be more accessible to her imagined “foreign” audience (Nelson & Hull, 2008, p.138). Thus, the meanings we find in digital stories regarding what they reveal about an author must be carefully considered in relation to the contextual and social discursive forces complicating an author’s choices when composing a personal, digital narrative.

While authors certainly exercise a great deal of choice during narrative construction regarding both form and content, these practices remain constrained by the technology and the discourses. Subject positions within discourses shape both how the author defines herself according to who she knows herself to be and in relation to the actual and perceived audience expectations. Tensions inevitably arise around whose goals get accomplished, whose story gets to be told.

Following their investigation of how a young man is haunted by the identities his digital story contains that he no longer identifies with himself, Nelson, Hull, and Roche-Smith (2008) assert,

...young people need to come to understand the consequences that can attend their representations of Self and community (as do we all), and they surely also need some freedom to write about what they want. Managing these tensions productively for the sake of children and youth is key. (p. 438)

If centering student experience and voice remain key assets to digital storytelling, as a growing body of literature celebrating the agentive affordances would suggest, we must attend to the

discursively evidenced sites of negotiation and compromise. Interestingly enough, it is in this relation to the other, as in the audience, where agency is said to be realized (Hull and Katz, 2006; DeGennaro, 2008).

First, in order to elicit audience response, authors must attend to their audience members (Bazley, & Graham, 2012; Curwood & Gibbons, 2010; Nelson & Hull, 2008; Ohler, 2013; Solomon, 2012; Vasudevan, 2014; Xu, Park, & Baek, 2011) as they craft their personal digital narratives. Moreover, researchers have shown how audience members at the time of production can have a direct and explicit impact on the author's composition decisions (Hertzberg & Lundby, 2008; Nelson, Hull, & Roche-Smith, 2008; Nelson & Hull, 2008). In these respects, multimodal analysis would not be possible if the researcher as audience lacked familiarity with the images, music, text, or multimodal features of the narrative. The impact of audience response on the composition process is further complicated by the social stigmas circulating around particular identities, ways of being, values, etc., which inevitably impact the decisions authors (consciously and subconsciously) make when composing their digital narratives.

**Subversive Digital Storytelling and Audience.** Whether the digital storytelling assignment explicitly invites youth to author narratives that directly resist master narratives (Curwood & Gibbon, 2010), or simply opens the space for youth to make decisions about their own self representations, authoring from a non-dominant position will inevitably position the author to engage in some form of subversion as the author asserts her subjectivity from the othered, marginal position. Counter narrative digital storytelling as an explicit form of critical literacy complicates attention to audience because by design the story contests socially stigmatized and reified aspects of the self; therefore, it will necessarily challenge audience, if any members of that audience approach it through normative narratives about individuals or groups.

However, asking non-dominant students to author any digital story for public presentation chances increasing the risks involved in identifying with already vulnerable subject positions, even if they are presented anew. The tensions involved in the choice to assert particular aspects of self and identity must be attended to before we ask students to follow us on this journey towards self-expression and perhaps discovery.

In looking across eighteen Youth Media Arts Organizations engaged in creating spaces for youth to create digital self-representations, Halverson, Lowenhaupt, Gibbons, and Bass (2009) found that each organization's approach to conceptualizing identity importantly informed the narratives youth at those centers composed. Moreover, in studying third grade writing workshops Lensmire (1994) found that students writing for peer audiences constrained narrative choice according to socially acceptable topics (as defined by the popular children), and avoided divulging too much information that would put them at risk for ridicule. He found this censoring to be most profound among the unpopular, lower class youth. These findings indicate that ideological underpinnings informing the social relationships in the space and context in which the story is authored and presented largely inform the story that materializes in that space. In this respect, I join Lensmire (2010) in calling for a new way to conceptualize student voice in a way that accounts for the social relations, audience, and values resonating in local spaces; he argues,

We need a revised, alternative conception of student voice one that affirms ...critical pedagogy commitments to student expression and participation, but also helps us see student voice as in-process and embedded, for better and for worse, within the immediate social context of the classroom. (p. 279)

Such an approach acknowledges the tension, risks, and challenges students face when engaging the work of self-expression, especially when that work is to be shared for revision and presentation purposes with others.

Knowing that public schools have historically been hostile spaces for non-dominant communities we must attend to the particulars of these spaces “opened” for racialized and, therefore, pathologized youth (Gordon, 1999, p. ix) when the youth performing a new, or alternative self is writing from an already vulnerable position (Blackburn, 2002/2003). To put oneself “out there,” so to speak, from a counter, and therefore marginal, position invites controversy because that new form of subjectivity is non-normative, and therefore always (in this current moment in time and culture) subject to questioning, ridicule, and expectation for what it should (and should not be). What then is the teacher’s responsibility to the youth as she invites him into this vulnerable space—as an evaluator and someone giving the invitation and the expectation? Further, we need to consider the burden we continue to place directly or indirectly on non-dominant youth to perform a subversive, counter self, as even the best of our intentions are riddled with a recognition of the non-dominant youth’s marked subjectivity—after all, this is a significant reason for doing this work in the first place.

Nelson, Hull, and Roche-Smith’s (2008) response to this second concern is to think of the multimodal representation as a nuanced representation of self rather than of group. However, as was the case for Steven (Nelson, Hull, & Roche-Smith, 2008) in an afterschool digital storytelling space, as well as other research on digital storytelling in after-school clubs and in classrooms, the adults opening spaces for digital storytelling articulate and concurrently shape youth’s experiences towards particular ends (Hertzberg & Lundby, 2008). To illustrate this tension further, Curwood and Gibbons (2010) examine the emergence of a counter narrative for

one youth author, Tommy, whose racial and sexual identities emerged centrally in his digital story.

The researchers are keen to point out that Tommy authored a personal narrative that stood to subvert two long-standing master narratives about race and sexuality in the town and school. While Curwood and Gibbons (2010) present an interesting question posed by the teacher concerning why different stories came to fruition through the project, the discussion does not centrally take up the question of why and how students respond variously to the digital storytelling project, but centers on the use of multimodal microanalysis of Tommy's multimodal counter narrative. Their discussion of Tommy's use of his digital story connects with aspects of my observations in my study and the issues I hope to push forward in the field. For instance, despite the invitation for all students to draw on the critical pedagogy and literacy frameworks prevalent throughout Kira's class, after they read Hugh's and Whitman's poems *I Too Sing America*, not all students created counter narratives. Although a few students explicitly drew on their racial and sexual identities as features of their stories, other students composed their narratives around their friendships or hobbies from relatively apolitical, and arguably less risky perspectives.

Certainly these methods are important tools to develop to examine the construction of narratives in order to reveal the sophisticated multimodal composition practices youth develop and enact through digital storytelling. However, there is no information from Tommy regarding his approach or process when creating this story. Tommy's voice then, is ironically missing when multimodal analysis gets employed. This approach to analysis will make it quite difficult to address the teacher's inquiry about why certain students told counter narratives while others did not. Moreover, we are missing information about audience response.

Granted, this formalist approach to analysis anticipates *how* the audience may respond to certain features, as Curwood and Gibbons (2010) posit that the final image of Tommy playing with a doll at the end of his movie was intended for comic effect. However, knowing the homophobic environment in which he is authoring and presenting this story, I am hesitant to assume that his audience laughed supportively at an image that many of them may find personally offensive. I do not disagree that these spaces for counter narratives to emerge need to be created. But, especially when they are being shown to a diverse and knowingly hostile audience, much more deliberate care and analytic attention needs to be given to how vulnerable youth are coached through their compositional processes and the various motivations they may articulate about how and why they approach their compositions in the ways they do. Given these complex issues of identity and power in relation to audience, the entire assumption of “choice” and what it implies is called into question (e.g., Dutro, 2003). Indeed, any notion of free choice is illusory, an idea I discuss further through my analysis in subsequent chapters.

## **Conclusion**

The cases I discuss in this chapter focusing on the agency and identity development afforded by digital storytelling largely define audience as the people who will or might watch the digital story. My study, as an investigation that attends centrally to the power relations involved in spaces and places of digital storytelling composition and presentation further delineates between different types of audiences the author is directly considering during the composition process in order to more fully understand the story that has been produced. This insight complicates the ways in which the field has been thinking about agency and identity for youth engagement digital storytelling, while pursuing similar goals of harnessing and privileging non-

dominant youth knowledge, experience, and semiotic practices as pathways toward transforming the spaces of literacy classrooms.

As we think about how this work will be shared and taken up in classrooms, as we collectively shape the discourse that frames how to teach digital storytelling and what its affordances are, I'm wary about isolating the aspects of digital storytelling (i.e. multimodal affordances) from a discussion of the particulars of the relational conditions/ context (i.e. student response, curricular conversations, classroom norms) in which these stories are composed. Removing the final product from the context risks presenting an incomplete picture of what digital stories ultimately afford a so-called agentive author. This all ties back to the idea that authorial agency is never performed in a vacuum (Davies, 2000).

Considering the implications for agency raises an ethical imperative regarding the necessity for maintaining a transparent agenda regarding our purposes for inviting youth to author digital narratives of the self. This is of particular import when the invitation involves asking youth to create a digital narrative that will have a life beyond production. For instance, we must further consider and name other audiences who will be involved in viewing and interpreting the narrative as these audience members play a part in making assumptions about the author's subjectivity. Without these considerations, we risk objectifying the subject and jeopardizing the loss of the potential power and beauty of the tool if it is allowed to sediment and formalize the subject. Through observation, interviews and informal interactions, and discourse analysis of both talk about digital stories and the stories themselves, my study examines how students are situated within and negotiate these tensions.



## CHAPTER 3

### RESEARCH METHODOLOGY & DESIGN

In this study, my goals were to better understand the authoring practices of diverse youth composing multimodal identity narratives within contested discursive networks of power. Toward those understandings, my study employs an interpretive, critical, discourse-analytic qualitative design drawing on ethnographic methods. I review these methods below, followed by a detailed description of data collection. The purpose of this study was to document, explore, examine, and discuss how youth in one upper level, honors, high school Language Arts class, African American Literature, constructed digital narratives of the self across curricular and spatial contexts over the course of the 2012 fall school semester. For the dissertation, I constructed case studies of three African American young men, Gabriel, Malcolm, and Darius, drawing on data collected over the course of the semester and specifically focusing on each youth's approach to composing his digital autobiography, or digital media project (DMP). Influential theories of discourse and subjectivity across humanities and social sciences contend that narrative plays a central role in subject formation. As Davies (2000) writes, "through stories we each constitute ourselves as beings with specificity" (p. 22). In classrooms, this is a highly consequential process for students who are storying themselves and are being storied in relation to prevailing school discourses, such as what counts as success in school literacies. Thus, I employed research methods consonant with feminist poststructuralist perspectives to investigate how individual subjects construct and perform their subjectivity through taking up subject positions in relation to those made available in this school and classroom. Moreover, in viewing the subject as being in a continual state of becoming, these methods reveal how one's performed subjectivity constitutes a perpetually evolving process whereby subjects continually revise old

storylines as they author themselves anew. I look to the contexts and spaces where students perform their subjectivities in order to access the multiplicity of discourses available in local class texts (e.g., stories one shares in class discussions and small groups, course literature, spoken word performed poetry) as well as those discourses available in the music, images, and quotations students drew on in composing their digital media projects. Poststructural feminist epistemology holds that subjects materialize within a network of available discourses constructed through relations of power; thus, the deconstructive analyst examines how networks of power constrain and enable one's access to and use of available storylines according to one's multiple subject positions and negotiations within these discourses.

If we are to better understand how subjectivity unfolds as a continual state of becoming in relation to literacy curricula and practices in English Language Arts classrooms, we need to attend closely to how narratives of self and interpretations of others' stories occurs. Gilbert (1994) captures a poststructural sentiment regarding how discourses can constrain students' opportunities to engage in schools when she writes, "A number of different and incompatible discourses mesh at the site of the classroom because schools are about among other things selection and sorting, discipline and punishment, knowledge and control" (as cited in Lensmire, 2010, p. 274). As I contend, digital storytelling is a crucial practice to investigate in this regard, as it encourages youth to harness their values, interests, experiences, and culturally informed literacy practices, in the making of this personal digital story. The practice concurrently invites audience response throughout and following the completion of the project. Thus, although the multimodal properties of digital storytelling facilitate youth access to a multiplicity of arguably non-school discourses resonant in the song lyrics, images, voices, and texts on which students draw—thereby, opening possibilities for authors to engage agentive authorship of self-

narratives—the author constructs these narratives in relation to the tensions arising in networks of power circulating throughout school spaces.

Immersive qualitative research, coupled with discourse-centered approaches to analysis, provides analytic access to the points at which subjects materialize through discursively signaled “discourses and storylines” (Davies, 2000, p. 29). As identities are always in a state of becoming (Davies, 2000), the formation of an “I” necessitates that bodies and texts occupy socially recognizable forms, it is important to identify how institutional constraints arising within certain contexts and spaces offer up particular narratives for particular bodies and texts. An investigation of subjectivity also includes attention to how agents negotiate their own subjectivity in relation to available discourses. Thus, documenting the processes through which students engage in self-narrative production necessitates a concurrent attention to the local and global discourses informing discursively constructed subjects. In these ways, this project engages the work of critical discourse analysis (Luke, 1995).

## **Setting and Participants**

### ***Context, Background, and Purpose***

*African American Literature and Dr. Kira Buchannan’s Teaching Philosophy.* This study takes place in an urban high school, Regional High, located in a metropolitan city in the Rocky Mountain region of the United States. African American Literature served as a primary context for this study and was taught by veteran teacher Dr. Kira Buchannan. This was the first semester that African American Literature had been taught at Regional High. Although Regional High is located in an affluent neighborhood, the student population ranged in a wide spectrum of ethnic, racial, linguistic, class diversity, as the school hosts international refugees, local neighborhood youth, and was an open choice school for district students. Therefore, it was not unusual for

students to commute as much as one-and-a-half hours each way. This was the case for Malcolm and Darius who both commuted from low-income neighborhoods located approximately 20 miles from the school.

Kira's teaching philosophy stemmed from her fifteen years of teaching in urban schools. She intended for students to leave her class as critical thinkers with a strong command of written and spoken English skills necessary for academic success in college. As a teacher of junior and seniors, Kira encouraged self-directed, autonomous learning among her students. Kira explained that her primary objective was to prepare her students for life. This philosophy was reflected how she aligned her instructional goals with her student's interests and plans for their own futures. For instance, she explicitly acknowledged that several of her students planned to forgo college in their life trajectories. She incorporated this knowledge of students into her unquestionably rigorous academic instruction with, as one example, a caveat during a discussion about an essay assignment that knowing how to format papers is both a college skill and a life skill, as "presentation is *always* important." It was, however, a focus on college readiness that drew many students to take several classes with her.

Kira designed curriculum that aligned with the articulated district expectations for what constitutes college readiness and 21<sup>st</sup> century skill sets. Ultimately, the primary district expectation for college readiness at the senior year level involved students being able to write at the fluency and organization level comparable for college freshman. Kira scaffolded her instruction throughout the year along a gradual release model that facilitated this goal. Kira developed her student's critical literacy practices through selecting a diverse body of African American literature. Students in Kira's literature courses read a series of fiction novels, plays, and short stories. She privileged texts that were of high interest and easily accessible in the

first few months of class, and the texts became more stylistically sophisticated and structurally complex as the semester progressed. Course assignments involved reading sections of the course text in preparation for class discussion and writing and revising papers and take home essays. Kira insisted that students continue submitting revisions until they earned an A. Class time was spent discussing key plot and character development points in the readings as well as raising thematic questions in which she invited students to draw on their personal experiences and life knowledge to grapple with these themes.

Dr. Buchanan often began class with an in-class response to a journal prompt, where students were expected to write at least one full page. Other class activities might include students working in pairs to write vocabulary stories as a part of SAT and ACT prep; reading independently while some students are conferencing with Dr. Buchanan about any given assignment they are working on at the time; or discussing a question in small groups in relation to the novel. Dr. Buchanan made a concerted effort to create space for students to work autonomously, with her support as well as the support of peers.

*Locating the Research at Regional High School and Kira Buchannan's Classroom.* In a pilot study I conducted Spring 2012, I visited both of Dr. Buchannan's Senior Honors English Language Arts classrooms two to three times a week over six weeks. During this time, it became clear that Kira engaged her students in both mainstream and new literacy practices and that multiple forms of storytelling were vibrant in this space. Examples of mainstream literacy events that could be observed in her classroom included, students writing essays, responding to journal prompts in class, and writing creative stories using vocabulary words. New literacy events included students composing poems displayed via various forms of visual media, and assembling CD's with their favorite music. Additionally, in African American Literature, composing and

sharing impromptu spoken word poetry in response to prompts offered by spoken word poets became a frequent literacy event.

While new literacies were present in the curriculum across each of Dr. Buchannan's classes as academic activities, student success was ultimately measured via mainstream summative literacy practices (e.g., written essay exams, course papers, and discussion contributions) that were aligned with the Common Core Standards' expectations for college readiness. I also observed students across the classes engaging in largely unsanctioned (aside from in the multimedia classes and clubs) new literacy practices such as texting, tweeting via Twitter, emailing, and interacting on social media sites like Facebook, MySpace, downloading and listening to music, taking pictures and video recording in class. Kira also invited students to engage quick Internet searches for select pieces of information relevant to class discussion. I also made note of several instances in which students took notes on their cell phones, laptops, and Ipads they had brought from home.

Despite the infrequent sanctioned use of digital technology in her class instruction, Dr. Buchannan enthusiastically added the digital media project (DMP) to her student's end of the semester assignments Spring 2012 and included this assignment in each of her classes in the 2012-2013 academic year as part of her collaboration on my study and in line with her professional development goal to incorporate more multimedia into her instruction. It is important to note that she evaluated these Digital Media Projects through different criteria than she used for other literacy assignments. For instance, in the first pilot semester, the assignment criteria required students to include text, music, and images; however, all students who submitted a digital story assignment earned an A. She reasoned that students had learned a new technology with very little guidance and shared a part of themselves with the class. She expressed a

discomfort in evaluating the quality of digital narratives that seemed to be so personal in nature. Kira's discomfort resonates with Gilbert's (1989) findings in which she documented writing workshop teacher's reluctance to critique the content of young boy's written texts in which they made themselves the heroes of the narratives. Gilbert (1989) notes that when student texts "are seen to be so closely aligned to the individual child and that child's original making of meaning that they are 'beyond criticism'" (as cited in Lensmire, 2010, p.270). In the second pilot semester, Fall 2012, the same criteria remained, with the addition of voice, and Ms. Buchannan emphasized that she would mark down for spelling and punctuation errors. However, in practice, student timely submission of a completed digital story ultimately remained the sole criteria to earn an A.

***Digital Storytelling Project.*** Kira and I started to talk with the students in each class about the digital storytelling project at the beginning of the fall 2012 semester. Kira and I decided that even though African American Literature was technically a one semester elective, meaning many students would transfer out at the semester, we decided that all students should create a digital story at the end of the class. Here, I outline the details of how the project was supported throughout during the Fall 2012 semester.

The digital story was decidedly about identity, so we referred to as the "Digital Media Identity Project." Kira and I decided early on to place minimal constraints on the project because of our shared interest in allowing for student creativity to flourish as they controlled the design and largely the content. The assignment sheet (Appendix A) outlines the basic constraints to which we later included voice and a time range of 2-5 minutes, although, we were flexible with this as well. I encouraged students to tell the audience something about themselves and to include their voices—as I found this to be something many students expressed hesitancy about.

In the first week of school, Fall 2012, I told students about the project and said that they should begin taking pictures that they might want in their stories. At that time, we talked about students' access to video and camera technology. Throughout the semester, Kira and I encouraged students to keep their in-class work that had to do with exploring different aspects of the self. Kira officially introduced the project at the beginning of November (Appendix A). Kira described the project as a project in which she asked youth to 'write' multimodal digital identity narratives as one of several culminating projects for the class; the requirements for the digital story were that the narratives span 2-5 minutes, communicate a story of the self, and include music, text, and image. Kira emphasized to the students that while they were sharing this project with the class it was meant to be a reflection of themselves and feature what they wanted others to know about them. She also required all students to submit an "I am" poem as a prewriting activity. For this poem, students wrote 5 statements for their past (where I've been), present (where I am), and future selves (where I'm going). This chronological ordering informed the popular *where I've been, where I am, and where I'm going* story structure among many of the students.

Kira brought laptops to class, and I introduced the project by briefly talking about how this was an opportunity for students to write a story about themselves following a semester of reading stories that authors had written about characters. I proceeded to show digital stories that I had permissions to show from the group of students who had created them in Kira's classes the previous Spring. I also shared my own digital story in which I sought to demonstrate both what one could do with iMovie as well as how one could explore a facet of identity by sharing an interpretive piece about my own journey to identifying as queer. Following the description of the project and examples, each student took a laptop and I demonstrated how to find iMovie and



some basic components regarding how to upload picture, audio, and music files into the program, include text, and save their project.

In the weeks following, I initiated conversations with individual students regarding the progress of their digital stories as a way to assess their individual needs. Needs that arose spanned: accessing computers in the school; transferring files from their cell phones to a flash drive; making voice recordings; editing text; trouble shooting glitches in the movie production software; and, conversing about narrative structure. Some students expressed a desire to work with me individually, including Gabriel and Malcolm. Darius worked primarily on his own during his video production class, and allowed me to record his work and talk with him during this time. Throughout November and December, I met with several students during free periods, lunch, and after school to work alongside them as they created their digital stories. My involvement with each student varied, and I will describe my interactions with Gabriel, Malcolm, and Darius in the Developing Case Studies section at the end of this chapter.

***Study Participants.*** Dr. Buchannan's roster in the African American Literature reflected the multilingual, multinational, multiethnic student body a notable feature of Regional High School. This diversity also played out along class, gender, ideological, sexual orientation, political and other categorical divisions. There were 33 total students in Fall 2012 African American Literature, all of whom consented to be in my study. Based on self-identifications, participants included: 19 male, 14 female students; 4 Caucasian or White students; 21 Black (6 were African immigrants) students; 7 Latino students ; and 1 Asian student.

Regional High largely defined its identity according to the ethnic and international diversity represented in the student body. Certainly, this diversity is what, in part, drew me to this space, but in my commitment to represent youth as whole people, and as diverse individuals

acting to define themselves, I would be remiss to not mention other aspects about their identities that they shared with me. For instance, a significant number of students participating in my study will be the first in their families to attend college. Many of them struggled with extraordinary life challenges—poverty, loss, war, violence, difficult journeys to the United States—and fight daily against implicit and explicit messaging within and beyond school that they are expected to fail.

At the same time, many of the youth demonstrated heroic resilience in the face of tremendous past and current obstacles and toward their futures optimistically. The students in Dr.

Buchanan's classes were honors students, athletes, actors and actresses, singers, musicians, photographers, future soldiers, poets, caretakers, worked 25 hours a week, commuted anywhere from ten minutes in their cars to an hour and a half via multiple buses to school. Some of these young people were parents, others cared for their parents, while others had parents filling out their college applications for them, and others lived with relatives and were thousands of miles from their parents who sent them to the United States for a safe life and a high quality education. Many of these youth were college bound, knew what they want to major in, were in committed romantic relationships, and articulated strong beliefs about the value of education and work to make their hard working parents proud, while others struggled daily with whether or not to drop out, saw college as a way out of a difficult life situation, or believed high school would be the last of their formal education.

*Case Study Participants.* Each of the case studies I present in the following chapters reflect how the classroom context complexly informed Darius, Malcolm, and Gabriel's classroom literacy practices.

Darius performed well in Kira's class doing his work and participating when asked to, but he was relatively quiet during class discussions. Darius kept to himself because he

admittedly feared his peers' judgment. Like Gabriel, Darius trusted Kira and felt more comfortable openly sharing sensitive life details with her through his writing that he withheld from his peers. Yet at the same time, Darius, over a fairly short period of time, shared the details he could not share with his peers with me, and explained that he felt it was necessary to do so. Darius sensed that his peers would judge him for a past life that he wished to discard from memory himself.

Malcolm explicitly discussed his preference for self-directed learning, and while he felt maladapted to school generally, he appreciated the flexibility in Kira's practice. Yet, he struggled to earn passing grades in her class despite being a prolific writer of poetry and deeply critical thinker. Malcolm openly shared his poetry in class on several occasions, but he purposefully kept his messaging esoteric. He believed that he and his peers in African American Literature had shared experiences that facilitated a classroom context in which he could share his poetry, but despite having known many of his peers for years, he did not believe that he and his peers necessarily shared value systems.

Gabriel excelled academically, often submitted his work early, and asked clarifying questions without hesitation. Gabriel viewed his active engagement with school activities as stemming from a commitment he had made to himself and his mother to justify the sacrifice of him having to grow up without her physical presence. Gabriel felt that he could trust Kira with emotionally sensitive information about his life, but he did not feel that the classroom climate supported this open sharing. He did not hold Kira responsible for the climate; rather, he understood school as a generally a highly risky space to share one's 'real' self.

Of the three, Darius worked mostly independent of me thus, I only documented a portion of his composition process. However, he allowed me to audio and video record his process when

I was in the room where he was working and he seemed to be the most open in sharing his thoughts in our interview. For Darius, these conversations began when I started recording his work sessions in his period one computer class that he was taking with Gabriel, the reason I started working in that room to begin with.

Darius spoke candidly with me about his composition choices and his life and his fears in our interview; thus, this data source significantly informed my interpretation of his DMP composition process. While I had the fewest interactions with Darius, he spoke consistently about himself across contexts when discussing himself and his DMP so much so that he often used the same phrasing and words in his explanations. This consistency facilitated my confidence in making claims about the discourses he proffered across process and product despite having the fewest data points across the three cases.

Malcolm in contrast spent the most time with me, and, of the three, was the person for whom I had the most abundant amount of data. Unlike Darius, Malcolm spoke with seeming inconsistency about his identity and experiences across time and contexts. The equivocal and often contradictory manner in which Malcolm spoke gave me pause to return to my fieldnotes and audio recordings from the entire semester to document the moments from September through December when Malcolm spoke in class.

Malcolm and I started talking in the first weeks of class. Given my intrigue of his character, my fieldnotes were populated with my observations and reflections about his behavior in class and our interactions. Malcolm was an elusive person, and unlike most of his peers, he would not give me his phone number, connect with me on Facebook, or meet with me for a reflective interview. Yet, he frequently spoke aloud while working and allowed me to audio record him in class and during his entire DMP composition process. In lieu of an interview, I

relied on conversations Malcolm and I had had through out the semester as well as his spoken discourse in class and while working among his peers and Angelica, his romantic partner and close friend, to determine salient discourses in Malcolm's DMP.

Gabriel and I worked side-by-side for his entire composition process, and we spoke at length over that time about his sense of self, his peers, and other people in his life. To develop his case, I drew on interviews, several audio recorded conversations, and multiple fieldnotes in addition to his DMP. Gabriel also gave an interview that importantly informed how I constructed his case study. It was through these conversations that I was able to document Gabriel's sense of peer audience, which informed an investigative inquiry line about audience that can be traced across all three cases.

### **Methodological Tools**

**Feminist, Discourse-centered Methods.** I used methods consistent with the critical, feminist, and poststructuralist theories informing my study to document and deconstruct discursively constructed subjectivities. By drawing on methods grounded in feminist-theoretical perspectives, I also located and considered the implications of my own subjectivity as well as the co-constructed role I play in the stories I tell about the youth in this study (Villenas, 2004, p.75; Denzin, 1997). In this section, I discuss my research questions, the data I collected, and the processes I took up in analysis.

Applying a feminist poststructuralist lens to a study of subjectivity demands attention to both the presence of available discourses and storylines and the ways in which subjectivity gets negotiated and performed in relation to other discourses—both locally and distally. Thus, this investigation must attend to the challenge of documenting how “large scale social discourses...manifest in everyday talk” (Luke, 1995, p.11). Rather than endorsing truth-seeking

objectives, feminist poststructural methods demand deconstructive engagement with text. This deconstruction elucidates the multiply layered binaristic tensions within and across storylines through which subjectivity forms (Davies, 2000). Moreover, deconstruction seeks out instances and opportunities for subversion, whereby speaking subjects may act with agency to disrupt hegemonic discourses by speaking a different truth.

### **Research Questions.**

1. How do non-dominant youth in an African American Literature course negotiate subjectivities in relation to and contestation with macro and micro discourses across conversational and compositional contexts in the classroom and other school spaces?
2. What do the process and products of autobiographical digital composition suggest about youth authors' access to and use of multiple literacies that may subvert, trouble, or disrupt normative (often dualistically organized) discourses of "self" in relation to audience and school literacies?
  - 2a. How do different audiences (e.g., author, peer, teacher, researcher, family) inform youth authors' decision-making processes for digital composition?
  - 2b. What are the intersections and/or disruptions between the discourses and subjectivities students engage in multimodal composition compositions?

As I describe below, the data I collect and analytic tools on which I draw follow from these theoretical and empirical goals and commitments.

### **Data Sources**

The qualitative approach I took to data collection began with a two part pilot study that informed the development of initial hypotheses that I explored in greater depth in the dissertation study design. From the six-week phase 1 pilot study in Spring 2012, I began to develop a

working relationship with the classroom teacher, Dr. Buchannan, and gained insight into classroom norms and practices. I framed the following questions to guide the pilot study:

1. How do diverse youth in two English Language Arts classrooms negotiate their own subjectivities when authoring autobiographical digital narratives a.) during work sessions with peers and the teacher present, and b.) that they expect to share with the class?
2. How do students respond to each other's autobiographical digital narratives when they are presented publically?

To address these questions, I collected data, including youth's digital stories, conversations and interviews with Dr. Buchannan and informal conversations with youth in Kira's classes while they worked on and following the creation of their digital stories, and video and audio recordings of select groups of students during in class digital story work sessions and video and audio recordings of digital story presentations to the class. Finally, because I was largely in charge of the digital storytelling project, I gathered valuable information regarding how to organize, present, and facilitate the assignment. This included learning about student access to technology in and out of school. My focus on the importance of situating digital stories in the larger contexts and audiences in which students construct, tell, and interpret narratives of the self arose from my pilot work. I realized that the experience of the digital storytelling project, though rich on its own, told a very partial story and left many questions unaddressed. Thus, the pilot project informed how I approached the dissertation study and the shape of my research questions. In Fall 2012, I joined two new classes during their first semester. I continued on with these classes through Spring 2013, although following Fall 2012, I was less active about data collection as I collected the central data for this dissertation Fall 2012 in one class, African American Literature.

**Contexts of Data Collection.** Here, I provide an overview of the spaces of the research and the data I collected in the dissertation study. Then, I turn to specific discussions of my approach to each of the key sources of my data. I end with a discussion of my approach to composing the three case studies that were formed in response to my research questions.

Acting as a participant observer, I accessed and co-inhabited the school spaces students occupied, including Dr. Buchannan's classroom, the two school libraries, three different computer labs, school hallways, and a junior/senior hangout space called 'The Future Center'. Specifically, I attended three to four class sessions a week for both Senior Honors Thesis and African American Literature from September-December 2012. During this time, I video recorded each class as well as audio recorded up to five select groups of students spread across the room. Depending on the class activity, I observed class discussions or participated in informal conversations with students and the teacher during small group or unstructured work time. During the five-week digital storytelling production phase beginning in November 2012, my role as a participant observer shifted to instructor and facilitator. I followed students into different spaces within the school as they worked on their digital narratives. These spaces included: "The Future Center" a hangout space for juniors and seniors; three different computer labs; school libraries; unoccupied school classrooms, school hallways, and Ms. Buchannan's classroom during class time and outside of that time during lunch and her free periods. At times, my work, also transgressed school boundaries, as students and I exchanged phone numbers and emails to text about their stories and schedule meetings with one another beyond the school day. There were limitations to the extent to which I could access the spaces in which youth were producing their digital narratives, as I was not physically following youth outside of school spaces and several students, including the three I worked with, worked on their stories during this time. However, while the students were



creating their digital narratives in school spaces, I followed and worked closely with several students from Black Lit, including Gabriel, Malcolm and Darius throughout much of their digital narrative production process. I describe the extent of this work with each student more specifically in the individual cases.

Studying narrative also demands an attention to the multiple curricular contexts in which youth engage storytelling practices. In addition to “collecting” spoken stories via audio recording, I also collected all class assignments, formal and informal, as a way to examine how youth told stories across contexts. Although I only analyzed the case study student digital stories in depth for this study, in the initial stages of analysis, I examined student produced literacy products to get a sense of how they were narrativizing their personal stories across genres. I used this information to guide my analysis as well as ask student’s questions about their digital storytelling practices in comparison to other engaged school literacy practices. Digital storytelling serves a central role in this project. Thus, I collected additional student generated materials specific to that project as a way to more fully examine multimodal narrative composition. Similar to how other student generated literacy materials functioned in this study the additional materials helped me to contextualize student’s processes as I describe them across each case. Each of these data sources provided insight into youths’ self-narrative production across contexts (e.g., in class discussions, small group conversations, informal discussions with each other and myself, in class writing, and formal essays). I now turn to more specific discussion of *how* I employed research tools to document student work and interactions in these contexts.

***Class Discussions: video and audio recordings.*** Narratives generally assume multiple modes (Ochs & Capps, 1996, p.20). Thus, as Kress and Van Leeuwen (1996, 2001) posit, “A primary job of ethnographers is to track, describe, and enumerate multimodalities as *semiotic*

resources in their combinations—linguistic, gestural, kinesthetic, and visual” (as cited in Heath & Street, 2008). Composing case narratives about youth in these classes demanded a multifaceted approach to documenting identity performances. For this reason, I used both audio and video recordings to document youth’s performances of the self in their Language Arts class.

I arranged one video camera to capture a wide frame of the class, and placed five audio recorders with select participants throughout the room. This included having an audio recorder where Gabriel, Malcolm, and Darius sat. These strategically placed audio recordings allowed me to capture small group and ongoing side conversations that did not necessarily get shared with the class at large. I also audio and video recorded participant work during digital story work sessions and formal interviews.

***Student Work: essays, essay exams, in class responses to prompts, in class poetry, group vocabulary stories, class presentations.*** Each of these assignments potentially function as contexts for sedimented self-narrative construction (Pahl, 2011) as well as exemplars of youth’s evolving literacy practices with different forms of writing. As I discussed previously, these assignments gave me insight into how the students were engaging multiple literacies across genres and served as a basis for comparison with the case study. Being able to compare literacy products in this manner informed my initial approach to analyzing the student’s digital stories.

***Student digital stories, digital story journals, digital story peer responses, digital story reflection.*** Digital storytelling was a new literacy practice to Dr. Buchannan’s Language Arts curriculum. I collected all student digital narratives along with process artifacts and peer responses, where available, as a way to understand youth’s composition processes. Peer responses throughout the process as well as during the public showing of digital narratives provided interesting insight into the spatial context (and parameters) for digital storytelling in

these classrooms. In my conversations with the students about their processes, I often drew on my perceptions of audience response with youth authors' discussions about their peer's expectations for their stories, and more generally for their own self image to make sense of how each was approaching digital storytelling.

***Case studies.*** I used case study as a way to deeply examine the lived experiences of three youth engaged in the perpetual process of becoming as they story and were storied across the contexts of this study. I consistently worked closely with seventeen students across the two classes and did not initially identify focal cases of students with whom to work. As previously discussed, I opened my availability to all students, and these fifteen students were the ones who most consistently sought me out for various reasons ranging from needing access to computer labs during out of school hours; wanting to discuss DMP assignment parameters; wanting to learn more about digital storytelling software capacities; and wanting to talk about themselves and their processes.

A case study approach allows for in-depth description and analysis of a bounded group (Merriam, 2002). Guba and Lincoln (1989, p. 178) offer "maximum variation" as one way to choose case study participants that reflect the range of variation in the study. Patton (1990) elaborates on the strengths of this approach.

[It] aims at capturing and describing the central themes or principal outcomes that cut across a great deal of participant or program variation. For small samples a great deal of heterogeneity can be a problem because individual cases are so different from each other. The maximum variation sampling strategy turns that apparent weakness into a strength by applying the following logic: Any common patterns that emerge from great

variation are of particular interest and value in capturing the core experiences and central, shared aspects or impacts of a program. (p. 172).

Among the large group of students I was working closely with there was a wide range of diversity across ethnicity, race, class, gender, nationality, spoken languages as well as life experiences (e.g., refugee status, college bound, military bound, and workforce bound), which reflected the diverse pasts and future plans of those expressed by students across the three classes. Selecting cases with attention to variation in experience allowed me access to a range of perspectives and ways of storying and being storied within a context. This approach also gave resonance to any patterns within the case study group, as it suggested that some larger issues may impact students who are positioned seemingly in very different ways. I also selected case study students who shared racial and gender categories. Doing so opened the possibilities that these students might share some of the positioning that may occur through macro level discourses of young Black males. Concurrently, this section method also allowing me to analyze the crucial differences in how students who may be assumed to share experiences story themselves and are storied by others in the context of a project such as the DMP, thus, allowing me to get at differences in positioning. My focus on narratives of self demanded that I was able to provide deep portraits of individual students so that readers can access the youth as rich characters in the story of my dissertation. I will discuss the processes that led me to selecting Malcolm, Darius, and Gabriel in the Developing Case Studies section of this chapter.

***Interviews, and conversations.*** Over the course of the semester and during the digital storytelling processes and interviews, I had hundreds of conversations with students in Kira's class, many of which were with Gabriel, Darius, and Malcolm. Regarding our interactions with research participants, particularly when the researcher "moves from stranger to friend," Lather

(1991) suggests that researchers “consciously use our research to help participants understand and change their situations” (p. 57). The critically conscious thinking I sought to inspire amongst Gabriel, Malcolm, and Darius was often met with resistance as students proffered sophisticated and reasoned beliefs about the fixity of oppressive discourses resounding in school contexts. Each of these young men located his subjectivities as being constructed in relation to those interlocking systems of oppression within schools. Yet, practicing acting as a critical witness (Dutro & Bien, 2014; Dutro, 2003; Dutro, 2011) through reciprocal storytelling gave rise to the students and myself coming to know one another as multifaceted individuals across our radically different lived experiences. Thus, the case studies demonstrate how the students positioned me as someone they could trust to treat the stories they told me with care. In this manner, I concurrently strove to position myself as a “resistance researcher” (Cruz, 2012) who practiced faithful witnessing in order to locate agency in the multiple discourses Gabriel, Malcolm, and Darius engaged.

I conducted one formal interview in the last week of school Fall 2012 with sixteen of the seventeen students I had worked closely with throughout the semester. I was unable to schedule an interview with Malcolm for reasons I will discuss in the Developing Case Studies section. I drew from Lather (1991) in viewing the interview as a dialogic space in which meanings were co constructed and required self-disclosure on the part of the researcher for the purposes of “seeing a greater mutual understanding” (p.61). Considering my own contributions illuminated the subject positions I made available through the lines of questioning and conversation during the interview. I took an inductive, grounded approach to generating interview questions, which attended to the comparative and iterative processes involved in building theory from the data (Maxwell, 2005). I used open-ended interview questions (Appendix B), which allowed me to

investigate youth's emergent subjectivity while concurrently checking my own emergent understandings arising from my field notes. Moreover, open-ended questioning allowed for interviews to take on different conversational forms, allowing for a more flexible and collaborative meaning making space.

***Teacher interviews and conversations.*** Kira and I developed a long-standing friendship stemming from this dissertation study. The ongoing conversations we had and continue to have about her students and her teaching philosophy have provided me with deep insight into school politics as well as students' lives, but they also reflect the friendship we have built out of our shared deep care for the students in her classes. In this respect, I talked with Kira about her classes to learn and understand them so that I could respectfully and carefully represent her work and these spaces that she has so generously granted me access to. Our conversations about students shifted between logistics, points of clarification, and always back to students as we celebrated together their successes and worried over their struggles. I recorded a majority of the conversations we had over the duration of my dissertation study and I took field notes following salient conversations concerning emerging themes I was making note of elsewhere in the data. These conversations also provided me insight into another perspective regarding select youth's varying identity performances as interpreted by their teacher (in addition to the youth's various performed selves across contexts). For instance, Kira had known many of her students for several years before having them in her classes. Because of this, she shared stories about their family members, events in their lives, and information about them that she had garnered about them from knowing them in other contexts. So, as I began to draw conclusions, or develop hunches about the students and their talk and behaviors, I spoke with Kira about my emergent findings. She often provided a backstory that further complicated the narrative I was forming about the

youth as well as my understanding of the school climate shaping available discourses for these youth to draw on. For instance, it was through these conversations that I learned that many teachers at the school feared being alone with Malcolm and shared these sentiments with one another, effectively criminalizing Malcolm within the school context. Having an awareness of these dominant and oppressive school discourses importantly contextualized my reading of Malcolm's response to these discourses in our conversations and in his DMP.

***Researcher notes and reflections.*** In the spirit of ethnographic fieldwork, I took daily field notes while in Kira's classes. I supplemented these notes as much as possible with additional details following each class observation. I followed Heath and Street's (2008) suggestions to document 1.) events in real time; 2.) short phrases and utterances by the youth who I was observing 3.) notable changes in routine, audience, context that coincide with shifts in texts, or "language and mode" (p. 77). Imbedded within these field notes, I kept a running log of my own observations and evolving theories regarding what I was observing in the school spaces into which I followed youth and their teacher. I used the field notes and reflections to identify areas in the data to elaborate upon further in conceptual memos (Heath & Street, 2008). In developing the case studies, I found these fieldnotes critical to contextualizing the audio data.

## **Data Analysis**

***Developing the Case Studies.*** In the following section, I discuss how I selected the three case study participants as well as how I developed each case study chapter.

***Selecting the case study students.*** Over the course of the semester, I developed relationships with many of the students in Kira's classes. Initially, I considered writing case studies on thirteen of the thirty-three students, whose subjectivities reflected the racial, ethnic, gender diversity amongst students in African American Literature. Gabriel, Malcolm, and Darius

were among this group. Initially, I narrowed the list of students to five, by way of reflecting the racial and gender diversity amongst students. As I began to consider the story I wanted to tell about this class and these students, I kept returning to the many conversations Gabriel and I had had about his peers in which he had expressed his desire to keep his personal information to himself rather than divulge it in his DMP. Gabriel's words resonated strongly with me at the time we were working together, and inspired me to ask his peers about their perceptions of one another.

Reviewing my fieldnotes, I found that Darius and Malcolm had engaged a similar sentiment about how they felt about sharing their personal life struggles with their peers. My fieldnotes also contained my observations about Gabriel's popularity as a football player in the school, and how his outward expressiveness seemed to conflict with his claim to identifying as a private person. I drew on these conversations with Gabriel when I spoke with Darius and Malcolm regarding their sense of their school and personal identities. I had spoken to Darius, Malcolm, and Gabriel about what being a football player meant to them, and I had detected similar *and* uniquely personalized storylines regarding their football identities, which appeared to be constructed in relation to macro and local dominant gender and racial discourses. I had observed Malcolm identifying as a poet and as an outcast. I had written field notes on his long absence from school and the story he returned with. Ultimately, I elected to write Darius, Malcolm, and Gabriel's stories because I felt that they could best help me to deepen my understanding of how three male students of color understood and negotiated their school and personal identities in relation to macro discourses about Black men living in the United States and at their diverse urban school.



**Analysis Process.** In this section, I describe my approach to data analysis, including my analysis of the digital stories themselves, the interaction data that contextualized and situated those multimodal texts, and [list the other major subheadings here—a little map for readers]

***Digital Story Analysis.*** My approach to reading discourse across each student's digital media project involved me privileging the salient discourses resonant in each young man's talk as he narrated and reflected on his past, present and future life in tandem with constructing his digital autobiography. In the following sections, I discuss my process to digital storytelling transcription and analysis in relation to how I approached reading discourse across multiple data sources to compose each case study.

My first step involved watching each digital story several times and taking notes on the salient themes. This step later helped me to recognize how Darius and Malcolm had constructed their stories along recognizable plot lines (e.g., the hero narrative), while Gabriel's story followed the teacher's suggested format where students presented their past, present, and future selves. Familiarizing myself in this manner also helped me identify salient discourses resonant in each story. I took note of thematic topics (e.g., football, family, religion, friendship, childhood, hard work), which formed the basis for the claims I developed in the case studies. I drew on other data sources (classroom audio, interview, process audio, field notes) to reject or develop these claims in each case study. Understanding the author's rationale for modal choices and DMP construction served a crucial role throughout in making sense of the authors' DMP's. Given the ethnographic nature of this study, analyzing the three DMPs was never done in isolation of my participation and observation throughout each author's process. Thus, it is important to note that while I initially delineated at first between data sources, the final case studies interweave information across multiple sources as my initial readings of the digital media

projects were always informed by my experiences with each student over the course of that semester.

My first level of analysis included a written transcription and rich description of each of the modes used in the DMP, frame-by-frame. I identified modes according to how Kira and I had defined them and how we had spoken about the modes with the students. The modes were: audio (spoken voice over), music (lyrics sung or rapped), image (photographs, and other pictorial images), text (written words), and video. In the image and video transcriptions and descriptions, I privileged human figures, cultural artifacts (e.g., sports equipment), colors, facial expressions, clothing, as well as other details that emerged as seemingly important as I cross-referenced process with product. For music, text, and voice, I documented the words as they appeared in the digital media project, which included punctuation and the colors the written text appeared in. I also closely read discourse in each mode, starting to map my initial identifications of salient discourses through my multiple viewings of the DMPs to the more detailed descriptions and transcriptions. For the music, I closely read each song and when necessary, I used rap genius ([rap.genius.com](http://rap.genius.com)), an open community hip-hop music annotation website, to assist me in lyric interpretation.

I proceeded to read modes in relation to one another and across frames. This process allowed me to find evidence for the initial discourses I had named as themes, and enabled me to identify an overarching plot in each digital media project. I used the discourses I had identified from repeatedly watching the digital media project as codes that I defined drawing on evidence from my reading of the digital story across transcribed frames. I began to populate each frame with analytical comments as I read the modes in relation to one another and across the frames. Through closely reading the DMP text, I began to identify conflicting discourses within the

digital story. For instance, Darius' DMP opens with lyrics that suggest a profound mistrust of teachers; yet, he ended his project with his voice thanking his teacher. These points of tension marked moments of analysis wherein I drew on other data sources to unpack these conflicting discourses.

Following closely reading each DMP, I turned to my field notes. I read through the notes I had taken over the course of four months, as well as reviewed the interviews I had with Gabriel and Darius and made note of salient discourses from our conversations. I identified transcripts where students were talking about themselves and their digital media projects and compiled transcript excerpts and fieldnotes into a single document for each student. I read through these documents and made analytical notes on salient discourses. This process unfolded differently for each case study and depended largely on the relationship and access I had had to each author.

*Layers of Analysis: Situating the DMP.* Given the focus on digital storytelling processes in this study, I decided to use the digital story as the framework for organizing each case study chapter. I proceeded to merge the digital storytelling close reading and analysis with the transcript excerpt documents I had created for each student. I drew on these transcript excerpts to contextualize my working relationship with each student, to unpack conflicting discourses they raised across contexts, and to develop claims around what discourses were salient for each student's composition process.

Listening to students talking about their digital storytelling processes also gave rise to their perceptions about the effectiveness of each mode to express something meaningful. I drew on student composition discourse to inform which modes I privileged in the analysis of discourses resonant within modes for each story. For instance, both Darius and Malcolm shared that they read their life stories in the song lyrics they had selected for their DMP's, while Gabriel

saw his emotions resonant in the song lyrics of the music he had included in his DMP. Thus, how I interpreted the meaning of the lyrics was largely in relation to what each student had said about the mode as well as the discourse revealed through a close reading of song lyrics.

**Locating ‘subjectivity’ in the data.** I draw heavily on Davies and Harre’s (1990) conceptualization of positioning as a way to locate discursively constructed subject positions in lived narratives, or conversations. In my study, conversational spaces comprise: class discussions, informal conversations (among myself and youth, youth and each other and the teacher, among others), and formal interviews. However, because discourses inscribe the body (Davies, 2000) my analysis also included attentiveness to bodily performances that aligned with and resist normative inscriptions.

Davies and Harre (1990) begin with conversation because it arguably constitutes the space in which individuals construct narratives of themselves, as one would write a fictive character into being; in other words, this is the space in which the author speaks her ‘I’ into being. The forces set in motion when a live conversation unfolds as a dialogue with others complicates authorial agency for self-construction in that people in conversation assert and occupy different subject positions. Moreover, as conversation involves speakers taking up and making available different discourses, Davies and Harre (1990) assert,

... every conversation is a discussion of a topic and the telling of, whether explicitly or implicitly, one or more personal stories whose force is made determinate for the participants by that aspect of the local expressive order that they presume is in use and towards which they orient themselves. (p. 91)

In this respect, looking to conversation enables one to unearth subject positions made available by speakers. All speakers participating in the conversation (myself included) assert available

positions through the discursive practices we employ. Identifying "...what positions [the speaker takes] up and in what story, and how they are in turn positioned" (Davies & Harre, 1990, p. 91) enables one insight into how the speaker views herself and others involved in the conversation. Because discourses are produced through embodied performances that vary for every individual, they are constantly in flux as well as in a sort of competition with one another. Thus, "... the [analytic] focus is on the way in which the discursive practices constitute the speakers and hearers in certain ways and yet at the same time are resources through which speakers and hearers can attempt to negotiate new positions" (Davies, 1990, p. 105). For instance, in the conversation between Gina and Cat (see below), I examined how the speakers both take up and challenge, or "refuse", normative gendered storylines (Davies & Harre, 1990, p.96), as one instance where student's subjectivities are constituted, negotiated, and realized anew.

***Tracing subjectivities over time and space.*** Viewing identities, or sense of self as "...always fragmented, partial, and often in conflict" (Moje & Luke, 2009, p. 418) demands an investigation that casts an analytic gaze across multiple contexts and spaces in which youth might perform subjectivity. While the previous section located subjectivity primarily in the lived narratives of conversation, engaged literacy practices also reveal facets of an author's identity (Moje & Luke, 2009) and afford opportunities for agency (Davies, 2000, p.66). Thus, in order to examine how always fragmented, always becoming subjectivities manifest in relation to and contestation with circulating discourses, I identify instances of subject positionings across written and spoken contexts over the course of the study.

Kira structured her classes in such a way that her students enjoyed various opportunities for talking, writing, and interacting. Some of these opportunities elicit specific kinds of responses as the teacher and students pose questions during class discussion, while others are formalized

through writing prompts. However, the loose organization of class structure allows for frequent opportunities for spontaneous talk to emerge amongst peers during class work time. The digital storytelling project presents a unique curricular context in that the personal aspects of the assignment invite conversation among peers, family members, myself, and the teacher and giving rise to a multiplicity of discourses that are further expanded as the student constructs her identity narrative with multiple modes each affording further discourses, subjectivities, and storylines.

***Deconstruction.*** I draw on critical discourse analysis and deconstructive approaches to language to reveal and examine the larger “storylines”, complexly embedded in unequal and consequential access to various forms of power, in which students’ more explicit narratives are situated. Feminist and queer scholarship seeks to exploit multiplicity and disrupt the powerful binaristic constructions and boundaries that become normalized into “hegemonic systems of meaning” (McCoy, 2000, p. 237), inscribed in language and on body. Holding one’s conscious thought back from recognizing the hegemonic ideological constructions (e.g., of woman as “irrational”, p.59) in how we document subjectivity becomes a necessary endeavor in both methodology and critical pedagogy (Davies, 2000, p.58; Lather, 1991, pp.123-152 for discussion of critical pedagogy). Engaging deconstructive methods also necessitates a sensitivity to the critiques of decentering methods (Hill Collins, 2000, p.41) that some view as potentially undermining identity categories that are important for individuals and for collective social movement against oppression. Ultimately, it is an important tension to be struggled over when the political approaches informing method and theory vary in their projects according to how different subjectivities have been constructed and subsequently marginalized—when the necessary un-doing of one threatens the tragic un-doing of another.

Cruz (2011), whose “connections” with her participants often extend well beyond the research relationship, calls on scholars to act as “resistance researchers”, particularly when working with queer youth of color whose bodies have been inscribed with “constraining” discourses that threaten to undermine one’s seeing among the most vulnerable of youth through a humane and caring gaze (p. 548). This approach involves both the naming and rejecting of dominant discourses inscribing queer identified youth as “irresponsible” and “contaminated”, in favor of looking for and documenting resistant discursive practices. In this respect, deconstruction requires the researcher to participate actively in re-inscribing non-dominant youth with alternative discourses by seeing them through those alternative storylines.

*Identifying larger discourses in which students’ stories are embedded.* According to Foucault (1972), discourses “systematically form the objects about which they speak,” shaping grids and hierarchies for the institutional categorization and treatment of people” (as cited in Luke, 1995, p. 8). Due to the salience of these categories in dominant discourse, which have been veiled in the guise of truths (Luke, 1995, p. 9), I found evidence of these larger discourses in the initial layer of analysis.

For example, in the episode I mentioned above with Cat and Gina, during unstructured class work time early in the semester in African American Literature, Cat asked Gina where she had been the previous week. Gina shared that she was with an afterschool youth group that had taken a group of middle school students backpacking in the mountains. In her story, she spoke at length about her adventures with the middle school students commenting that one student drove her nuts. “There’s always one kid who drives me nuts!” she laughed. Gina then shared that her niece wants her to dress up like a “good” fairy for Halloween. “What the heck is that?” she asked,

turning to Cat. “You know, it’s like all flowey and sweet,” Cat giggled. “I know!” Gina retorted, “That’s not me! I hate kids.”

Shortly thereafter, Cat began talking about a cartoon character, Magdalena, whom she was surprised to find out is male despite wearing pink and having a name that ends in “a”. Gina commented, “That’s fucked up! What the hell?” and laughed. Gina then shared that two of the Telly Tubby characters are male and two are female actors. Cat responded, that no, this can’t be, her Telly Tubby stuffed animal is male, and she won’t believe otherwise. Then Gina shared that Burt and Ernie are apparently supposed to be gay, and commented, “Well, I guess it’s not surprising with all those bubble baths they took with that duck.”

This short vignette opens a window into one conversation emerging in this classroom space in which youth articulate ideas about gender, sexuality and personal identity, some of which seemingly conflict with one another. For instance, Gina’s volunteer position as a youth coordinator could be seen as her filling a stereotypical gender role of caretaker; yet, Gina does not see herself in a different stereotypical female role, as demonstrated through her rejection of her niece’s request that she play what Cat and Gina describe as a stereotypical female image of ‘princess like’. However, in the conversation when heteronormative expectations around gender are violated regarding the relationship between language, color, and gender, Gina and Cat express discontent. However, this conversation was filled with frequent instances of laughter putting a literal interpretation of each speaker’s words into question that would need to be clarified with interview, further observation, and an investigation of performed identities in other contexts. I looked across transcripts of interaction, my notes, and the case study students’ work to identify the larger discourses at play in students’ positioning of themselves and others in the classroom, particularly storylines related to race, class, gender, and sexuality. As I explain below,



I then employed critical discourse analysis of particular episodes of interaction to examine *how* students' take up and negotiate those discourses in various contexts of composition.

**Critical Discourse Analysis.** In order to interrogate the ways in which youth challenge larger discourses as well as how they are implicated by them, I employed critical discourse analysis (henceforth CDA) framework as another layer of text analysis. In light of the tensions I discuss in my conceptual framework chapter, it is important to note, as Fairclough (1995) aptly does, CDA was first a political and social project engaged by those marginalized by dominant discourses before an academic one. With its focus on text, CDA interrogates how speakers' and writers' lexicogrammatical (Halliday, 1978) and other semiotic choices are mediated within discourses, consequently constructing subjects and subjectivity (Luke, 1995, p.18). The aims of critical discourse analysis are critical and constructive. The critical aspect of CDA involves exposing how naturalized discourses construct and perpetuate people's differential access to social power and material goods (Luke, 1995; Fairclough, 1995). The constructive aspect seeks to give teachers and students tools to transform their material and social conditions (Luke, 1995, p. 11-12; Fairclough, 1995).

A notable challenge for researchers employing a critical sociological discourse analysis involves closely reading texts to demonstrate how the macro instantiations of discourse manifest locally in every day social practice and text-in-use (Luke, 1995, p. 11). As people are both consumers and producers of discourses, critical discourse analysis investigates how people negotiate subject positions through their engagement with and of text. Through a close reading of text/language-in-use, critical discourse analysis promises to reveal how "power and identity are legitimated, negotiated, and contested toward political ends" (Luke, 1995).

Luke draws on Halliday and Hasan (1985) to explain a CDA definition of text as: "...any instance of written and spoken language that has coherence and coded meanings" (p.13). This definition of text resonates with how I locate texts in my study. Luke explains that text spans across all communicative modes (e.g., visual, audiovisual, gestural, spoken, written) as well as digital forms (e.g., multimodal, mixing visual, audio, electronic) (Kress, 2003). Moreover, textual meanings rely on a recursive exchange between texts and other texts and people exchanging, negotiating, agreeing upon and contesting meanings. And, texts are located in institutions; people draw on texts to make sense of and to construct their world; and, texts construct subjects by making various ways of being available (p. 13).

CDA exposes hegemonic discourses and seeks opportunities for constructive engagement with text and discourse by denaturalizing texts; exposing how texts affect people's experiences; and, identifying which texts affect people's lived experiences most profoundly (Luke, 1995, p.19). Following a process of CDA ultimately leads to "[opening] opportunities for alternative readings particularly by "those silenced by dominant social institutions that tend to privilege a particular analysis, reading position, or practice as official knowledge" (Luke, 1995, p. 19). I draw on the following questions modified from Luke (1995) and Fairclough (1995) to guide how I approached using CDA as an analytical tool.

#### Questions

- What discourses—micro and macro—are reflected in the texts?
- What words, phrases, images, and music, etc. are present that suggest particular identities/subjectivities (e.g., race, class, gender, sexuality, student, writer)?
- What positions do the texts make available for readers?

- What particular identities/subjectivities do speakers and writers take up in writing and conversations?
- What cultural representations, social relations, and identities are articulated through spoken and written texts in the classroom?
- What are the most “normal” discourses reflected in these spaces?
- What identities/subjectivities are resonant across texts?
- Whose material interests do particular texts and discourses serve?
- How does that articulation of discourses work on readers and listeners?
- How are students using the digital story assignment as a textual space to re-infect and rearticulate normative discourses?
- How do youth respond to non-normative identities/subjectivities in texts?
- How do youth trouble or refuse identities/subjectivities in texts?

Ultimately, Luke (1995) writes, “The job of discourse analysis, thus, is to disarticulate and to critique texts as a way of disrupting common sense” (p.19) by way of closely examining local texts in use. I used these questions as a guide for close analysis of the transcripts, fieldnotes and, particularly, the DMPs created by the students.

**Dissertation as an act of storytelling.** My role as a researcher largely centered on capturing, collecting, and composing a narrative using these narratives to fuel its content. These stories must be treated with care. And, as Denzin (1997) notes, “we need to understand that writing is inscription, an evocative act of creation and of representation” (pp. 25-26). Villenas (2000) explains that it is through identifying her own “feelings and emotions” that emerged through the interview process that she reflexively locates her own power to construct the subjects in her study (p.83). Certain steps and precautions must be taken to make transparent the

processes involved during the fieldwork phases of research, some of which I discuss in the interview portions of this chapter. In this way, acknowledging biases of one's research gaze demands that the research design affords a variety of opportunities for the individuals whom the research is about to be involved in the data collection processes themselves. I understood the digital storytelling project as an important space for this to happen in how students made decisions about what process work to share with me, how involved they want me to be in working in that process as case study participants and otherwise during the digital storytelling composition process, as well them having control over audio and video equipment I used to document their work time.

In the three chapters that follow, I tell the stories of each of the case study students, showing how the methods of inquiry I described above unfolded in my interpretations and understandings of Darius, Malcolm, and Gabriel's experiences with this project.

## CHAPTER 4

### DARIUS

**“Mine's like, kind [of] like a struggle theme...Like coming from nothing and trying to be something type thing” Darius King.**

In this chapter, I illuminate how Darius engaged several counter narratives in relation to Black masculinity, football player dispositions, and hustling. In the form of interweaving images of childhood innocence and family, Darius engaged these counter narratives in his DMP. The chapter begins with a discussion of the conversations that Darius and I had about the digital storytelling genre. Here, Darius conceptualized his project through multiple discourses, including those lending towards academic literacies. Darius immediately identified his theme as overcoming struggle. As Darius constructed his story about struggle he concurrently expressed that he believed that his peers only knew him as a mean football player and expected that his peers would judge him for his past life; yet, he expressed that he did not resent them for that.

Ultimately, Darius' experience with materializing a struggle storyline involved him negotiating what he revealed about his own personal experiences with living as a Black man growing up in poverty in the United States in a narrative that would be publicly shared with a peer audience he expected judgment from. While Darius engaged a socially critical discourse in his DMP wherein he implied his understanding that his struggle was shared and endured by many Black men in the United States, he purposefully withheld sharing the details of his personal life struggles from most people by way of circumventing this expected judgment. Reflecting on his process in the end of semester interview, Darius reframed his theme as “moving forward,” and explained that he purposefully engaged a childhood innocent storyline throughout to maintain a focus on his past, present, and future happiness.

*“So basically this is mostly about us, right?”* Ben and Darius were sitting side by side at their computers working on their Digital Media Projects (DMP) in their first period computer class. Taking advantage of having the digital storytelling so-called expert, myself, who was standing beside him, Ben asked, “So basically this is mostly about us, right?” (November 27, 2012). For each of these young men, yes, the story was about them, but who each believed he could be in his digital representation profoundly shaped the author’s approaches to his autobiographical narrative. In response to Ben’s question, I expressed the notion that self-representations are constructed. I said, “So it’s an identity movie, but I think it’s kinda cool, like everybody is gonna take their own angle at it.” And then I called attention to the racial identity theme of the class,

...you guys are making this movie in an African American Lit class where you’ve been thinking about Black identity...so this is an opportunity to not only think about how you are representing yourself but also how you are representing the identities that you claim for yourself.

Here, I implied that Black identity was an identity that both Darius and Ben would claim for themselves, an identity I had heard them both claiming in Kira’s class and which I had confirmed in this conversation. I expanded upon that point in sharing my own approach to using the DMP as an opportunity to subvert mainstream discourses regarding queer identity, when I said, “... in my movie I was trying to like disrupt some of those assumptions [about queer people] and so like but that was an explicit thing that I was doing.” Here, I also called attention to the limits of agentic self-representation in saying,

...whether I like it or not, I'm recognizable as a woman and as a White woman and so like my movie is saying something about a White person and about a woman because those are identities that people see.

In signaling the visual aspects of embodied subjectivity, I called attention to how my imagined audience would see race and gender as aspects of my self-representation regardless of my intentions. Thus, my audience would bring their own assumptions specific to those identity categories to their interpretation of my narrative simply because of how familiarity and recognizability invites a certain level of knowing. In this regard, I was drawing attention to the limits of agentic self-representation. If subjectivities are recognizable, attached to that recognizability were familiar, mainstream (and also local) storylines specific to race (Whiteness) and gender (femininity) in the case of my DMP.

*“They look at me like as a jock, but I don't see myself as being a jock. I see myself as an ordinary kid that's going to school trying to get an education like everyone else.”* Drawing on my conversations with Gabriel about how his being a football player informed his performed school subjectivities, I suggested that the DMP might be an opportunity for Darius and Ben, both star football players, to weigh in on the conversation regarding the significance of being football players at Regional High. In some respects, Darius' approach to digital storytelling suggested that he planned to leverage the DMP towards those ends. However, Darius also rationalized his self-censorship in his day-to-day life and in the DMP in the context of sharing that he did not believe his peers would ever see him differently. Darius and I had several conversations about his perceived school identity. In the end of semester interview, Darius explained his sense of what his peers thought of him and how these notions conflicted with how he saw himself.

Darius: ... people always looked at me like I was the big bully guy,

Becky: You're sweet=

Darius: =but I was never the big bully guy. Ahh

Darius: I'm like yeah. They look at me like as a jock, but I don't see myself as being a jock. I see myself as an ordinary kid that's going to school trying to get an education like everyone else.

Becky: Yeah.

Darius: They just look at me because I have a, I have a sort of a mean side. Like, that's just around football. Like I'm actually sensitive.

Becky: Mm Hm.

Darius: Like to certain stuff. Like I can [like] adapt to a lot of situations and environments. But, people only see me as, 'Oh he only plays football, he don't know a lot of the other stuff.' So, I'm sensi, I'm very sensitive like when it comes to like the family and stuff. I'm very sensitive like with my mom and everything, but

Becky So is that?

Darius: It's just the life you live.

In saying, "it's just the life you live" Darius was implying that he felt that he was being unfairly judged on account of his experiences in life, but not for the person that he understood himself as.

Becky: And the other thing that I have been talking to Gabriel about is I think it's also interesting because you guys are both football players.

Darius: Um Hm

Becky: And so, there's also this like public image of who you are, and this a this is a, this is your own. So like it's interesting on your website like there are pictures of you guys all like over the Internet.



Darius: Mm Hm.

Becky: And so you already have this digital presence. And people know who you are in school. But, what do they know about you? So like, this movie is an opportunity... to tell your own story, when other people have all these assumptions about who you are.

(November 27, 2012).

Responding to my suggestion that Ben and Darius work to subvert and reframe the football discourse both said that they were planning to leave mentioning football all together out of their DMP's.

Ben:.... I don't want to talk about football because I feel like everyone just sees me as a football player. You know?

Becky: Yeah.

Darius: I wasn't gonna put that. No football.

Ben: Yeah, no football.

Becky: That's a really interesting choice that you're making. There's probably some people that would expect that you would talk about that.

Ben: Oh yeah, everyone's gonna expect that.

While Darius' reasons at this point were unclear, he echoed Ben's sentiments about excluding football from his DMP. Yet, Darius ended up including several frames that featured the salience of football in his life. As I will argue, football imagery ultimately played a significant role in supporting the hero narrative storyline through which Darius framed his life narrative through in his DMP.

In our interview conversation (November 27, 2012), Darius described his peers having misinformed notions of who he was on account of him being a football player, and that it was

these misinformed perspectives that both hindered and motivated Darius to proffer subversive or counter storylines in relation to the assumptions he believed his peers made of him. In this respect, Darius expressed an awareness of the flattening affects of stereotypical thinking and he desired to reject and thicken other's understand of his person. Yet, it was also the peer audience discourse that precluded him from sharing more openly about himself and his lived life because he believed his peers would judge him. In this respect, he articulated deeply held beliefs about the possibilities of shifting his peers' opinions of him. Thus, Darius' compositional approach and DMP product reflected his sophisticated management of a judgmental peer audience discourse concurrent to his efforts to subverting that discourse.

*"Mine's like, kind [of] like a struggle theme...Like coming from nothing and trying to be something type thing."* In our initial conversation, I signaled to school and academic forms of writing for digital storytelling in arguing for the importance of organizing the DMP thematically for the purposes of constructing a narrative accessible to a broad viewing audience. I drew parallels to narrative and expository writing genres in my use of the terms thesis, theme, and claim. I explained these ideas to Darius.

So, you have a thesis, like a major theme to the story that you're telling, and then all of those pieces to that story speak to that thesis. So maybe in order to define yourself in order to make your claim or in order to make your thesis statement about who you are, you need to say this is where I've started, and this is where I am, and this is where I'm going. But not everybody is gonna need to follow that um that same kind of chronological order of sharing their lives (November 27, 2012).

In suggesting a thesis and that the author is making claims about who he is, I implied that an author should write with an external audience in mind. Both concepts of theme and audience

ultimately played significant roles in how Darius participated in digital storytelling. I also suggested that the story organization should be up to an author's discretion.

In the following conversation, I referenced the videos created by past students in Kira's class that we had shown as exemplar digital stories. My reflections on past DMPs was that many lacked cohesion in their structure, and I suggested that organizing one's story according to a theme could provide a roadmap of sorts for a viewing audience. Here, Darius identified his theme as struggle.

Becky: It depends on. Like, like I think, you know, a lot of the ones we watched in class, like a lot of people chose to start from what they see as the beginning of their life. Um, but the difference between last year and this year, is that I'm really trying to encourage people to tell more of a story. Um that actually has like a theme. So, like Ben's, it sounds like Ben's theme is through thick and thin his family's been with him.

Darius: Mine's like, kind [of] like a struggle theme.

Becky: Mm hm.

Darius: Like coming from nothing and trying to be something type thing.

Darius' quick response suggested that he had already been thinking about his story in relation to a theme, or at least that applying a theme to his early life memories came with relative ease. Darius operationalized struggle when he explained it meant, "like coming from nothing and trying to be something." At the same time he named the mainstream hip-hop hero narrative trajectory his digital media project ultimately followed.

***Darius King, Behind the Music.*** Struggle emerged centrally in the first two slides, as did elements of Darius the protagonists' positioning within that struggle. In what follows, I discuss how Darius' modal choices reflected his thoughts about how this theme reflected elements of

himself. With regard to positioning, distance was importantly established between the experiences of the person in the story and the present time storyteller as a function of time in that the events depicted in the DMP are of the past. Thus, while the story may be one of struggle, it was being told from a position of a protagonist looking back as the heroic one who had overcome those struggles.

*The Struggle.* Darius' opened his DMP with the words appearing in bubbled, multicolored text, "Darius King. Behind the music." Two spot-lights drifted back and forth horizontally over the name, 'Darius King' and the voice of the late hip-hop artist, the Notorious B.I.G. rapped, "Fuck all you hoes. Get a grip. Yeah, this album is dedicated to all the teachers that told me [I would never amount to nothing]."

Modal choices in this first frame established the protagonist as a heroic survivor of struggle. First, the idiom, "behind the music" signaled a popular music television program that aired first in 1997 called, "Behind the Music," where music artists were interviewed at length about their lives and careers (Black, 2012). While not all musicians experienced happy endings to their careers, appearing on the show was indicative of notable levels of life achievement and fame; thus, this cultural referencing to "Behind the Music" might be read as positioning protagonist Darius as a sort of hero in how author Darius framed his representation as a life worth looking back on. Second, Darius selected the song "Juicy," composed and performed by rap artist, the Notorious B.I.G., who experienced both fame and struggle in his short life (Ongiri, 2009). In the opening lines of "Juicy" Biggie rejected deficit perspectives associated at large with Black male identity. While Darius only ever spoke positively about his experiences with teachers at Regional High, Kira notably among them, he talked extensively about feeling

misunderstood by his peers. Later, I will discuss how he went so far as to proffer his perceptions of being misunderstood by his peer audience to rationalize how he told his story.

*Hustling.* Darius selected “Juicy” because of how he understood the song lyrics as capturing a storyline of struggle that resonated with his perceptions of his own life struggles, which he sought to narrativize in his DMP. When Darius searched the Internet for music in his first period computer class we discussed his music choices (December 3, 2012).

Becky: Do you know what other song you want?

Darius: Oh, it's just him, him rapping and how he had a hustle. It's like all the same thing, hustling and all that.

Becky: Yeah.

Darius: That's what I had to do, so::it's all the same thing. [Dreams and Nightmares played in the background, “Ain’t this what they been waiting for?”].

A few minutes later in our conversation, Darius reflected on his past life experiences that for him mirrored the experiences Biggie rapped about in Juicy.

Darius: So, it's been a little ra. It's been rough from the beginning with what me and my brother had to do, but it's all good.

Becky: Yeah.

Darius: I mean it all comes to play right now. So it's all good.

Here, Darius indexed time in reference to the struggle as something experienced in the past; he also uses the word “beginning” in relation to talking about this struggle, as though as far back as he could remember, his life had been wrought with struggle. “It’s all good” were also the same words that formed the refrain of “Juicy”, suggesting how Darius understood an alignment

between how he had lived his life and how Biggie had lived his. In this way, he saw his own story reflected in the music lyrics.

In the next frame, the text was set against a black backdrop and is written in white, aside from the word “overwhelmed,” which was layered with color; the top of each letter began in red that faded to green towards the bottom of each word. The text read,

The individual has always had to struggle to keep from being overwhelmed by the tribe.

If you try it, you will be lonely often, and sometimes frightened. But no price is too high to pay for the privilege of owning yourself. By Friedrich Nietzsche.

The voice of the Notorious B.I.G. finished the opening lyric, “I would never amount to nothin’, to all the people that lived above the buildings I was hustling in front of that called [the police on me].’

“Hustling” was something that Darius had admittedly done in his life, and as he composed his digital story, he struggled between telling people about that life and telling a different story. He had had experiences that he recalled in our conversations about people making unfair assumptions about him being mean when he viewed himself as direct and honest. He also named judgment, or desire to circumvent judgment, as reasons for not sharing his own experiences hustling with the class.

Darius’ modal choices reflected the ways he was thinking about these struggles in relation to his own life as well as how he was drawing connections to how others had articulated living with hardship. Following examining several quotations on the computer screen during an Internet search, Darius selected a quotation by the German philosopher, Friedrich Nietzsche (November 27, 2012). As the quotation displayed on the computer screen Darius quietly read it over and we discussed its meaning together.

Darius: It just means a lot. This one like stuck to me the most over all the ones I read.

Becky: That last line, “the price is too high for the privilege of owning yourself.”

Darius: Exactly. That's the one that actually like stuck to me.

Becky: Yeah.

Darius: If I, cuz see, uh, can I start off with something like that?

Becky: Yeah.

Darius: That, that honestly like pulls you in.

Becky: Mm hm.

Asking me if he could start his DMP in this manner implied that perhaps he held in mind our earlier conversation about how good writers start narratives as he selected this quotation.

Regardless, that quotation “stuck” to him among the others. Darius explained that he liked the quotation because it had the effect of “pull[ing] you in.” Using the pronoun “you” rather than “me” suggests that he may have been thinking about a provocative opening for his audience, or perhaps he just meant that the quote resonated with him.

Darius was also considering starting with either “Juicy” or “Dreams and Nightmares” because of how these songs both contained lyrics on hustling and supported the theme of ‘coming from nothing to be something’, suggesting that Darius was selecting this quotation with these aforementioned thematic elements in mind. The quotation in the context of the DMP provided information about the struggle discourse. The first sentence mentioned struggle stating that, “The individual has always had to struggle to keep from being overwhelmed by the tribe.” Recalling the conversation Darius and Ben had on November 27, 2012, Ben and Darius talked about how they understood quotes serving the purpose of one “explaining” oneself. Starting his DMP with this quotation suggests that Darius the author was constructing a digital representation

of Darius the protagonist as an individual in the midst of ongoing negotiations and struggles to resist “being overwhelmed by the tribe.” Given our conversations in relation to the unfolding storylines resonant in the DMP, the tribe might be read as a signal for macro and micro oppressive discourses that Darius both countered and was constrained by as evidenced by his approach and process during the DMP.

“*So, I keep it on lock*”—*Thwarting judgment through self-censorship*. Darius opened his DMP with the opening lyrics to “Juicy”.

Fuck all you hoes. Get a grip. This album is dedicated to all the teachers that told me I would never amount to nothing, to all the people that lived in the buildings I was hustling in front of that called the police on me...

These lyrics established a counter storyline to a racist discourse with regard to widely held deficit perspectives about Black men in the United States. Biggie framed the narrative as counter by following provocative profanities, “fuck all you hoes” and “Get a grip” with a sardonic dedication to the people he cast as unfairly judging him as a failure. Darius identified judgment, or a desire to resist judgment from his peers as a reason for why he chose to reveal certain parts of his childhood memories and not others. In our end of semester interview, Darius talked extensively about how he made choices for his digital storytelling in relation to his peer audience. I had asked him why he chose to not divulge information about his experiences with hustling.

Darius: I would never wanna tell the class about that because I don't want to be judged.

Becky: Mm Hm.

Darius: For the life I did.

Becky: Mm Hm



Darius: I mean. It all takes a toll on me. A little bit, like right now. I'm re, I'm thinking about the time, like the dark night. I, it was a lot.

Becky: Yeah

Darius: From ten years old to fifteen hustling, every day. Trying to pay, trying to get food on the table. And I would never wanna. I would never want any kid, na, growing up from my situation to do that, ever.

Becky: Yeah

Darius: So, I would never. I would never tell nobody about that honestly.

Becky: Yeah.

Darius: So, I keep it on lock. But I feel comfortable with you telling you about it because I feel like it's necessary to tell you.

Despite his desire and willingness to tell me about his life struggles, Darius struggled with sharing this information indiscriminately. The notion of being overwhelmed by the tribe, to draw on the Nietzsche quotation, resonates in this brief exchange where Darius expressed his reasoning for both telling and not telling. To talk about hustling in his DMP would leave him vulnerable to peer judgment, and while he didn't name it, to his own as well. The emotional weight Darius attached to these memories emerged palpably in this brief moment of recollection, when he explained, "It all takes a toll on me. A little bit, like right now. I'm re, I'm thinking about the time, like the dark night. I, it was a lot." So, while Biggie outright rejects a racist, judgmental discourse in recalling his days with hustling, and Darius too rejects being overwhelmed by other's judgment, his discourse here suggested that he too judged himself. This sentiment resonated in his words, "I would never want any kid, na, growing up from my situation to do that, ever." In expressing that he would never want anyone else to experience what he had in his early

childhood Darius implied his own negative impressions of his early life. For these reasons, he largely kept his personal life private.

Darius: So, it's like a big thing. That's why I stick to. I don't stick to myself, but I let very few people into my life because I don't want to be judged.

Becky: Mm Hm.

Darius: Of what the life that I lived, or the past life, or the life, or the life I live now.

Becky: Mm Hm.

Darius: So, I always keep everything like in the shallow, in the shallow hallways. So, people don't know. (December 18, 2012)

Here, he indicated that self-censorship was a normal way in which he related people and not just a choice he was making for his DMP. In this manner, self-censorship seemed to be a sort of survival mechanism he had learned to employ to ward off his perceptions of other's judgment.

*My theme was to keep moving forward.* While Darius initially named his theme for his DMP as struggle, in the end of semester interview he returned to the notion of theme and stated it in terms of being future oriented and he wanted to gloss his past with an air of childhood innocence.

Darius: Ahhhhh. I didn't know. The the wa, I don't know what the theme. My theme was to keep moving forward.

Becky: Mm Hm.

Darius: And not let the struggle that happened to me affect me in the future.

Becky: Mm Hm.

Here, Darius spoke about his struggle in the passive sense, in his expression that he did not want the struggle that "happened to" him affect his future self. Maintaining a future oriented outlook

inspired Darius' choice to cast an air of innocence with the beginning images explaining, "So, I just started off just with the kid picture" (December 18, 2012).

Later in this conversation he explained that he preferred to depict his childhood through a normative discourse of childhood innocence.

So, I didn't want to put none of that hustling thing in there or like a theme like that I wanted to be like where I was innocent...And I didn't have a past like that. Like I wanted to stay focused.

Here, he also explained his choice to exclude hustling in exchange for maintaining a focus on the future, as focusing too heavily on the past seemed to threaten his perceived abilities for forward movement.

*"I would never want nobody to live like the life I had to live."* Darius reiterated the pain these memories caused him when he shared that he would not want to relive his own childhood; he preferred to erase it (December 3, 2012). He was reflecting on words spoken by Biggie Smalls regarding the hip-hop artists' statement about not wanting to be reincarnated. Darius shared how that sentiment resonated with him.

Darius: I don't want to come back reincarnated. That's probably like the best [quotation]. I love.

Becky: What does that mean to you?

Darius: I don't want to be born the same guy.

Becky: Yeah.

Darius: I would want, would rather come back different.

Becky: Yeah.

Darius: I would never want nobody to live like the life I had to live. I'm not saying it was bad, but from my circumstances what I had to come overcome and, it was bad.

Becky: Yeah

Darius: So: I wouldn't want to do that again.

As though anticipating the revised theme of innocence that Darius articulates in the interview, he goes on to explain that rather than focusing on the darkness of the past, he preferred to center on happiness.

Becky: Yeah.

Darius: Honestly.

Becky: Are you going to talk about like, what?

Darius: Ah, I don't want to. That's a dark, gloomy road.

Becky: Yeah.

Darius: So I don't know. I don't want to put that in there, honestly. I'd rather just put like the smiles.

*Remembering Happiness—“We whip [the pictures]’ out and just look at em’ and laugh.”*

Despite the salience of trauma resonant in how Darius recalled his childhood, he seemed to have genuinely happy memories as well. He even recalled the process of selecting images for his DMP with his mom as being fun and reminiscent of happy memories. During the end of semester interview Darius and I talked about his experience selecting images with his mother for his DMP. He described finding pictures with his mother as “fun” and reminiscent of good memories. For the project, Darius explained that he and his mother scoured through the several duffel bags where she kept their pictures, each one a memory of an event. Darius explained that she had written the names of people pictured as well as the dates on the back of each image. Going

through the pictures, they laughed together remembering and in Darius' words, "reminisce a little bit." Looking at old pictures with his mom was in fact a regular practice they shared every few months and more recently when Darius needed to find, "baby pictures or somethin, like our senior pictures, we whip em' out and just look at em' and laugh." He reflected, "Yeah, I liked it."

***Complexly constructed counter-narratives.*** As Darius described his digital storytelling process, he articulated a desire to erase the darkness from his past. Rather, he preferred to cast an air of innocence to his reconstructed childhood memories and purposefully populated the frames reflecting his early childhood with images signaling happiness. At the same time, he constructed several counter narratives through which he responded to oppressive school and societal discourses. The counter narratives related to Black masculinity, football player dispositions, and hustling. In the form of interweaving images of childhood innocence and family, Darius engaged these counter narratives in his DMP. The counter narrative discourses are layered across and interwoven with the imagery of innocence signaled by the pictures of Darius and his brother as children. Certain quotations cast an air of knowing as though articulated from a position of wisdom in looking back.

*Childhood innocence, the struggle, and hustling.* The innocence discourse resonated across the following thirteen frames. Yet, as "Juicy" played in the backdrop and images of baby Darius were juxtaposed with the words of Tupac Shakur, Martin Luther King, Jr., Bryant H. McGill, Ronnie Hames Dio, and Ralph Ransom, the innocence discourse was complicated by a critical race discourse as well as a meritocratic discourse.

For instance, Darius coupled a critical race discourse with images of childhood innocence in the second frame. The Notorious B.I.G.'s lyrics addressed judgmentally minded people, "that called the police on me when I was just trying to make some money to feed my daughter. To all

the niggas in the struggle, you know what I'm sayin'?" The image on the screen was a picture of a baby, smiling and sitting on the bed. Here, Biggie's words framed the macro context in which this baby was subjugated. This image of baby Darius, was a baby born into "the struggle." This opening formed the thematic elements for Darius' digital story, as well as for how he characterized his own childhood.

The background in the next frame was black and the text on the screen read, "I am society's child. This is how they made me and now I'm sayin' what's on my mind and they don't want that[.] This is what you made me, America Tupac Shakur". The voice of the Notorious B.I.G. continued, "It's all good baby baby. It was all a dream, I used to read Word Up magazine. Salt 'n' Pepa and Heavy D up in the limousine."

The little I knew of mainstream rap at the time that Darius was writing this gave me pause to question Darius' choice for including both Biggie and Tupac, rap artists whom I knew to be notorious rivals, in a digital story together. When I asked Darius about this, his response to my question was, "That's all love in my pic, in my eyes. I'm gonna put Martin Luther King quote. I'm gonna put everything in" (December 3, 2012). Darius' response indicated how he understood the quotations as delivering a message that resonated with him. While it is not clear what Darius meant when he said, "that's all love in...my eyes" his use of the word indicates that he found harmony amongst the quotations, that they were perhaps communicating a common message about the struggle that Black and African American men, and what people endure in America, and that he was focused on the synchrony rather than any rivalry that others (myself included) might associate with these rap artists.

When Darius mentioned that he wanted to include a Tupac quotation he shared that despite having known many of his peers in Black Lit since his freshman year in high school, he

believed that most knew him as a football player. He explained, "...They don't really know na, nothing other than that but football... That's all they think of [me]." He continued, "I'm gonna put some stuff in there they're gonna be, ahh, ok. That's a side of him...that we didn't know...I'm gonna put all that in there" (December 3, 2012). Darius was thinking about using a Tupac quotation when he expressed his desire to disrupt his perception of his peer's flattened impressions of him. His intentions to include iconic historical civil rights figures and critical hip hop artists like MLK Junior, Tupac, and Biggie, implied his desire to construct a counter narrative challenging his notions of his salient school football identity.

The digital story transitioned to two young boys; each was smiling at the camera, and holding a dog. One boy was smiling and showing his teeth, the other had his lips pressed together and jutted his chin out at the camera. The background looked like a nature scene with blue and green colors. Biggie rapped, "Hangin pictures on my wall. Every Saturday Rap Attack, Mr. Magic, Marley Marl."

In the next slide, there was a black background and in teal, italicized text read, "Every man must decide whether he will walk in the light of creative altruism or in the darkness of destructive selfishness. Martin Luther King, Jr." Biggie rapped, "I let my tape rock til my tape popped. Smokin weed and Bambu, sippin on Private Stock."

There is a notable parallel between Darius' description of his past as being a "dark and gloomy road" and the darkness Martin Luther King Jr. alluded to in the aforementioned quotation. In the interview, Darius told me that when he was hustling to pay rent, "people was passing away." He described the hardship coupling these experiences; he explained, "Like, it was it was took a toll on me" that informed his choice to stop. He shared his thoughts at the time, "so I felt like I don't need to be hustling no more to be doing this. I found a job and then my mom

met my step dad and stuff started to fall into place. But, it all just takes a toll. I don't want to go back to my life, man.” Martin Luther King Jr.’s quotation, “Every man must decide whether he will walk in the light of creative altruism or in the darkness of destructive selfishness” reflected a pivotal choice Darius understood himself as having made to turn away from illegal means of making money towards being legally employed. Coupling this quotation with Darius’ remembrance of his reasoning for why he stopped hustling further indicated that he shared judgmental sentiments about hustling with his perceived peer audience. The next frame disrupted the heavy tone stirred up with Darius’ memories with the image of an adorable baby Darius.

*“My childhood was safe and sane.”* The project transitioned to a picture of a baby lying on his back, with his arms spread like wings. He was dressed in a blue and white striped hoodie and wore a blue bandanna on his head and looks straight into the camera. Biggie rapped, “Way back, when I had the red and black lumberjack. With the hat to match.” Darius and I did not discuss this frame he seemed to be underscoring the parallels between his life and Biggies. In other words, he found a visual of himself as a baby that seemed to match Biggie’s lyrics in which he offered description of himself.

Following was a frame with a black background and there was blue bubble text with a white outline that read, “It is better to have a meaningful life and make a difference than to merely have a long life. Bryant H. McGill”. Biggie rapped, “Remember rappin Duke? duh-ha, duh-ha. You never thought that hip-hop would take it this far.”

McGill’s words, “It is better to have a meaningful life and make a difference than to merely have a long life,” both illustrate the heroic plot in the implications of the protagonist acting as one whose actions are done in the interest of others, and anticipated a family value discourse that Darius developed in the following frames.



The project transitioned to another image of baby Darius. The baby was sitting in a baby swing, wore sunglasses, a blue bandana, and a hoodie with the hood up. Biggie rapped, “Now I’m in the limelight cause I rhyme tight. Time to get paid, blow up like World Trade.”

In the next frame, the background was black and the text, in white, read, “My childhood was safe and sane. No abuse and no traumas. I was surrounded by a large and loving family who taught me the importance of hard work and a meaningful education. Ronnie Hames Dio.” Biggie rapped, “Born sinner, the opposite of a winner. Remember when I used to eat sardines for dinner. Peace to Ron G.” The juxtaposition of the lyrics with the quotation capture the essence of what Darius struggled with in composing his digital narrative. Dio’s quotation suggested that the childhood of the child featured throughout the DMP enjoyed a “safe and sane” childhood; yet, so much of how Darius described his childhood motioned towards an antithetical storyline. Biggie’s lyrics, “Born sinner, the opposite of a winner,” signaled a critical race discourse that spoke to both the structural and lived experiences of systemic poverty. Combined, these modes reflected Darius’ struggle; while he indicated several times that he did not want to focus on the hardship of his past, he seemed unable to recall his past without remembering that hardship. Yet, his agency, albeit compromised by a storyline resonant in Biggie’s lyrics that conflated living in poverty with living in destitution, was reflected in his inclusion of Dio’s quote, which enabled him to proffer a storyline about his childhood that focused on an idealized image of a happy, loving childhood.

***Reframing Struggle.*** The next eleven slides reflected Darius’ agentic moves to reframe struggle in a positive manner. Here, the juxtaposition of the images and the lyrics challenged a storyline about what living in poverty was like by underscoring the strength and happiness stemming from strong family relationships and confidence in one’s own fortitude.

*“Our roots will always be tangled.”* On the screen, there was a picture of a baby who appeared to be holding a present. Biggie rapped, “Brucey B, Kid Capri. Funkmaster Flex, Lovebug Starski. I’m blowin up like you thought I [would].” Unlike Biggie, baby Darius was holding a present, a signal of abundance, rather than destitution and want. The lyric, “I’m blowin’ up like you thought I [would],” returned to the culmination of the hero narrative, the success achieved at the end of a long struggle.

Against a black background, the text in the following frame was italicized and in white. It read, “Growing apart doesn’t change the fact that for a long time we grew side by side; our roots will always be tangled. I’m glad for that. Ally Condie, Matchbed.” Biggie rapped, “Call the crib, same number, same hood. It’s all good. Uh.”

The quotation here proffered a discourse of solidarity, whether it was family solidarity, or racial solidarity that Darius intended to illustrate in these modal choices is unclear, but both seem to be implied in the imagery of tangled roots, as in family roots, and the words, “same number, same hood,” signaled back to home.

As the DMP continued a toddler was pictured sleeping on a couch and Biggie rapped the chorus to “Juicy,” singing, “And if you don’t know, now you know, nigga. You know very well [who you are].” The lyrics facilitated a reframing of the socially constructed self. In this reframing, there was both a rootedness in the past self as the lyrics lead up to the chorus signal, and a positively constructed present self who now knew who he was, a success, not the person that people judged him to be.

*“[you know very] well who you are. Don’t let em’ hold you down.”* Following was a frame with italicized text written in white on a black background.

All life demands struggle. Those who have everything given to them become lazy, selfish, and insensitive to the real values of life. The very striving and hard work that we so constantly TRY to avoid is the major building block in the person we are today. Ralph Ransom.

Biggie rapped, “[you know very] well who you are. Don't let em’ hold you down.”

Here, Ransom’s quotation presented struggle as an asset to a person’s character in calling struggle a “major building block” for the present self. Biggie’s lyrics, “don’t let em’ hold you down” signaled the tension that Darius struggled with in terms of how he imagined a judgmental peer audience and feared being judged for choices he had made in his early life. Yet, “Juicy’s” chorus, “you know very well who you are” signaled an empowerment discourse implying that who they say you are, or those who judge, do not know the actual, powerful person.

*“I’m very sensitive like when it comes to like the family and stuff.”* Following these slides, the DMP presented eight slides centering on the strong bonds that existed between mother and child and between family members. When Darius spoke about his family it was often in the context of remembering his early life struggles and in describing his motivation for focusing on overcoming those struggles. Family was also a prevalent theme amongst the other student’s digital stories, so perhaps there was an element of Darius including explicit mentioning of his family by way of normalizing his DMP. For instance, in a conversation midway through working on the project, Darius relayed that he intended to include a “side of him[self]” that his peers didn’t know, and that including these sides of himself could effectively teach them something new (December 3, 2012). As I discussed earlier, in relation to the peer audience discourse, Darius expressed that he felt his peers mischaracterized him as a “mean jock” while he described himself as sensitive and having the capacity to adapt to different environments and life situations. He explained, “But, people only see me as, oh he only plays football, he don't know a lot of the

other stuff. So, I'm sensi--, I'm very sensitive like when it comes to like the family and stuff. I'm very sensitive like with my mom and everything.”

His sense of sensitivity related to family was captured in the slide that followed. The text, words by rap artist Tupac Shakur were typed in italicized white lettering and read:

I reminisce, cause through the drama I can always depend on my mama. And when it seems that I'm hopeless you say the words that can get me back in focus. When I was sick as a little kid. To keep me happy there's no limit to the things you did. And all my childhood memories Are full of all the sweet things you did for me[.] And even though I act craazy. I gotta thank the Lord that you made me. Tupac Shakur.

Biggie rapped, “but not that many cause you're the only one. I'll give you good and plenty. I made the change.”

In the end of semester interview, when Darius and I were talking about which of his peers’ DMP’s resonated with him, Darius expressed his sensitive side. Here, he was commenting on Reyna’s DMP, in which she had shared that she was raised by her aunt and uncle following the death of her parents.

Darius: And I give mad props to Reyna for keep going on because I don't think I could even move on with my mom gone.

Becky: Mm Hm

Darius: Cuz, shu, that would kill me; like I don't know what I would do.

Becky: Yeah.

Darius: And it hurts me thinking about it.

Becky: Well, you don't have to.

Darius: It's alright. I mean, it's just life, and I understand that deaths do happen, but I give mad props to Reyna for keeping her head up.

Becky: Yeah.

Darius: That's a lot, that's definitely a lot.

That Darius, a high school senior, called the experience of mourning death “just life” underscored an awareness of a truth that some people are shielded from realizing well into adulthood. He revealed his sensitive emotions associated with his mother in imagining the profound pain, “that would kill me”, and sense of instability, “like I don't know what I would do”, he would feel if he were to lose her. Yet, rather than turning away from the pain he felt in imagining such a profound loss, he turned that awareness into a sympathetic stance, and an opportunity for relating to Reyna across a shared experience. His recollection of this moment revealed him performing the self he described himself as—a sensitive person.

I asked him if he shared his sentiments with Reyna.

Becky: Did you talk to her about that?

Darius: I did, I did actually talk to her about it. I gave her a hug and told her, ‘you're strong because without your mom, without my mom period in life, life is too--,’ so like Gabriel, I don't know how he does it, living not knowing how she's doing and stuff like that, and I hate to see anybody in that situation...I give mad love to them two.”

Darius’ articulation of his sympathy for his peer Reyna, and close friend Gabriel, over being separated from their mothers through death and distance illustrated the deep bond he felt to his mother. He described himself as both hating seeing anyone in this situation, implying that to be without a mother was a terrible way to live, and as his previous reflection indicated, a circumstance that he did not believe he could survive. Yet, he admired what he understood as a

laudable courage displayed by both Reyna and Gabriel for moving forward in life in the absence of this crucial relationship in their lives.

Darius included two images of his mother in his DMP. In the first frame in the sequence, she appeared as a beautiful and youthful woman lying down, lips painted deep red, face aglow with light and a baby with Darius' curly hair lay next to the woman, both looked mystically off camera. Biggie rapped, "from a common thief to up close and personal with Robin Leach. And I'm far from [cheap]." The juxtaposition of the music lyrics that signal one's wealth, "Robin Leach. And I'm far from [cheap]" with a stunning image of Darius' mother and her baby suggest that the two pictured are of great importance, almost regal. Whether Darius deliberately selected this image for the purposes of drawing on a dominant narrative specific to American cultural associations between wealth and beauty is unclear. Regardless, Darius held his mother in high esteem and the selection of this image captured how he wanted to share the beauty and value he saw in her with others.

*"From ten years old to fifteen hustling. Every day, trying to pay [rent], trying to get food on the table."* The focus on family continued, as the next two frames centered on brothers. Darius's conversation about his brother illustrates how he understood that as males both were expected to be providers for the family. The few times that Darius spoke about his brother, it was in the context of hustling and hardship. In his stories about his middle school memories, Darius indicated that he and his brother were primary providers in the family prior to his mother remarrying, at which time Darius explained that their situation started to improve. In the end of semester interview, Darius recalled the time that he and his brother had to hustle, when he said, "From ten years old to fifteen hustling, every day. Trying to pay [rent], trying to get food on the

table.” Despite their economic situation improving, Darius and his brother continued to work out of necessity as young adults.

Darius mentioned in one of our conversations while he was working on his project that his brother’s birthday was coming up (December 3, 2012). I asked him if the family would be celebrating.

Darius: Na, he don't like to celebrate. He just says, ‘We got work anyways.’

Becky: Really?

Darius: Yeah, we got work. So he didn't do nothin' except come home and eat.

Becky: Yeah. Yup, my brother turned twenty-five this year, and [on his birthday] he just (laughter) came home from work.

Darius: That's all there is to do. (“Dreams and Nightmares” started playing).

This exchange indicated how Darius drew parallels between himself and his brother as though they functioned in some respects as a unit. Darius first mentioned that his brother did not like to celebrate because “we” or he and Darius had work, which Darius then rephrased as “we got work.” Moreover, while I laughed about my brother having to work on his birthday (because it was the first time in his life that I had known him to be working that hard), Darius maintained a somber tone. He did not mimic my laugh; rather, he rephrased his brother’s sentiment, “That's all there is to do,” and returned to the work at hand as indexed by the playing of the song “Dreams and Nightmares” which he used as his second song in his DMP. In other words, there was nothing more to say about work; their reality was what it was.

The two frames that focused on brothers capture an essence of a relationship in terms of a bond that seemed to exist between Darius and his brother. On the next frame, the text on a black background in white read, “We are not only our brother's keeper; in countless large and small

ways we are brother's maker.” And Biggie rapped, “cheap, I smoke skunk with my peeps all day. Spread love, it's the Brooklyn way. The Moet and Alize.” The project transitioned to an image of a toddler-aged boy holding a chair with a baby in the chair. The older boy next to him is smiling at the camera. Biggie rapped, “keep me pissy. Now they write me letters cuz they miss me. I never thought it could happen.”

The picture of two smiling children presented a different picture than the one Darius proffered when he mentioned his brother in our conversations when he spoke of hustling with his brother; yet, his inclusion of this images of happy children coincided with Darius’ previously articulated intention to cast an air of innocence over his shared childhood memories as well as reflected images that he and his mother had likely joyfully reminisced over.

*Overcoming the struggle, family, and the American Dream.* In addition to demonstrating the influence of family on one’s character, the DPM proffered a critical discourse regarding the construction of Black male subjectivity. In the slide following his focus on brothers, the text, which was on black background with white letters and in italics read, “I’m 18 years old. I might just be my mother's child, but in all reality, I’m everybody's child. Nobody raised me; I was raised in this society. Tupac Shakur.” And Biggie rapped, “this rapping stuff. I was too used to packing gats and stuff now homies play me close like butter play toast.” In claiming that society raised him, Tupac implied that his subjectivity was in part a cultural product. While Darius seemed to struggle with how much he could tell of his past life because he believed he was would be held accountable for his past actions by his peer audience, he was concurrently aligning his self-representation with African American males, Tupac in particular, who situated one’s own accountability for one’s actions in relation to one’s socially experienced conditions.



The following three slides exemplified a discourse that deeply valued family and through Biggie's lyrics, celebrated wealth. In other words, these frames raised both the family and American dream discourses. Darius included a picture of a woman, likely his mother, sitting in the middle of a room holding two small children, one child was in a diaper and the other has a shirt. There was another child half captured in the picture. The group was sitting around and surrounded by wrapping paper. Biggie rapped, "from the Mississippi down to the east coast. Condos in Queens, indo for weeks." The next slide is a black background with words in white, italicized; they read, "In family life, love is the oil that eases friction, the cement that binds closer together, and the music that brings harmony. Eva Burrows quotes." Biggie rapped, "Sold out seats to hear Biggie Smalls speak. Live a life without fear." There was an image of a young child sitting on a blanket chewing on a pacifier. Biggie rapped, "Putting five karats in my baby girl's ear. Lunches, brunches, interviews by the pool. Considered a fool cuz I dropped out of [high school]."

Darius' images and words suggested a parallel between Darius' and Biggie's aspirations and realization of the dream, and subsequent alleviation or overcoming of the struggle through the achievement of economic security. Both positioned themselves as providers; thus, success was rooted in one's ability to care for one's family members. This aspiration for Darius in particular resonated in the characterization of him as a hero in his selfless pursuits in life to be able to care for his family. Biggie's lyrics were also resonant in Darius' attention to audience and his characterization of his perceived peer audience. Biggie's lyrics resonated with Darius' sense that there were people in his life who unfairly judged his life choices. For Biggie it was dropping out of high school, and for Darius it was playing football. In both cases, each used language

suggesting the perception of others as thinking of them as foolish, albeit in different forms, but foolish nonetheless.

*“They just see me as a mean jock”— Reframing “Stereotypes of a Black male.”*

Significant to Darius’ struggle was his sense of how oppressive discourses shaped his subjectivity. At two minutes and ten seconds into the DMP, the following quotation, on a black background, with the text in white and italicized, signaled a transition to football. The quotation read, “Believe you can and you're halfway there. Theodore Roosevelt”. Biggie rapped, “high school. Stereotypes of a black male misunderstood.” While Darius did not indicate that he felt that he was misunderstood by his peers on account of his racial identity, in his end of semester interview he relayed that he certainly felt misunderstood on account of his playing football. As previously mentioned, while he characterized himself as a sensitive “kid” who valued education, he believed that because of how he acted on the football field, others found him to be a “big bully guy” and “mean” and a “jock.” Moreover, in an earlier conversation, Darius shared that he did not want to include a lot of football imagery in his DMP because he believed his peers only knew him as a football player. When I asked him why he was choosing to leave football imagery out of his DMP he said, “...people just think it’s all about football, but it's not....I have more of a story than just football” (December 3, 2012).

*“I’m an ordinary guy.”* In the end of semester interview, I expressed my confusion as to why he felt so harshly judged on account of being a football player, and relayed that I expected that popularity, or glory might align with being a football player and not negative judgment, but Darius resisted being positioned in this manner and expressed his desire to be viewed as normal.

Darius: There's not that much glory. This is, this is the sport that I love, but I would never hold it against somebody that I'm, I'm this over somebody. I would never hold a title over

somebody that I deserved a right more rights than you because I'm a football player. I'm an ordinary guy.

Becky: Yeah.

Darius: That's it.

Here Darius called himself an “ordinary guy”, and expressed that he loved the sport of football. Yet, he indicated in his interview that he had an awareness of how being a football player positioned him differently than he would have preferred within Regional High. In our interview he explained his objectives for his DMP in relation to wanting to subvert the impression that he felt his peers held of him on account of him being a football player.

Darius: What I put in my video I felt comfortable with the whole class knowing. That I did start from something. And I am trying to go somewhere with my life. I'm not just ah, a mean person or a jock that's trying to fit in with anybody. I do have feelings.

Becky: Yeah.

Darius: And I am one of ya'll.

Here, Darius again repeated his desire to be viewed as normal when he said that he wanted his peers to see him as just “one of ya’ll.” Moreover, his statement here captures the essence of the plot of his DMP. He wanted people to know that he “did start from something” and as his DMP would indicate, that something was a loving and supportive family. And, following along the lines of the hero narrative, he reiterated that he wanted his peers to understand that he had goals in his life, that he was “trying to go somewhere with [his] life,” as Biggie’s lyrics had spoken to and as Darius had explained with regard to his attitude towards school and education. And he wanted to subvert the notion that he felt people held of him on account of him being a football

player, “I’m not a mean person or a jock” rather he wanted people to see that he felt. In other words, Darius was explaining that he wanted people to see his humanity.

*“They’re gonna expect football.”* Despite sharing several times that he did not want his DMP to center on his football identity, the last two minutes, or nearly half of the slides that contained images were primarily of football imagery. Darius shared that he had planned to include some video footage of himself being interviewed at a press conference with Gabriel (December 3, 2012).

Darius: So, I was gonna import that. There's all kinds of videos I got a video of when we were at the press conference.

Becky: This weekend?

Darius: Yeah, and we have videos for our ah, when me and Gabriel did the interview.

Becky: Mm hm.

Darius: So it's ah; I want to put all that in there.

Becky: Yeah

Darius: So it's like a friend type of thing.

Here, Darius indicated that he viewed his inclusion of football footage in his DMP for the purposes of featuring his friendships when he referred to his inclusion of the press conference as evidence of his video being “a friend type of thing.” Yet, the salient presence of football in his life at that time resonated in his example—as a high school senior he had spoken at a press conference that had been video taped. Clearly, football maintained a profound role in Darius’ life and during his current life in particular in that his weekend had been in part consumed by football and that he had been positioned as a public spokesperson for his school and for his team.

Following Darius talking about his plans for his DMP to include the video footage from the press conference I asked if he thought his peers expected him to tell particular details of his life. I asked, “So, do you think people expect a certain of story from you?” Darius made a clicking noise with his mouth and responded, “They're gonna expect football.” In continuing to return to the statement that his peers would expect him to feature football imagery in his DMP, Darius undoubtedly believed that his peers held a singular view of him and knew little more of him than that he was a football player.

*“Football is more to me than a sport it's a way out the struggle.”* Darius had previously shared that he wanted his peers to know that he had started from something. In the first half of his DMP he had included images of himself as a toddler and as a baby. The following eleven images depicted Darius during what appeared to be his middle school years of life. These images are juxtaposed with text that informed a discourse about football functioning as a motivator and an outlet and are interwoven with football as well as other images. It is important to note that according to his stories, it was during his middle school years that Darius was hustling on the streets with his brother to raise rent money, and the lyrics in “Juicy” carried that storyline in the backdrop of the following images.

This section began with an image of a professional football picture that looked like a trading card. Darius’ name appeared across the top alongside the date 2002 inscribed at the bottom. Biggie rapped, “And it's still all good. Uh. And if you don't know.”

In this next slide, the text read, “Football is more to me than a sport it's a way out the struggle, it's a way to express my feelings on a physical manner.” The chorus for Juicy played, “Now you know, nigga. You know very well, who you are.” Here, Darius interjected his own words into the DPM in the inclusion of the text, “Football is more to me than a sport it's a way

out the struggle, it's a way to express my feelings on a physical manner.” Given that Darius felt that his peers misappropriated his emotive expressions on the football field to his daily interactions with people off the field, it seemed here, that Darius was responding to his notions of peers’ judgments about him being a “mean jock;” rather he was an expressive person who had found in football an outlet and a conduit to a better life.

In the next image, there was a group of people dressed in red football uniforms standing and some kneeling. A figure dressed in a white jersey on a knee with the back to the camera kneels about 30 feet from the figures in red football jerseys. Biggie rapped, “don't let them hold you down, reach for the stars.” In the next slide the text on the slide read, “To succeed, you need to find something to hold on to, something to motivate you something to inspire you. Tony Dorsett”. And Biggie rapped, “You had a goal.” The timing of the chorus aligned here in a manner that underscored the message in the previous quotation that football served as a motivator to young Darius as he was striving for his goal. Biggie’s lyrics, “don’t let them hold you down, reach for the stars” functions in tandem with the affirming messaging reflected in Dorsett’s quotation regarding how football for how Darius was framing the function of football as a positive outlet and way to overcome negativity for him to achieve success (i.e., the stars).

Next appeared a professional looking football photo with a young Darius kneeling and holding a football, looking at the camera and wearing a football uniform. Biggie rapped, “Cuz you're the only one. I'll give ya good and plenty.” The text in the next image is written in white, italicized, and on a black background; it read, “Growing up happens when you start having things you look back on and wish you could change. Clary Fray.” Biggie rapped, “Super Nintendo, Sega Genesis. When I was dead broke man, I couldn't picture this. Fifty inch.” Here, Darius was a high school senior instructed to write an autobiography in which he was expected

to look back on his life. This assignment came during a time that he was also looking forward to the future in anticipation of achieving what he had been working towards for nearly half of his life. Clary Fray's quotation harkened back to Darius' comment about not wanting to relive his past life (December 3, 2012). While it was not clear when in his life Darius might have been referring in his inclusion of this quotation, this comment about not wanting to be reincarnated along with other comments he had made about the darkness in his childhood indicated that he certainly was looking back and identifying parts of his childhood that he wished he could change. His DMP can be interpreted as performing those efforts in his approach to his digital story construction, as the innocence discourse repeated in several upcoming frames depicting different images of a young Darius who appeared to be enjoying life in different settings. These strategically placed images underscored Darius' articulated intentions to emphasize the happiness of his childhood rather than the dark moments that he had expressed in so many different ways.

In an image in this section of the DMP, there was a young boy with Darius' curly hair smiling at the camera. Biggie rapped, "Screen. Money green, leather sofa, got two rides, a limousine with a sofa." Following this was a picture that appears to be in a frame. The frame has footballs and baseballs and bowling pins on it. There are two figures in the image. One appears to be a young boy. One of the figures is holding a long white object, perhaps a baseball bat. Biggie rapped, "Folk in about two G's flat. No need to worry, my accountant handles that. And my whole crew is lounging." In this next image, two little boys are sitting on the couch smiling. Biggie rapped, "Mom pimps a Ac with minks on her back. And she loves to show me off of course. Smiles every time my face is up in The Source."

This is followed by a slide on which the text read, “Even tho time passes and we grow up im still the same kid.” Biggie rapped, “We used to fuss when the landlord dissed us. No heat. Wonder why Christmas [missed us].” Here, Darius used his own words in the quotation, “Even tho time passes and we grow up im still the same kid,” words that spoke to Darius’ articulated desire to demonstrate that he in his words, “came from something” and perhaps to himself, or a discourse that positioned him as a “grown up” looking back on one’s life with regret. This quotation written by Darius spoke to both of those notions and established the relevance of honoring the so-called happier version of Darius, and who in this quotation was “the same kid;” yet, Biggie’s lyrics, “no heat” and “wonder why Christmas [missed us],” signaled Darius’ experiences with poverty that Darius despite his efforts to reframe his narrative, could not erase if only because of how intertwined those pieces of the narrative were with his efforts to overcome.

Next the DMP returned thematically to happier pasts and futures. There was a picture of a middle school aged boy, likely Darius, smiling at the camera. Biggie rapped, “--missed us. Birthdays was the worst days. Now we sip champagne when we--.”

***“When Dreams started coming true.”*** As the DMP shifted toward a sense of conclusion, nine images feature Darius as a high school football player. A transition in music signals a notable shift in tone. “Dreams and Nightmares” by the rap artist Meek Mill like Juicy follows a heroic narrative plot, but contains violent and misogynistic lyrics. In our conversation on December 3, 2012, Darius explained that he wanted to use the introduction (which was actually the refrain that he was referring to based on what he had been listening to in that moment and where he started the song in his DMP) to “Dreams and Nightmares,” of which he knew most of the lyrics for, for similar reasons that he included “Juicy.”



Becky: So, what is it about that intro that you like?

Darius: Ah, this. I can relate to what he's saying. And it kinda relates to my life.

Becky: What are they talking about?

Darius: Oh in the song, of how he had to struggle to come up from a, from a nobody to become somebody.

Here, Darius employed a similar discourse to the discourse of judgment he believed his peers held of him when he explained his shared beginnings with Meek Mill's protagonist as being "a nobody;" yet, the full explanation plays out the plot line of the hero narrative Darius desired to capture in his DMP in telling his life story along the trajectory of surviving struggle and ending up as "somebody." Darius' explanation of the parallels he understood between his life and Meek Mill's is further important to recognize to avoid mapping verbatim similarities between Mill's misogynistic lyrics and Darius' depiction of his life.

The project transitioned to a slide with Darius' the words, "When Dreams started coming true" typed in white across a black background. Meek Mill rapped, "...thirsty. Uh. Not without dessert, fuck nigga. Hold up, wait a minute." Similar to how "Juicy" functioned to facilitate a discourse specific to how Biggie achieved the American Dream of wealth, "Dreams and Nightmares" contained a storyline that centered on one emerging powerfully from hardship to live out one's dreams. The text, "When Dreams started coming true" were Darius' words, indicating that playing football in high school, and perhaps most significantly that semester as the team was approaching the state championship during the time that Darius was composing this digital story, was the moment, or series of moments in which his dreams were coming true.

Darius, dressed in a football uniform was pictured in the following slide. His back was to the audience and number 21, Darius' number, shows on the jersey. Meek Mill rapped, "Finished?

When I bought that Aston Martin y'all thought it was rented?" Similar to "Juicy" in "Dreams and Nightmares" examples of material wealth serve to reflect the protagonists' success in life. At this point of "Dreams and Nightmares," the music increased in speed and volume giving the feeling of a hyper and intense energy, likely something one might need to carry through to the end of a long struggle out of hardship.

This energy continued to build through the following frames. In one respect, the pairing of these lyrics with these images of Darius playing football might be read as signaling aggression, and aggression that Darius had felt his peers always saw as being a part of him. Yet, given that this section built the hero narrative in relation to the struggle theme underlying the narrative, one might interpret the messaging as being indicative of Darius the character as being an unstoppable force on his journey to success.

The digital story continued with an image of football players on the field from two opposing teams. Player #21, Darius, could be seen in the frame. Mills rapped, "Flexin' on these niggas, I'm like Popeye on his spinach." The song's referencing to strength in the simile comparing the protagonist to the cartoon character Popeye (on spinach, his fuel), furthered a discourse of a person making a strong comeback, or rising up from a struggle.

Next, an image of football players wearing Regional High's purple jerseys were sitting side by side on a bench; Darius was among them. A man, possibly a coach, was on the opposite side, leaning in towards Darius, pointed a finger at Darius. Mills rapped, "Double M, yeah that's my team. Rozay the captain; I'm the [lieutenant]." The lyrics signaled military leadership roles (captain and lieutenant) in relation to the image suggested a positioning of Darius in a leadership position. Whether he served in a leadership role on the team or not was not fully clear, but his senior status, and speaking at the press conference suggest that he might have been. Regardless,

Darius did play the role of hero in his DMP and this image underscores that role. The project transitioned to a lone image of Darius, or player number 21, standing in the middle of the football field. Mills rapped, “lieutenant. I’m the type to count a million cash then grind like I’m broke.” Here, the DMP singled out an image of Darius, underscoring his role as hero, as signaled by the word, “lieutenant” in the narrative.

Next, a team of football players dressed in Regional’s purple jerseys were pictured playing football on the field. Mills rapped, “That Lambo, my new bitch, she’ll ride.” The next image was a close up shot of four Regional High football players sitting on the bench; Darius among them, was turned towards the players to his right, mouth open, and he appears to be yelling. Mill rapped, “I’m riding around my city with my hands strapped around my toast.”

The crescendoed energy and aggression of “Dreams and Nightmares” lyrics and music seemed to mirror the energy reflected in the preceding image. As Mill rapped about holding his hands around his toast, or gun, the image showed Darius appearing to be yelling at his teammates. This image coupled with increasingly aggressive lyrics motioned back to Darius’ concern that his peers viewed him as a mean jock, and his description within the DMP of football as being an outlet for him to express his emotions “on a physical manner” in relation to the struggle.

The project continued, and next Darius was pictured in an action shot running on the field. Mill rapped, “Cause these niggas want me dead.” At this point in the DMP project, those being perceived as taking up a discourse of judgment have been framed as the oppressors, and here as those bent on destroying Mill, or Darius. A discourse of judgment existed in tension with a discourse of empowerment and triumph throughout the entire DMP. Mill’s provocative lyrics articulated an intensity that perhaps spoke to multiple layers of Darius’ past and present life in relation to his struggle for acceptance from others and from himself. Yet, as an author, he

immediately diffused this tension with the inclusion of the subsequent video featuring an adolescent male, Darius' friend, cramming a hamburger into his mouth.

Darius had explained that he wanted to include a video of his "homeboy eating this hamburger whole" in order to make his DMP "a friend type of thing" and "funny" (December 3, 2012). The adolescent male in the video chewed the hamburger and smiled and moved up and back in the frame as he chewed. Meek Mill continued rapping as the video played.

And I gotta make it back home cause my momma need that bill money and my son need some milk. These niggas tryna take my life, they fuck around get killed. You fuck around, you fuck around, you fuck around, get smoked. Cause these Philly niggas I brought—

In the penultimate frame, the background was black and Darius' words appeared in white text on a black background, "Thank you [MS.B] for a wonderful year and all my classmates.. much love =)." Darius' voice chimed in as the music paused.

You have watched a video of your boy [Darius] and his everyday life of struggling to finally try to make his dream come true. Though it's been a rough struggle and a roller coaster. To finally to see your dreams unfold and really happen in front of you. It's been a blessing to live this life I've been living. Cuz a lot of people where I'm from normally reach the age I'm at right now. So, it's always a blessing to know that you're still living and that God has blessed you with another day. To final life and try to peruse your dreams. I'm on my way to pursue my dreams right now. I'm on this marathon shit. You know, tryna, tryna, li, tryna get it man tryna make my Moms proud. That's my biggest goal in life. Tryna make my sisters and everyone that's in my family proud of me. That's why I'm the man I am today, that's why I do the things I do today. Thank you all for watching.

Next, “Dreams and Nightmares resumed,” and the text, “EASTSIDE AND WE OUT” appears in white lettering across the center of the screen then disappears. “Dreams and Nightmares” plays through its completion against a black background.

Cause my momma need that bill money and my son need some milk  
These niggas tryna take my life, they fuck around get killed  
You fuck around, you fuck around, you fuck around, get smoked  
Cause these Philly niggas I brought with me don't fuck around, no joke  
All I know is murder, when it comes to me  
I got young niggas that's rollin' I got niggas throwin' b's  
I done did the DOAs, I done did the KODs  
Every time I'm in that bitch I get to throwin' 30 G's  
Now I'm hanging out that drop head, I'm riding down on Collins  
They let my nigga Ern back home, that young nigga be wildin'  
We young niggas and we mobbin', like Batman and we're robbin' (Robin)  
This 2-door Maybach, with my seat all reclinin'  
I'm like real nigga what up, real nigga what up  
If you ain't about that murder game then pussy nigga shut up  
If you diss me in yo' rapped, I'll get your pussy ass stuck up  
When you touchdown in my hood, no that tour life ain't good  
Catch me down in MIA, at that heat game on wood  
With that Puma life on my feet, like that little engine I could  
Boy I slide down on your block, bike on twelve o'clock  
And they be throwing deuces on the same nigga they watch

And I'm the king of my city cause I'm still calling them shots  
 And these lames talking that bullshit the same niggas that flock  
 I'm the same nigga from Berks Street with them nappy braids that lock  
 The same nigga that came up and I had to wait for my spot  
 And these niggas hating on me, hoes waiting on me  
 Still on that hood shit, my Rolls Royce on E  
 They gon' remember me, I say remember me  
 So much money have ya friends turn into enemies  
 And with these beef I turn my enemies to memories  
 With them bricks they go from 40 ain't no 10 a key, hold up  
 Broke nigga turn rich, love the game like Mitch  
 And if I leave you think them pretty hoes gon' still suck my dick?  
 It was something 'bout that Rollie when it first touched my wrist  
 Had me feeling like that dope boy when he first touched that brick  
 I'm gone.  
 Woo, woo, woo.

The DMP concluded with an image of a professional football picture with Darius' name at the top, and the date 2002 inscribed at the bottom. Biggie rapped, "And it's still all good. Uh. And if you don't know".

As I have traced in my analysis of Darius' DMP and his talk about the process of composing it, I have illustrated how his awareness of oppressive school discourses informed his rationale for proffering an innocence discourse in his DMP. Throughout, I called attention to moments of tension where Darius seemed to be struggling with telling the story of his life with

judgmental peer audience in mind. Through my analysis of Darius' DMP in relation to his spoken discourse and modal choices, I discussed how he struggled to subvert racist narratives about Black males that impacted his perception of how others knew and could know him. Furthermore, I illustrated how he selected and juxtaposed modes that complicated racist discourses, and how his own discourse suggested his doubtfulness about his abilities to author a narrative that would change people's minds about his subjectivities.

## CHAPTER 5

### Malcolm

**“I’m comfortable sharing everything. I’m just not comfortable with who I always share it with” Malcolm Harvey.**

I first met Malcolm in mid September. Kira’s class had walked down the hall to the library to check out their books for Black Lit. The seniors were standing in line waiting to get their library books. I stood within earshot of Kira and watched her strike up casual conversation with the students as they waited. When I noticed her turn towards Malcolm and ask him about the tattoos covering his arms, my attention perked. Malcolm had been an active contributor in class already, and I was interested in learning more about him. I walked up to join the conversation and Kira casually introduced us and moved on to talk with another student in line and we continued the conversation (FN. September, 14, 2012).

In this chapter, I draw on the conversations Malcolm had with his peers, his teacher, his girlfriend, himself, and with me to illustrate his complex approach to negotiating Black masculinity among his multiple subjectivities in the school space. Throughout his work on the DMP, audio recordings captured Malcolm’s discourse as he processed these experiences for himself and in conversation with others. Malcolm’s composing process included spending time reviewing images of himself over the past four years of his life. As he sorted through images, he often reminisced. He seemed to draw hope in these moments remembering the past, and reflecting on who he had been, as he dreamed aloud about his “comeback” (December 7, 2012). As I will show and discuss in this chapter, the resonant and often conflicting discourses in Malcolm’s DMP can be interpreted as reflecting the complex space in which Malcolm was constructing a present and future self.



*“I’m comfortable sharing everything. I’m just not comfortable with who I always share it with.”* Throughout the semester, Malcolm, a self proclaimed rapper, MC, and poet, engaged multiple literacies through which he told stories that often featured himself. He shared his writing when invited to by guest SLAM poets in Black Lit, he attended SLAM poetry nights hosted by Kira at Regional High, and he included elements of his written and spoken poetry in his DMP. When Malcolm and I discussed him including quotations in his DMP, he asked whether he could share his own writing as text in his DMP. I said “whichever” and he responded, “I’ll use a quote from myself. I’ve got lots of quotes” (December 4, 2012). In these ways, Malcolm actively engaged multiliteracies across school spaces; however, his presentation of self was purposefully esoteric.

That day in the library, Malcolm told me that he wrote poems, but he could not share most of what he wrote with his peers in his poetry class because “the audience [wasn’t] ready for it.” His explanation then and over the next several months seemed to be predicated on his perception of other people’s abilities to understand the lived experiences resonant in his poetry. ‘Being ready’ in Malcolm’s perspective seemed to form in relation to others’ abilities to relate to what he wrote about. For instance, when I asked if he could read his work in Black Lit, he explained that, yeah, he could; he had known these kids for years. However, when I later alluded to this conversation, Malcolm relayed that he “really [didn’t] share anything inside of [Black Lit]” (November 9, 2012). Knowing his peers in Black Lit over a lifetime did seem to matter in how he characterized them differently from his other peers whom he did not have relationships with outside of school. However, those characterizations of that audience were not always consistent. In this chapter, I discuss how Malcolm’s equivocal talk encapsulated multiple and competing discourses through which he narrated his sense of self.

Malcolm did not readily admit that others influenced his self-perceptions; rather, he rejected the notion that other people had any influence on what he thought about himself. In early November, Malcolm and I had a conversation about the affect other people's opinions might have on how he acted in the world. It was a planning conversation, and I referred back to our first conversation in the library when Malcolm shared that his poetry class peers were not ready for his material. I asked him how he was weighing what he felt comfortable sharing of himself with his peers in his Black Lit class. Malcolm responded, "I'm comfortable sharing everything. I'm just not comfortable with who I always share it with" (November 9, 2012).

When composing his DMP, he often commented on the esoteric nature of his writing, and explicitly stated that this was purposeful. At one point he shared that his goal for the DMP was for people to see him as being "out there." Despite having known his peers for years, he explained that he didn't necessarily agree with them, but he seemed, at the same time, to take comfort in their shared histories and, to some extent, implied shared experiences. Speaking of his peers, Malcolm explained, "I seen them then; I see them now just as well." Malcolm's sense of audience indicated that shared experiences allowed him to understand his peers in Black Lit, but also illustrated his sense that sharing race and ethnicity did not equate to universal agreement.

Context mattered for Malcolm's participation. He explained that Kira's class felt different than "school" and therefore more appealing to him. He said, "It's cool in [Black Lit]...It's school... and expectation and boundaries and all that, but it's just more of a comfort level" (November, 9, 2012). Thus, his description of Kira's class as comfortable perhaps enabled a context that was more conducive to him engaging literacies that held meaning for him and his peers informed that context. In our first conversation I had shared that I was in his class because Kira and I were developing a digital storytelling project that the students were going to create at

the end of the semester. Malcolm expressed that he liked, “that kind of interactive work,” because in his words, “you could feel it” (September, 14, 2012). A few weeks later, when I formally introduced the DMP to the Black Lit class, Malcolm again expressed his excitement about the project and willingly signed up to be a part of the research study. A month later, when we started to talk about project specifics, I recorded in my field notes that Malcolm had expressed a slight air of disappointment about my description of the DPM. He had thought I was going to follow him in and outside of school and create a video documentary about him. I recalled him saying that he had wanted me to help him create a movie that featured him as a “Black man beating the odds” (FN, November 9, 2012).

Malcolm’s hope for the theme of that wished-for documentary resonated with his interactions inside and outside of the classroom and his DMP. Throughout the first few months of Black Lit, Malcolm expressed his profound insight into the complexities and obstacles Black men in particular were up against in the United States. At the same time, he had hope and imagination for how to combat racism. For instance, the ideas he shared ranged from moving back to Africa, creating his own city and accompanying school system on his own land, to circumventing institutional constraints by rejecting the so-called axiom that earning a high school diploma was the only way to get to college. Some of his notions implicated a form of escapism, such as relocating himself or an entire group of people.

While other ideas emphasized asserting counter-narratives to normative life pathways. Malcolm often raised these comments in class as asides to himself in response to the class conversations about different forms of racism in the United States. Yet, when a guest speaker SLAM poet asked the class to each share one way they could combat racism, Malcolm didn’t publicly share an idea and had expressed, “I don’t know” (FN. September 20, 2012). Malcolm’s

silence in this moment had surprised me because he never seemed to be at a loss of words. Yet, his silence here reflected the complexities with audience Malcolm continued to negotiate as he composed his DMP.

Malcolm wrote his DMP in the midst of contemplating an uncertain future. At that point in the year, he was contending with several jarring life circumstances. Following several weeks of living displaced from his mother's home and, as a result, missing a significant amount of school, he had returned to failing grades in several of his classes. He had concurrently been accused of being involved with stealing and selling school laptops and was waiting for his pending court date. In addition, he had been shot at over the weekend prior to returning to his mother's house and school that Monday. He talked about all of these upheavals as he composed his DMP and showed me pictures of the bullet holes that penetrated the wall of the room he had been feeding his nephew dinner in when the shooting occurred.

***Malcolm's Digital Media Project—"Look Me In My Eyes Tell me what You see!"***

*"This is the start of my video. I'm a rapper now."* Malcolm employed a "comeback" plot structure to his DMP. He opened his project with a video of himself in which he featured himself as a rap star, Mo Stacks. Mo Stacks was a name that Malcolm had previously used in Black Lit when he had shared his poetry in class.

Ok ya'll. This is the start of my video. I'm a rapper now, ok. Come support me at all my shows. You know every little video I do, I want you to, you know, to go to my YouTube and like that shit, or get on Twitter you know tweet it you know however you want to. Facebook it, hit that like button you know I need about a million of them (lifts up the brim of his hat), so yeah. You know, I'm famous now. You know, if you need an autograph I'll you know, I'll give you one after class. You know what I'm saying. Just ask

Ms. Buchannan. You know what I'm saying (someone laughs). Call security and then ya'll line up. I got you, but yeah, this right here is my video, Mo Stack it ya'll, yeah.

The opening to Malcolm's DMP revealed several complexities in Malcolm's experiences in school and with school literacies. The video suggests his struggles to be read as successful through mainstream school discourses his savvy with new media literacies, and a resilience discourse that runs throughout his DMP and its comeback plot. Moreover, he was making sense of himself by locating his idealized self in mainstream Hip-hop genre. Hip-hop music Powell (1991) notes is a "genuine reflection of the hopes, concerns, and aspirations of urban Black youth" (p. 245). While most students began their DMP with images of themselves as babies, suggesting a chronological past to future narrative, Malcolm elected to start with a playfully imaginative, future-oriented video in which the present Malcolm had transformed into Mo Stacks, a famous rapper who had returned to his former high school to see his fans. Through this character, he employed a success narrative, inviting his peers to support his music and line up for his autograph. Malcolm creatively played out the thread of this storyline in the opening video while demonstrating his cultivated knowledge of how musicians garnered success through social media.

In contrast to the confidence and success of Mo Stacks, Malcolm's talk about himself and his future was riddled with self-doubt. For instance, he seemed unclear about his future plans, and in one of our final work sessions, he was captured on the recording expressing regret for how he had lived his life and his lack of clarity about where he was going next. Further, although little in his spoken discourse suggested that Malcolm understood rapping as a feasible future career aspiration, when SLAM poets had invited students to share their own poetry in class, Malcolm had introduced himself as Mo Stacks. Thus, this character was not entirely fictionalized either.

Outside of the DMP, Malcolm seemed to struggle with envisioning Malcolm the person as a success. However, Mo Stacks served as an entry point to that representation.

Opening his DMP in this manner also seemed to be reflective of his preference to shield transparent revelations to his audience. As I discussed earlier, Malcolm doubted whether his audience could understand his narrative. After he shared a draft version of his DMP with a few of his peers (FN. December 4, 2012), Malcolm told me that he thought members of his audience understood his DMP to be unserious. In other words, by opening with a playful video in which his imagined success was predicated on him being a rap star, he seemed to be setting an expectation for his audience to be entertained with fiction, rather than be confronted with his present realities. The fictional character, in other words, provided a means to a future-oriented success narrative and a shield, as well as a way to hook his audience based on his assumptions of their expectations.

Perhaps it was this fictionalized characterization of himself that emboldened him to confront the audience with the following provocative image. Toward its end, the video transitioned to a close up image of Malcolm's face. He stared intensely at the camera, eyes squinted, eyebrows raised, jaw clenched, lips parted and teeth showing. He wore a black doo rag on his head, and wore a plaid shirt and a black jacket. As the music played, the camera panned out showing more of Malcolm's face. Meek Mill rapped, "Look me in the eyes; tell me what you see!" Mill's voice echoed, "Realest shit you ever seen. Realest shit you ever seen." Immediately after the image appeared, white text moved in rapidly across the screen stopping at Malcolm's pictured eye-line. The text, written in white, read, "Look Me In My Eyes Tell me what You see!" Malcolm wrote a modified version of Meek Mill's lyric, "Look me in my eyes; tell me what you see" in his DMP. He had originally written Mill's lyric to begin an impromptu poem he had

written in October in Black Lit when one of the guest speaker SLAM poets had invited students to free write (October 10, 2015). He valued the power of his own words to narrate his DMP, “I can use a quote from myself. I got a lot of quotes,” he had declared (December 12, 2015).

Obliging my inquiry, Malcolm read this poem aloud. Because Malcolm was revising the poem as he read it, I have included all of his words as he read his poem aloud, rather than just the poem.

Look me in the eyes; tell me what you see. I was losing out on life due to my selfish needs. Never understood why many [pause]. Ho, a, never understood why.

Why I had so many re—[pause]. Why I had so many responsibilities at what building character is. Is what I didn’t see. So I set out on this mission to destruction and hustling.

See Moms wanted—[pause]. See— [pause]. Oh yeah. And see Moms wanted the best.

Kept me away from the set. Even tried to move me out to jet. Everyday I ha—[pause]. I was training like it was my last breath forcing these visions on my path NFL dreams. But, broad day struck with my blue flag.

After he finished reading, he commented, “But I can make it rhyme more. I just wrote it real quick in class.” We then further discussed his approach to constructing his DMP and he shared that he anticipated threading elements of this poem throughout his DMP in juxtaposition with images. I asked if the words in his poem captured the story he believed he was currently telling in the existing image sequence of his draft at that point. Malcolm talked through each of the slides to verify that they captured the essence of the poem. He concluded, “Like shoot. I can add some pictures, like places I done lived at. Ah. And then I could put my NLF team that I like, and then I got my, ah, college on here” (December 12, 2015). While elements of this poem appear as the story unfolded, if the audience did not know the poem and its backstory, the personal significance of those words would dissipate.

The lyrics playing during this slide—Mill’s words, “Realest shit you ever seen. Realest shit you ever seen”—seemed to cast Malcolm’s invitation, “Look in my eyes. Tell me what you see,” as a rhetorical question. Mill’s lyric provided an answer to what one should see when looking Malcolm in the eyes. The exclamation point following the words, “Look me in the eyes; tell me what you see” indicated how this line functioned as an imperative. Juxtaposing the fierce look captured in the image of Malcolm underscored the connection between the imperative and the music overlaying the image and words. Yet, this slide and Malcolm’s use of “real” combined with the intensity of the imperative to look straight into Malcolm’s eyes coupled with the fierceness of their expression, followed a video introducing Malcolm himself as a fictionalized character, Mo Stack. In this way, Malcolm’s DMP constructed an elusive self-representation that defied categories of his “real” self and the fiction of an imagined future.

While he was asking the audience to see him, he was on the one hand literally not being Malcolm; rather he was presenting future, fictionalized Malcolm. Yet, he offered an intimate invitation for the audience to look into his eyes and see what is there. Yet he held them far away from the self he will allow them to know. Interestingly, in the following slides, Mo Stacks seemed to disappear while images of high school aged Malcolm interwoven with his written text encompassed a majority of his narrative up to the final video that concludes his DMP. His multifaceted presentation of self, combined with how he negotiated this sharing, reflects the complex approach Malcolm continued to take when constructing his subjectivities in relation to his varying audiences.

*“...you gonna tell me that I’m ignorant?”* In terms of the perceptions he imagined people might develop about him through watching the DMP, Malcolm expressed that he hoped people would see him as being “out there.” As I mentioned earlier, this seemed to be connected with a



consistent desire to be seen as unconventional and unique. He mentioned several times he did not intend for his poetry to be understood nor did he expect people to understand it. However, he also expressed disappointment when he was not understood. For instance, in a class discussion about whether there was such a thing as being “Black enough,” Malcolm responded to a peer’s comment on how class and education influenced and disrupted racial solidarity, explaining that seeing from another’s perspective was what mattered most.

From a personal perspective, I personally feel like it’s not really where you come from. It’s about the other individual, about what they are going through. Because it’s not even about you being Black, or you being Blacker than this or that, but if I tell you what I’m going through and you look at me as if I’m crazy because I tell you that I just got busted, and I’m thinking about retaliating, you gonna tell me that I’m ignorant? (September 18, 2012).

His reflections here exemplified a felt isolation that Malcolm expressed frequently. In this, he raised questions about the assumptions we are at risk of making about others if we fail to pursue learning more about their perspectives and experiences

When sharing his reasoning for no longer attending church with his mother, Malcolm expressed that he would be unfairly judged if asked for financial assistance from the church community.

Malcolm: I'm just saying, like what if I, wha wha what if I'm in my time of need?

Becky: Mm hm.

Malcolm: You know? Are you gonna help me, or are they gonna be like, oh he need to get a job, oh he prolly ain't doing this, oh he prolly in this kind of predicament situation because of this? Are you gonna judge me, or are you gonna help me?

Whether Malcolm had asked for this help or not was unclear and, in the moment, I did not follow up with that question. Yet, he clearly expressed his strong sense of how people in his church community would judge him rather than offer help. Thus, here again, he raises questions about the potential of an audience's unfair judgments in the face of his (and, presumably others') narratives.

*"...if you listen to my song, it literally talks about me...Literally, everything that he's saying."* At the same time that his words capture the risk of judgment in audience response, Malcolm shared that the music in his DMP revealed "a lot of stuff" about himself that he could not explicitly say (December 6, 2015). Referring to another song he ultimately did not keep in his final DMP, Malcolm explained, *"...if you listen to my song, it literally talks about me...Literally, everything that he's saying."* Following his general explanation of the parallels, he asked me, as he often did, whether I understood: "You know what I'm saying? Like I'm not even sure you get what he's saying." In retrospect, I did not exactly know what he meant and, in the moment, Malcolm did not offer further explanation.

Here, Malcolm proffered an equivocal discourse regarding his competing desires to be understood and misunderstood. He opened this conversation on his own initiative, wishing to explain that his song "literally" talks about him and told his story. Yet, he assumed that his audience (myself in this instance) would not understand the meaning of the words, rendering his story safely hidden within seemingly incomprehensible lyrics. However, me understanding that the song contained his story seemed important to Malcolm. It is also perhaps telling of his awareness of the risk of audience misunderstanding and judgment that he chose not to include this song that he felt was "literally" about his life. Indeed, the song he chose for his final DMP was about a person in the midst of success, a song more illustrative of the comeback narrative

Malcolm constructed in his final DMP. That song, Mill's "Realest Shit You Ever Seen", is a song largely about the protagonist being powerful and obscenely wealthy to the extent that he can burn money.

*"Standing tall on my two's."* Consistent with the comeback narrative, Malcolm included several images demonstrating his own prowess. In the image following the "look me in the eyes" slide, Malcolm was leaning against a wall. The image started at Malcolm's pictured feet and panned up his body to just above his head. As the image appeared, the text in black lettering and white outline emerged on the screen and remained in the center as the camera panned up Malcolm's body. The text read, "Standing tall on My 2's." Meek Mill rapped, "You ever seen, yeah, yeah. Ride hard so clean with my seat back back. Blowin' money like I never even seen that, that. Blowin' money like I never seen that that. It's the realest shit you ever seen yeah, yeah. Ride hard with my seat back, back."

As though he was offering people a good look at him following the invitation—look me in the eyes—confront me directly—tell me what you see—he showed himself as a proud person standing tall. Mill's lyrics characterize a protagonist who had his life under control enough to let go and ride with his seat back as indicated in the lyrics, "ride hard with my seat back." "Standing tall on my two's," indexed his two feet and that his pride and strength remained uncompromised despite what he was going through. Further, blowing money indicated that he was obscenely wealthy and money was of no concern. While both pride and money were elements in life that seemed to weigh heavily as concerns for Malcolm during this time, his digital story played out an imaginary future where his present concerns were resolved completely.

*"The ones to survive the struggle remain in success, knowing one day that your dream will overpower all evil."* In the next frame, Malcolm and two other adolescent males were

pictured, standing closely together, behind them a window with blinds closed and adorned with red curtains. Behind Marcus' head a wall decoration was mounted. The imagery suggested that the picture was taken in someone's home. Malcolm was half smiling at the camera with his right hand resting on his chest; he appeared to be giving a 'thumbs up' with the hand on his chest. The following text, in white font, "crawled" up the screen in the fashion of Star Wars' opening lines and focused in on Malcolm's face as the words faded above his head.

The ones to survive the struggle remain in success knowing one day that your dream will overpower all evil. Meek Mill rapped,

Ride hard with my seat back, back. Blowin' money like I've never seen that that. Blowin' money like I never seen that that. Gangsta, gangsta. Blow it, blow it. Yeah, I blow this money like you never seen it. Felony flow—

Malcolm was in the midst of living through a personal life struggle, one he consistently connected with a shared struggle with Black males in the United States. In this way, he constructed his story through a racialized discourse that was connected with the assumed risks and presumption of audience judgment I discussed above. For instance, Malcolm had expressed a profound awareness of structural racism in America during a class dialogue in which students discussed the question, "Does it matter that Obama is Black?" Malcolm defined a racialized struggle discourse.

Malcolm: Like with that one thing that [the author of the article was arguing], like [for President Obama to even be considered catering] to Black[s] and all of that. I just personally feel like it's impossible, just because of what my ancestors have been through, for him to cater down any sorts of people, people that's in poverty they're his—It's the minorities, Black, White, Hispanic, all of that—

Here, Malcolm articulated his sense that dismantling racist practices in the United States was beyond the President's capacity. This impossibility according to Malcolm was in part related to entrenched racism and its historical and present impact on people of color as well as class inequities that impacted all people. As the discussion continued, he further challenged the notion that equality was achievable in the United States for people of color given his sense of systemic inequities for people of color.

Malcolm: At the end of the day, like everybody's, well, capable at the end of the day of getting an education and being somebody. But, who actually had that equal chance and it goes through their blood-line of how, how their home is based for them to be able to strive for more and be better? What if they ain't given that at home, and they don't know that?

Kira: ...Everyone has an opportunity, but not everyone has the same opportunity

Malcolm: Exactly.

He acknowledged that all people are intelligent beings, but structural inequities shape future opportunities. For instance, he explained, "somebody...who actually had that equal chance, and it goes through their blood line" implied his awareness of structural racial inequity in how people became disadvantaged through their, "blood line." In asking, "What if they ain't given that [knowledge] at home, and they don't know that?" he implied an awareness of discrepancies in access to power among different cultural home knowledge systems. Through the words, "The ones to survive the struggle remain in success, knowing one day that your dream will overpower all evil" Malcolm engaged a heroic discourse about those who survive the struggle. They "remain in success" suggesting that success was the survivor's destiny to achieve his desires. Survival was predicated, however, on surviving all evil, not a small task.

*I don't know what the fuck life is anymore, man.* Elements of struggle consistently resonated for Malcolm in his talk and interactions around the DMP. In talking about the parallels he drew between his life and song lyrics he had shared, "...you can't get ready for combat by yourself. You know what I'm saying? It's too real out here. You feel me?" On December 6<sup>th</sup>, Malcolm was talking to a friend on the phone about his near death experience of being shot at, certainly a significant element of his life struggles while working on his DMP. Here, he shared with his friend how he was surviving his personal struggle.

Man bro. I miss you too. You already know how I'm doing, maintaining, blue shoe strangin' different shit, different tiz-o. You know. Shit, shit, the homos tried to smoke a nigger like on Sunday and shit. But you know, ah, I ain't tripping though. You already know I'm back at it in full effect. I got that get down and lay down, so shit, it's like whatever. I'm just chilling though, taking it a day at a time and shit.

His use of the words, "you already know how I'm doing" imply that he carried a similar attitude of "blue shoe strangin'" across different contexts of life that all brought a familiar struggle, "different shit, different tiz-o." While I'm not sure what he meant by "blue shoe strangin'", he mentioned the color blue in different contexts. In his poem, discussed above, he wrote, "But broad daylight struck with my blue flag," indicating that "blue" meant something of significance. However, because he sometimes spoke to friends in ways that purposefully obscured meaning to outsiders, this was perhaps code for something he was not going to speak openly about in the school context. In his phone conversation, Malcolm indicated that he knew how to survive an attempted homicide, "I got that get down and lay down, so shit, it's like whatever." Although he seemed to downplay the personal impact of his near death experience in that conversation, he repeatedly brought it up that day indicating that he might have felt more distraught than he was

letting on. At the same time, his last remark, “I’m just chilling though, taking it a day at a time and shit,” seemed to capture an essence of Malcolm’s state of being during this period in his life. He was immersed in reflection throughout the DMP process, looking back, contemplating present, imagining his future self. Some of his talk expressed a sense of being lost. For instance, towards the end of the three-hour work session on the DMP that same day he spoke with his friend on the phone, Malcolm spoke aloud to himself.

I got to get up out this state. I don't know what I'm going to do.

Man I haven't done shit for like two fucking whole years. Shit, fuck. Fuck man. Can't wait to get back on my fucking shit. I don't know what the fuck life is anymore, man.

Fuck. I'm gonna start growing out my hair and shit now. So by the time I fucking get [out of Colorado] I can start doing my fucking shit right. I should a just fuckin'. I don't fucking know::what the fuck I should did. Just gotta know how to do this shit right now—

While I cannot be certain what aspect of his life Malcolm was lamenting, his mentioning of not doing anything for two years coincides with the years he had not been playing football. Over this time, it seems that his grades had begun to plummet as well. Given his consistency as a deep thinker and prolific writer, his spoken words must be taken as a profound self-reflection on his sense of loss in this moment, “I don't know what the fuck life is anymore, man. Fuck.” Yet in this space of loss he maintained a moment of hope in the possibility for a different future somewhere else when he said he would start growing his hair out now, “so by the time [he] fucking [gets out of the state he could] start doing [his] fucking shit right.” But even as he considered an alternative, seemingly better life for himself, he was lost in self-doubt and his

overwhelming circumstances as indicated by the end of his lament, “I should a just fuckin’. I don't fucking know what the fuck I should did.”

**“My Dream.”** Despite his spoken discourse that signaled his self-disillusionment and profound awareness of his life struggles, Malcolm dared to dream for himself and imagine a better future. It was not clear at this point in the DMP what the ‘dream’ in the slide with the image of himself in the house with the other two young men was referencing, aside from the implication that it meant overcoming struggle. Later in the DMP, however, Malcolm labeled a slide “My Dream” (3 minutes in, or half way into the DMP), suggesting that the earlier slide was setting up the subsequent slides where his Dream would be more clearly articulated. The next two slides, as I discuss below, establish the latency of his success and serve to anticipate Malcolm realizing that dream.

*“The sleeping Giant.”* In the next image, Marcus was pictured sitting at a table. His hand rested over eyes, he pointed his face up, and his tattoos prominently showed. The text was written in fancy italic lettering that had swirled decorative framing around the top left and bottom right corners and read, “The sleeping Giant.” Meek Mill rapped, “You niggas is misdemeanors. When I was broke I used to walk, I had a rich demeanor. Shawty said, “I make her pussy wet that bitch Katrina. Last week I blew like twenty for the hell of it.” The text, “The sleeping Giant” seemed to function as a metaphor for Malcolm, as sleeping indicated hibernating, suggesting that he was lying in wait for his moment. The lyrics certainly invoked a sexist discourse, including, in a gendered allusion to hurricane Katrina, both a sexist slur and associating power to overcome circumstances with the man’s ability to sexually arouse a woman. However, the lyrics more relevant to Malcolm’s success narrative were the words, “When I was broke I used to walk, I had a rich demeanor”, suggesting that even when the song’s protagonist



had no money, he appeared as though he did. Similarly, Malcolm seemed to always put efforts towards being well dressed and appearing “fresh.”

The next frame further anticipated the theme of latent success. Malcolm was looking at the camera and holding his right hand and pointer finger under his nose. The text on the screen was typed in teal, “The smell of Greatness...” Meek Mill rapped, “Bloodhound, I find that money just from smellin’ it. Pick your drug of choice. I bet you I was selling it. Addicted to that money. Roll a hundred start inhaling it. I’m burning papers like I’m Wiz Khalifa.”

Here, Malcolm creatively built on the concept of smell across the lyrics, image, and text. “The smell of Greatness” suggested that greatness emanated from Malcolm. Juxtaposing the messaging here with the previous slide indicated that while Malcolm was a “sleeping giant” he was destined for greatness. Mill’s lyrics, “Bloodhound, I find that money just from smellin’ it. Pick your drug of choice. I bet you I was selling it. Addicted to that money. Roll a hundred start inhaling it” constructed success as financial gain, as it did for Mill, who was a “bloodhound” who could smell out where the money was and who was “addicted to that money.” However, later slides in Malcolm’s DMP suggest that he was constructing a more complex view of success.

*“Grandma, I know you hear, deeply in spirit, Blessed.”* In the next image, Malcolm was wearing a hat and vest. He was leaning against a wall and looking off into the distance. His lips were parted and his mouth appeared to be curved up into a slight smile. The italicized text was written in white and zoomed and splashed across the screen with a burst of sparkles twinkling around the words then disappearing. It read, “Grandma, I know you hear, deeply in spirit, Blessed.” Meek Mill rapped, “And if this rappin’ ever fold, I could get it cheap. You know the feeling when you brung a hundred in a week.”

Malcolm never mentioned his grandmother in our conversations, but once in class he did share that his grandmother was from Ethiopia. His mentioning of her here in his DMP, following several slides in which he anticipated his destined success, suggests that he included her perhaps because she had been a person in his life who believed in him, or at least someone from whom he drew strength. Indeed, her appearance connected with appearances of other women of significance in his life, namely his mother and his girlfriend Angelique, who appeared later in the DMP.

In the frame that followed the one about his grandmother, the camera panned up over an image of Malcolm. He stood with bent his arms and he held his hands in front of his waist slightly in front of his body. He pointed his hands forward and curled his fingers in towards his body with the palms facing upward. His pointer finger on each hand was pointing out as though he was captured in movement, perhaps dancing. He was looking down; his mouth was closed and an orange hat covered much of his face. He wore a striped and brightly colored shirt under a letterman's jacket. As the camera panned up, spotlights bubbled on the screen, and the text, "Legendary," centered in white appeared between spot-lights. Meek Mill rapped, "Turn a nigga out just like the first time when he hit a freak. Eenie, meenie, miney, moe, pick a chick and dick her down. Maybach in the-."

The word "Legendary", similar to the previous slide's messaging, signaled a self-affirming discourse, and in this respect underscored the form of self-representation Malcolm was creating about himself in his DMP. Again, the image connects to the genre of rap music as well as to the comeback theme of Malcolm's text, which often includes a sense of confidence, even posturing, in the lyrics and the personas of the rappers (Morrell, & Duncan-Andrade, 2002; Smith-Shomade, 2003). In this image, Malcolm wore a letterman's jacket as the word "legendary"

indicates a framing of Malcolm as a memorable person of great importance. While it was not clear which sport this jacket represented, or if this jacket was indicating his achievement of playing on a high school sports team. Within the DMP, the jacket anticipated Malcolm's soon to be articulated dream of one day playing football again. The lyrics "...Eenie, meenie, miney, moe, pick a chick and dick her down," functioned as evidence for Mill's success in that he could have intercourse with any of the many women at his disposal. As was the case throughout the song, the demoralization of women formed in relation to the bolstering of the protagonist's masculine power.

The misogynistic lyrics trivializing and objectifying women as objects of conquer both aligned and contrasted with Malcolm's verbally expressed attitude towards women and his performed masculinity. For instance, in the previous slide Malcolm honored his grandmother, and in forthcoming slides, Malcolm featured his mother as his cheerleader and his girlfriend, Angelica, as a partner. However, Malcolm also complained to Angelica about the stringent rules her grandmother had about her leaving the house at night and in these conversations criticized her grandmother for foiling his need for sex, thereby objectifying Angelica as a means to that end. Further, while he called her his lover and his friend in his DMP and in our face-to-face conversations and frequently sought her feedback and advice on his schoolwork, Malcolm often dismissed Angelica's ideas and rationalized disrespecting her grandmother and hypothetically hitting her, despite other's disapproval. In those instances, Malcolm's assertions of independence seemed to be rationalized through a sexist discourse wherein Malcolm's power came at Angelica's expense. As I will show, in the frames following this one, Malcolm continued to construct his protagonist through empowering discourses as a survivor and a suave person

surrounded by strong females. In these instances, his own words subverted the misogyny resonant in Mill's lyrics.

*"Because you can't get ready for combat by yourself."* In the next slide, the text "True Vet" written in thick black text dropped into the frame ("True" shot up from the bottom of the frame, and "Vet" dropped down from the top of the frame) and stopped in the center over an image of Malcolm's smiling face. He was pictured looking at the camera with a smile, and a cell phone was centered at his mouth indicating that he had taken the picture of himself in a mirror. Malcolm was wearing a brown hat and a hoodie was pulled up over the hat. Mill rapped, "Building money everywhere you look. We'll be on the top floor, Hater we ain't lookin' down. Lil' P up in the kitchen. Look at me, I'm cooking now! I'm cooking up and whipping white—"

Malcolm labeled this image of himself with the word "True Vet" or veteran, indicating that the protagonist was a veteran and therefore survivor of a war. When Malcolm discussed the linkages between his life and music, he identified engaging in combat as the crux of the parallel. In a discussion about locating his narrative in mainstream gangster rap music, Malcolm explained, "Just because I relate doesn't mean I was completely on an island alone... You know what I'm saying? Because you can't get ready for combat by yourself." Positioning himself as a vet, through a militaristic and heroic discourse, Malcolm solidified his status as a successful survivor who had already survived "combat."

*"Fresh To death."* In the next frame, Malcolm was pictured holding his head at a slight angle to the right of the frame. He wore a Chicago Bulls cap on his head, and his eyes were slanted down towards the phone he was holding out in front of himself; the right corner of his mouth was curved slightly up in a half smile. As the camera panned down over Malcolm's face, the words "Fresh To death" slid onto the screen; the word Fresh in red moved in from the left,

and the words, “To death” in white slid in from the right. Meek Mill rapped, “The money. I’m a spend it now. She said you don’t hit it right so she just tryna’ spend the night. You smoke on the regular but we smoke on that kryptonite. My whip it got paper plate.”

Clothes and appearance were important to Malcolm. He frequently commented on the outfits he wore in pictures of himself as he composed his DMP. In one of the early work sessions, he and I discussed him dressing up for a picture that I would take of him that he could put into his DMP. In these ways, he seemed to be actively subverting any association with poverty despite being in his self-described time of need for financial support. Mill’s lyrics corroborate this sentiment of wealth and success, as the song’s protagonist proves himself the superior man because the female in the song prefers to spend the night with him rather than her inferior partner (“you” who doesn’t “hit it right”). Further, his wealth was illustrated by his spending of money on the best drugs, or “kryptonite.”

*“My Success is Coming SOON!”* The slide right after this one shows Malcolm sitting on the stairs with four other young men of color, two of whom were students in Black Lit. Malcolm and two of the people he was pictured with looked directly at the camera while a third looked off into the distance. Malcolm was wearing gold-rimmed sun-glasses, a black cap, black pants, a white shirt, a red vest, and red and black shoes. The text on the screen flew in at an angle and filled much of the screen. It was written in a teal blue with black outlines and said, “My Success is Coming SOON!” Meek Mill rapped the song hook, “—In your life. This the realest shit you ever seen, yeah. Ride hard so clean with my seat back, back. Blowing money like I never even seen that, that.” Despite his expressed uncertainty about his future, here Malcolm again positioned himself through discourses of latent success, explicitly captured in the text, “My success is coming soon.” Mill’s lyrics metaphorically aligned to this idealized future in which

the protagonist had life under control, riding casually and coolly with his seat back and spending money as though it were limitless.

*“Yeah, you know. I'm trying to hold it down”*. The next two images of strong women in Malcolm’s life again layered complexity onto the DMP’s narrative of success and what it would take to achieve it. Malcolm was standing with his arms around a woman wearing a sparkling sweater and matching gold earrings. Malcolm was wearing a shiny brown vest over a white and brown striped shirt. The pair matched. Both smiled, showing their teeth to the camera. The text swirls into words and vines flow and flank the words, “My ride or Die Momma.” Meek Mill rapped, “This is the realest that you ever seen yeah, yeah. Ride hard so clean with my seat back. Blowing money like I never even seen that...”

This slide captured one of three times Malcolm’s mother appears in his DMP. Malcolm chose to label the first image of his mother with the words, “My ride or Die Momma” therefore characterizing her as a strong person. Despite being estranged from his mother and having a relationship riddled with tension, here Malcolm seemed to be showing her honor and respect. Moreover, in selecting an image in which he and his mother wore outfits with complimentary colors suggests he was illustrating an alignment between himself and his mother. The respect he showed her in this image mimicked the respect he was giving her in daily life following the recent move back into his house. For instance, one evening while Malcolm and Angelica were working late, his mother called and Malcolm spoke with utmost respect to his mother, an interaction Angelica specifically noted (December 6, 2012). The phone call from Malcolm’s side proceeded as follows.

Malcolm: Hi Mom. Why what's going on?

Malcolm: Chur, Church tonight again?

Malcolm: Ah, ah. I'm sorry mom. I'm sorry mom. I got too much homework. I can, I can't do that two nights in a row. I, I went to sleep on my homework last night. I got way too much homework. I got=

Malcolm: Okay I appreciate that mom. And I'm not trying to be rude or disrespectful, but I have a lot of stuff that I have to take care of Ma. And I only got two weeks to do it. Literally, but, but ah, please may you leave, you know, that for me? Ok, I appreciate it, and I give you. I need to go get me a key made today too.

Malcolm: Oh ok, I appreciate it. I'll give you a couple of dollars for it too.

Malcolm: Thank you, I appreciate it.

Malcolm: Alright. Ah did your trash get up stairs?

Malcolm: Ok, I'll do that when I get home. Do you want me to wash our walls coming up and down our stair wells? I was looking at them the other day and they didn't look too white.

Malcolm: Okay, I love you. I'll see you later. Alright, bye, bye.

Angelica: Go ahead then.

Malcolm: What?

Angelica: Someone's being a good child.

Malcolm: You said somebody's being a good child? What you mean? I am?

Angelica: That's good.

Malcolm: Yeah, you know. I'm trying to hold it down.

Angelica: Make it do what it do.

Malcolm's attitude about church may or may not have changed, but he spoke about church differently with his mother than he had me, and he seemed to be attending at least some of the

times with his mother. Following her comment that he was now being a good son, Angelica commented, “Make it do what it do,” affirming that he was “holding it down.”

*“Friend Lover.”* Malcolm appeared with a third strong female in his next slide, Angelica, who stood by his side through much of his struggle. Angelica and Malcolm were standing together posed, wearing matching blue colors in their clothing. Malcolm wore a collared black shirt under a plaid grey and blue sweater. Angelica wore a blue sweater with diamond rhinestones at the right shoulder. Angelica smiled up at the camera showing her teeth. Malcolm looked up lips closed. The italicized text in white read, “Friend Lover.” The hook of the song played, “Blowing money like I never even seen that, that. Blowing money like I never even seen that.”

Several aspects about the image suggest that Malcolm viewed Angelica as his partner. He labeled the picture, “Friend Lover”, indicating that their friendship was of equal or even more importance than their romantic relationship, as he called her friend first. Further, their matching dress underscored a suggested union. In a conversation during work time in the computer lab, Malcolm had called Angelica his possible future wife (December 5, 2012). Each of these elements complicate the misogynistic discourse resonant across Malcolm’s DMP music choices as Malcolm constructed Angelica here as a partner and not an object.

***Malcolm’s Dream.*** The next eighteen images thematically reflect the alluded-to dream of the first part of the DMP and materialize Malcolm’s successful future trajectory. In this part of the DMP, it becomes clear that the dream is that Malcolm, through hard work and determination, was destined to achieve his dream of playing college football. Much of this dream materialized through a meritocratic and heroic/survivor/militaristic discourse where physical and mental strength, hard work, commitment, and desire laid the foundation for achieving future success.



The discourses of survival and invocations of war and of the military are present, for instance, in the slide following his tribute to Angelica. He invokes preparing for combat as he describes the elements one must possess in order to achieve success. In the next frame two weight machines were pictured against the backdrop of a blue and egg-shell colored wall. The text, in all caps, crawled up the screen in Star Wars fashion and read:

STRONG MINDS ARE BUILT WITH STRONG BODIES WHICH YOU ARE  
PREPARED FOR A HEAVY FUTURE. WITH DETERMINATION AND  
MOTIVATION YOU WILL RULE THE NATION. JUST ALL THAT MATTERS  
WHATS YOUR PASSION CUZ MINE IS SUCCESS.

Meek Mill rapped:

Blow it. I'm a stunt until the whole world mad at me. I'm out here killin em again that's  
somethin sad to see. I take my boys out to the mall they pop and tackle me  
Get anything you want my niggas; eatin's what I'm glad to see.

The text, Malcolm's written words, revealed his beliefs about how he would achieve his dream, and were engaged through a discourse that valued hard work and stamina indexed in the opening words, "Strong minds are built with strong bodies." Yet, while he recognized the necessity of strength and determination to achievement, the future here is framed as "heavy." Heavy implied his awareness that, while success may be achieved, struggle does not end. A militaristic discourse emerged in the following sentence in which the protagonist would arise to "rule the nation." Malcolm's words while initially used more generically, point in the last sentence towards the protagonist of his DMP when he states, "Just all that matters what's your passion cuz mine is success." This slide underscores the construction of success as attainable by overcoming

all obstacles (what he previously called evils) and, again, includes a level of confidence often absent from his spoken discourse achieving his goals and a positive future.

In the context of his confident persona in the DMP, however, he named his college in the following frame. A negative image of a black silhouette of a face with white stripes on it and a white cap around the back of the face filled the screen. The words Florida State are written on the bottom image. The words, My Dream, fall into the center of the screen as the silhouette emerges. Meek Mill rapped, "...what I'm glad to be." The song volume lowered and the instrumental opening of Meek Mill's "Dreams and Nightmares" started playing.

*"All of my grades have made a tremendous drop...I don't care."* Throughout our work time together, Malcolm's failing grades, combined with his uncertain future, seemed to weigh heavily on his mind. In an early November 9<sup>th</sup> work session Malcolm made note of his failing grades and contemplated the possibilities for his future. In response to a comment Malcolm made about his current F in Ms. Buchannan's class, I asked if he was turning his work in.

Malcolm: All of my grades have made a tremendous drop.

Angelica: They dropped?

Malcolm: Ye:ah

Angelica: Ba↑d?

Malcolm: Thirty-nine percent F

Angelica: Oh (.) my (.) gosh.

Malcolm: Thirty-one

Angelica: From who:? (.) You have, hold on, is this. (inaudible) F in Ms. Buchannan's for a final?

Malcolm: Yeah↑, I don't know how that happened.

B: Have you been turning your work in?

Angelica: Oh my gosh]

Malcolm: [Of course. The only thing I'm missing is just one test. (.4) I don't care.

As the conversation continued, I challenged the nihilism in his talk about college.

B: You're going to college↑ you've got to care.

M: I may. I don't, like I don't know. How I've been feeling I'm about to prolly just gonna take off next semester and start working and the:n. If if I end up going to college from this semester's grades then that's cool. But if not, mine as well just work, prolly get me a job at UPS and]

Angelica: [Oh god (whispered under breath).

Malcolm: [like try to balance it out payback my to, like pay cuz like they pay half your tuition

Becky: Mm hm

Malcolm: So if I find a job, like make like ten dollars, and then like a thirteen dollar hour job, I'll be straight. I don't know.

In this brief exchange, Malcolm equivocated each time he suggested a foreseeable pathway for his future self. He indicated a missing test as a reason for his F in Black Lit, and immediately said, “I don’t care,” when he clearly seemed to. It had been him, after all, who had just raised our collective attention to his plummeting grades, announcing that he had checked his current grades and “All of my grades have made a tremendous drop” and “I don't know how that happened.” His reflections seemed to indicate his hopelessness as well as his lack of understanding about why his grades were in this present state. As I pushed a college-going discourse on Malcolm, he pushed back, stating that he most likely was not going to college

unless he could get in with his (failing) grades. He offered his alternative plan of working for U.P.S. to make money and pay for tuition, indicating he was considering college but could not see a path where he would gain admittance based on his current grades. Tellingly, he ended the sharing of his plan with the statement, “I don’t know.” His dream of college, as expressed within and outside of the DMP, truly was clouded with obstacles and uncertainties. Angelica’s commentary throughout underscored her feelings about the feasibility of his plan and perhaps echoed Malcolm’s as well. Perhaps it was this awareness that in part inspired Malcolm to start considering playing football as his pathway to college. When Malcolm constructed the previous slide on December 4<sup>th</sup>, he referred to Florida State “my college” when he told me he was going to put his college in the DMP.

Given his initial plans for his DMP, it was a surprise to see the prominence of football as a theme and key to success in his project. Malcolm was initially not going to include football imagery in his DMP, as he had previously rejected Angelica’s suggestions made early on (November 9, 2015).

Angelica: Yeah, so, um, yeah. I think that it should be: (.) it could be a collage because you, you [Malcolm] like have a lot of things, like you had your foo:tbll

Malcolm: I'm not [gonna talk about that

Angelica: [your Facebook life.

(.)

Angelica: Well, okay then↓.

Perhaps it was her framing of football as something he had had in the past rather than in the present moment that triggered Malcolm’s curt rejection of Angelica’s suggestion. Malcolm had been a football player for Regional early in high school, but told me that he had torn his ACL

and had not played since then. As he neared the end of the semester in which he participated in my study, Malcolm had mentioned being in conversation with recruiters. I also had overheard him telling one of his peers and former teammates that he didn't want to play football, but he wanted to workout with the team.

Here, Malcolm seemed to be expressing that playing football was not a part of his career plans (as he only wanted the workout), which conflicted with how he constructed his future self. However, Malcolm seemed to be aware of his outcast status as indicated by his spoken discourse (e.g., he wanted people to see him as being "out there" and he did not expect people to understand his poetry's meaning) and he physically sat at the opposite side of the classroom from the group of football players in Black Lit, as indicated in the maps I drew of the class and where students were sitting in my fieldnotes. Thus, perhaps him making this comment was in relation to his sense that he was not a member of the team officially, but also seemed to express his desire to be a part of this community and participate in their practices to perhaps show the commitment and strength he associated with success in his digital media project when he wrote, "Strong minds are built with strong bodies." These conversations indicate that Malcolm seemed to be considering football as a viable near future option.

In his DMP, his comeback narrative culminated in an idealized future trajectory where he would one day return to the football field. Following the slide where Malcolm established the ingredients necessary for his success, in the next slide Malcolm was pictured looking down at the camera, his right closed fist held over his mouth, the thumb resting against his cheek. Cursive writing tattooed along his arm showed prominently in the center of the screen. The text, "DEEP THOUGHT THE FIELD OR THE BLOCC!" was written in all caps, in black lettering outlined in white. Meek Mill rapped, "Can't panic; don't panic. Gangser, Greezell, Gangster, Grezell."

The song now playing was Meek Mills' "Don't Panic," a rap song about not panicking during a drug bust, not getting caught by the police, and enjoying extreme wealth acquired through performing shows. The song choice functioned to both illuminate latent insecurities Malcolm might have had about the feasibility and fragility of achieving his dream and provided a reassuring mantra of "don't panic" in highly stressful moments. In this respect, the message of the song was that one could get away with illicit activities and enjoy great success as long as he does not panic as many of the characters in the song seemed to be foolishly doing. For Malcolm, achieving success seemed to be predicated on him maintaining focus, faith, and passion. The text in this slide, "Deep thought [on] the field or the blocc," reflect the notion of focus, as does the picture of Malcolm staring directly at the camera, appearing serious with his hand covering his mouth as though in contemplation.

The next image continues the storyline of Malcolm being an athlete, and likely football player, living out his dream, as he was pictured in a letterman's jacket. He wore a white dress shirt, a red tie, and black pants and a doo rag on his head. He was pictured looking at the camera, with a cell phone held out in front of him. He appeared to be standing in a bathroom, sinks in rows against mirrors flanked the right side of the image. The words, "FAITH BELIEVE" in all caps and in white shoot onto the screen from either end of the frame and center in the middle as one word as the camera pans up towards Malcolm's face. The words zip off the screen as the image transitions to the next frame. Meek Mill rapped, "Can't panic; can't panic."

The picture showed a younger version of the present Malcolm. When Malcolm included this picture, Andrea had correctly guessed that Malcolm was sixteen when the picture was taken, meaning he must have been a freshman or sophomore and had been on the school's football team. In conjunction with a meritocratic discourse, Malcolm employed here a seemingly engaged a

Christian discourse, signaled by the words, “faith” and “believe.” Here, the audience was invited to have faith and belief in Malcolm’s inevitable comeback.

This younger version of Malcolm seemed to reflect a version of himself he seemed to remember fondly, or in other words was reminiscent of his glory days when he wore a letterman’s jacket and played football for the school. Given the centrality of football in the DMP he seemed to be calling on his audience here to have faith and believe that his comeback included a revival of this past self.

*A bullet doesn't have a name.* In the next slide, Malcolm’s smiling face appeared behind his hand holding a cell phone out in front of his face. He wore a white hat that had a blue rim. The letter F was inscribed on the hat over a large fish. Malcolm held the rim with his right hand. The following words in teal blue chased up the screen mimicking the Star Wars opening lines format, “Mentally Straped The Success Is with in my Passion, my Pain, My Glory of What and who I well be. A bullet doesn't have a name. Many life learnt lesson to know knowledge is far from a game.” Meek Mill rapped, “Can't panic. Can't panic. Don't panic. They knocking. Don't panic. It's them people in penny-loafers.”

Here, the words “Mentally Straped The Success Is with in my Passion” reiterated that a strong and focused mind and passion served as necessary elements for success. Mentioning a “bullet” was a possible allusion to Malcolm’s recent brush with death. Perhaps in writing “a bullet doesn’t have a name” he meant that his fate did not have to be to die in a gunfight. He had learned “many life lessons” which had taught him to know that life was to be taken seriously; it was “far from a game.” Mill’s lyrics metaphorically relay a similar message in reiterating the importance of not panicking because evil (in this case, the “people in penny-loafers, or the detectives) were out to get a person, “they knocking.”

The next slide shows an image colored in sepia taken from an aerial view of a large group of people dressed in football uniforms all facing and crowding into a center. They stood on a football field. Two people stood at the back and appear to be coaches, dressed in collared shirts, one a dark shade, the other a light white shade. They face the football players, standing upright, with hands on their hips. A multilayered crowd of people stood facing the field. A single person stood at the front of the players and appeared to be holding up an object on a pole, perhaps a camera. A banner ran along the bottom of the screen and the words written in white text traveled with the banner from right to left: “One Heart Beat. Loyalty and Honor.” Meek Mill rapped, “They searching people and searching soldiers. Oh lord, don't panic.”

The modes, read in relation to one another, proffer a discourse of solidarity. The image of the football players standing together coupled with the text in the banner, “One Heart Beat. Loyalty and Honor,” suggested that the players embodied one unified organism operating together. The words, loyalty and honor, echo some of the United States Army values, connecting to the thread of militaristic discourse in Malcolm’s earlier slides and the idea that one cannot go into combat alone. While the imagery here focused on football, the song lyrics, “they searching people and searching soldiers”, are reminiscent of war and invoke illicit activities and racism. Malcolm also found himself in the midst of being accused of stealing and selling school property, he felt ostracized by his faith community, and he had an astute awareness of the crippling affects of historically rooted racism on present day people of color’s lives, and saw himself wrapped up in that struggle he was struggling to find his way out of. In other words, the solidarity he sought in football perhaps parallel a solidarity he had hoped and struggled to find in other aspects of his difficult life, where he seemed to feel alone or outcast. Yet, the layered



modes of the DMP also show Malcolm's continued efforts to embed a construction of an individual identity.

The next four images present four dynamic representations of Malcolm. First he was shown as being "tatted up" or tattooed, then serious and focused on his "way out." Next, he was positioned as the son of a good mother, then a punk, flipping off the camera. These slides seem to function as representing aspects of who Malcolm had been over the past four years of high school. These images and how they are composed within the DMP, show both Malcolm's sense of humor, as well as a sense of seriousness about achieving success.

*"My Future."* Following this series was a picture of Malcolm surrounded by five small children in the middle of a football field. He had his right arm around one child who was leaning in towards him and hugging him. Malcolm's eyes were closed. The text, written in lime green with a black line around each letter read, "My Future!" Meek Mill rapped, "That would a been one of my niggas betcha hommie woulda died quicker. Lawyer cost a hundred thou nigga. Tell him no more. Shoot at us, no recourse."

The words, "My Future" coupled with an image of Malcolm surrounded by children suggested how Malcolm envisioned his success. Not only did he envision himself as a successful football player, but also a role model. Here, community and solidarity remain salient ideals carried through from the past image labeled with the words, "one heart beat." In this moment that played on the screen, Mill rapped of the racism inherent in US justice system, through the lyrics, "shoot at us no recourse". Perhaps Malcolm envisioned that his success might support the success of others in his community as well and, in this image, young African American boys. Mill's lyrics call attention to the obstacles Malcolm, and other young African American males, faced when working to achieve their dreams.

This is a notable shift from the Mo Stacks persona from early in the DMP and the focus on personal wealth and fame; this image suggests that as the DMP is culminating, the connection to community as part of success becomes central. Football seems to signify the means to a comeback that enfolds material success, fame, yes, but also connection to community and Malcolm's sharp and engaged political critiques and commitments related to racism and its impact.

In the next image, which is cast in negative coloring, six figures glowed a ghostly white and appeared dressed in football uniforms; their hands rested on their hips; the numbers 8, 25, 44, and 16 displayed in red accordingly on their jerseys. Each figure faced the camera. The field under their feet glowed a soft pink. Meek Mill rapped, "We shoot and them and they goin to court. Fuck niggas want to go to war, just make sure you can stand it. And when them boys start rushin'; nigga just don't panic." This refrain repeated as the text faded off the screen. The text was written in black and italicized. It crawled down the screen in Star Wars style and read, "One day I will be back at it if it's Gods will but into them i'm going to continue on this mission to success I see my struggle was a phase but off to the Millions i'm worth..."

Here, Malcolm framed his struggle as ephemeral, "I see my struggle was a phase." He drew on a religious discourse to signal that his success lies in "God's" will. Yet, he implied that his own concentration and hard work were central to that achievement; as he was going to "continue on this mission to success," here, again, connected to football as the means to the future dream and connection to the idealized past.

*"The reason I'm here!"* Malcolm was pictured standing next to his mother in the following frame. Malcolm was wearing a white shirt, blue jeans and orange shoes. His mother wore a sequin black shirt decorated with flowers, bright pink stretch pants and high heeled black

shoes. Malcolm's mother smiled and rested her left hand on Malcolm's shoulder. She had a large, bright blue ring on her right middle finger and her nails were painted blue. Her dark brown hair was curled and streaked blonde and cascaded down the right side of her face. Malcolm had a collared shirt with gold decoration in the shoulders. He stared at the camera, head tilted back. His hand was wrapped around his mother's waist and curled into a loose fist. The words, "The reason I'm Here!" were written in a swirling white text. The refrain of the song played, "No time to plot it, no time to plan it. Hey what ta do nigga." The potential double meaning expressed in Malcolm's words, "The reason I'm here" are striking given that a biological mother births her child into life, and at the same time Malcolm underscored the sentiment he had about his mother's role in where he was in his present moment in life.

Similar to the other images of Malcolm with his mother, grandmother, and Angelica, in previous slides, Malcolm and his mother appear here in matching dress. The alignment suggested perhaps Malcolm situating himself on the path that his mother had always envisioned for him, a path towards college. The slide of Malcolm and his mother appears between others that continue to the complex constructions of identity and the idea of success that run throughout the DMP.

Immediately following the image of his mother, his DMP returns to an image of Malcolm that echoes the fiercer portrayals of himself and his alter ego, Mo Stacks, from earlier in the narrative. He also returns to the militaristic discourse that thread through much of his DMP and, certainly, in the music he has chosen for the project. Malcolm was pictured leaning forward on a desk. His face was turned down towards the desk so that only the top part of his head, his mouth and lips showing. He wore a black cap with an orange rim and a matching black shirt; his arms were crossed in front of him and his tattoos were showing prominently. The text, written in white, was slanted and read, "Death Before Dishonor." Meek Mill rapped with another person speaking

the words within the hypens, “A hundred keys—we tread walking around nigga, where the hell you be you know what I’m sayin’ then?—up in the attic.”

Unlike most of the other pictures featuring Malcolm that showed his entire face and often his entire body, this image only showed the top of his head, a part of his face, and his arm. This pose could be interpreted as performing humility in the context of the weight of the words about death and death itself. Malcolm was not staring at the camera welcoming death or in defiance of death. Rather, he was looking down, accepting that if that was to be his fate for maintaining his honor, so be it. At the same time, the music carries a thematic undercurrent central to Malcolm’s DMP related to the shared conditions shared by Black men in the United States. Captured in the lyrics, “we tread walking around nigga” is a sense of justified paranoia that one lives in a state of waiting to get caught according to how Black men are profiled.

*“Blessed to be Alive.”* The idea of death was not abstract for Malcolm, who composed his DMP in the days following a near death experience. When he returned to school and we were working together in the computer lab he had asked me, “have you ever thought you were going to die?” He then showed me the images he had taken with his cell phone of the bullet-riddled wall. He had been feeding his nephew dinner when the shots were fired, he told me. He pointed out the sixteen bullet holes in the wall.

While Malcolm does not share his near death experience explicitly in his DMP, it is a presence throughout. Alluding to this experience illustrates how he constructed his self-representation in relation to his conflicted feelings about and whom he assumed would not or could not fully understand stories he might share without judging him unfairly. Yet, he did construct a narrative that included some very raw sharing, while also working to foreclose the

audiences' judgments and instead lead them to view him as a wounded, but valiant and resilient "soldier" who could and would return to that former star athlete and future rap star.

Showing a contemplative self, Malcolm looked off and away from the camera in the following image. The image was a side profile, close up image of his face. His eyes are looking slightly up to the right and away from the camera. The text was written over a brown and white decorative banner at the bottom of the screen. The text was in fancy white lettering and two green vines curl on either side of the text: "Blessed to be Alive." Meek Mill rapped, "In the alley. Oh lord! Busting niggas in the alley. Pussy niggas panic. I could see their panties."

Malcolm did not discuss the details of his near death experience, but his comments to his friend over the phone, "You know. Shit, shit, the homos tried to smoke a nigger like on Sunday and shit..." seemed to suggest that he believed he had survived a targeted shooting. In the text for this frame, he again invokes a religious discourse in the words, "Blessed to be alive" across an image of himself looking off into the distance, an unknown future. The subtext of this slide seems highly dependent on audience knowledge of the backstory. Knowing about the shooting, the words on the screen have a particularly striking meaning; without that backstory, the words and image invoke the threat to his own and other Black male lives, an awareness and theme that his peers know he speaks to in multiple contexts, but the backstory makes this particularly powerful for him as audience and others who have more intimate knowledge of his recent circumstances that he kept from his peers; yet alluded to in his narrative and openly shared with me.

Mill's lyrics, "In the alley. Oh lord! Busting niggas in the alley. Pussy niggas panic. I could see their panties," reiterated that surviving required a certain kind of masculine hardness. This misogyny in the lyrics signaled a sexist discourse that proffered a machismo form of

masculinity seemingly necessary for survival. In other words, those who fail and get busted and panic are effeminate, or “pussy niggas” who wear women’s underwear, “panties.” Yet here again, Malcolm’s self-construction complicates a survivor discourse. As previously discussed, Malcolm attributes his life to a woman, his mother, and his partner and the only friend he signaled out individually was his girlfriend, Angelica, whom he labeled with the words, “friend, lover.” Thus, his constructed self-representation importantly complicates the role women play in Malcolm’s subjectivity and survivor discourse in particular by proffering the idea that strong men form in relation to strong women not subjugated, objectified women.

*“SQUAD UP!”* As the DMP moved toward its conclusion, the next four images reiterated previously salient themes: football, college, Malcolm and his mother, and Malcolm’s strength as a football player. There was a striking repetition in these slides from those just a few slides before that return the DMP narrative to the central elements of the “dream” and the form of the comeback. The penultimate frame, and last image before the concluding video is of five Black male adolescents staring intently at the camera. Malcolm stood in the middle holding his fists up against his chest; his arms were bent at his waist. All of the others were leaning in towards Malcolm, and the young man to his left held up a finger from his hand resting at waist level, pointing towards Malcolm’s chest where there appeared to be a United States monetary bill of indistinguishable quantity attached to his chest. Two of the young men were wearing yellow and blue striped shirts that matched and were on opposite sides of the photograph. Two others wore black jackets and another a powder blue collared shirt. Malcolm wore a white shirt with short sleeves so his tattoos show as he lifted his arms and held his forearms to the camera. The text, written in white appeared in the middle of the screen and read, “SQUAD UP!” Meek Mill rapped, “that’s on everything, Money-Bag and the bread game. My partner and them is my partner and

them. Murder one or get guap with them. Yo Gotti. Can't panic. Don't panic. They knocking, don't panic."

When Malcolm first included this picture in his DMP he remarked that people should watch out when his crew got together. Malcolm stood in the middle of the group, suggesting that he held a leadership position among his friends. The words, "Squad Up", again invoking military, or a call to duty, signified that these young men had connections that meant they could be called upon to support each other. Given the images of war and struggle invoked throughout the DMP, what was clear from this image was that Malcolm not going into this battle for survival alone; he had his community. The image of money on his shirt and the friend pointing to that image seems to return to that monetary image of success that was very present early in the DMP and central to the Mo Stacks persona, but that becomes far less present in the latter half of the DMP when the football and college themes became more central. Interestingly as the story neared the end, the theme and presence of money returned.

***"Just pure comedy. You know what comedy means? That means that shit is absolutely funny. So yeah, that is, that is where I'm headed to."*** Malcolm ended his DMP with a video of himself, which he filmed while in the computer lab where we had spent all of our out of school time working and conversing and where Malcolm had constructed his project. In the video, he was wearing a red shirt with blue and white stripes. A necklace hung around his neck. It was the same necklace that he was wearing at the beginning of the video; he had recorded this video and the opening video early in the process, but ended up using this particular video to conclude his DMP. Malcolm also wore a black knit cap with the Mighty Ducks symbol on the front. The hat was pulled down low, obscuring his eyes. He leaned his head back as he spoke and gestured with his hands, which he held up under his chin when he wasn't gesturing toward the camera. He

spoke in a distorted voice that he had changed through one of the features in iMovie; his voice sounded low and intimidating. He said, "So yea, you at the start of my new video. And I'm a rap star now. My name is Mo Stacks. But yeah, you know a little bit of my life. K? But next time it ain't gonna be this easy. Going to put my hands around your neck. K? Cuz yeah. I'm about to start this shit. I mean this stuff. Yeah, ok."

After Malcolm made this video, he asked Angelica and me to watch it. He played the video and we noticed that midway through the recording, I had walked into the frame and had started typing on my computer that sat on a table about ten feet behind Malcolm. My multicolored lunch bag made from recycled juice boxes sat beside the computer. I looked up a few times as Malcolm recorded his video and laughed quietly to myself at Malcolm's performance, and then I moved off camera. As we watched my debut, I commented, "I think I ruin anything what is fierce about this video" (December 6, 2012).

Malcolm and I laughed together at that idea. We discussed whether he should re-record the video without me in it, but he responded, "I just like how it looked." He then referred to how he sounded, saying, "I'll put it in the small voice because that's going to be even funnier." He played the video again and Angelica asked incredulously, "Are you really going to use this?" Malcolm ignored her and kept playing the video repeatedly as we watched.

At the part where Malcolm said, "Next time it ain't gonna be this easy. I'm gonna have to put my hands around your neck. K?" Andrea commented, "this is terrible," and I said, "I can't understand what you're saying." Malcolm replayed the section for us and echoed the words, "I'm gonna have to put my hands around your neck." I laughed and said, "Oh, ok, great, is that what I'm smiling [in the video] about?" Angelica laughed. Malcolm said, "Oh, oh, you can't understand it, though?" I replied, "No, but do you need people to understand it?" Malcolm said,



"Yeah," as Angelica retorted, "You don't want people to understand that part. That's funny, though." Malcolm protested, "That's the funniest part!" He played the recording, "Next time it ain't going to be this easy. I'm gonna have to put my hands around your neck" again and burst out laughing. "That's the funniest part."

He then called on the other students in the computer lab to gather around his computer and watch this video. I told him to leave people alone and let them work, and he responded that it was "afterschool hours," implying that afterschool could be a time of play and did not have to be organized around the same rules they had to follow during the school day. He played his video again in a slow robot voice and then in the voice he eventually ended up keeping in the final draft. As the recording stopped he said, "I like that shit," and Andrea asked him to leave the recording for her, as it would give her "something to laugh at." Not surprisingly, she seemed to be taking Malcolm getting shot at over the weekend pretty hard and her comment about wanting something to laugh at seemed connected to that experience. Malcolm played the video again with the "tiny voice" as he had called it, and Andrea said, "That's cute. I like it." Malcolm responded, "Ah, I think it's funny. Comedy. It's not cute to me. Just comedy. Just pure comedy. You know what comedy means? That means that shit is absolutely funny. So yeah, that is, that is where I'm headed to."

Throughout his DMP, he subverted failure narratives and proffered a tale of future success. Both Kira's class and the after school work space offered Malcolm opportunities to challenge the oppressive discourses he perceived resonant in other school spaces as well as outside of school and through which he assumed many in his audience would interpret his life. The final video and our conversations following exemplified the complex discursive spaces through which Malcolm constructed and understood his self-representation as well as his

perceptions about how others misunderstood and judged him. Malcolm's agency seemed to materialize in how he seemed to enjoy keeping people guessing about him. In the final video, he pulled his hat over his eyes, he distorted his voice, he gestured at the camera, he used violent language; in these respects, his video seemed to intend to intimidate and perhaps take up the stereotypes he must have known people held about him on account of his embodied subjectivities. Yet, he called the most threatening part of the video the funniest part. While Angelica and I did not initially agree that making death threats was funny, we all agreed that my presence in the video seemed to diffuse the intimidation resonant in Malcolm's threat delivered through a menacing voice. Malcolm played the video repeatedly that afternoon and kept laughing at the video and my role in it. This juxtaposition of characters in this image—Malcolm, a large young Black man looking like an intimidating gangster rapper, and me, an older White woman wearing a turtleneck with a multicolored lunch bag exemplified the complex narrative of identities he weaves throughout the DMP. My presence in the video also constructed a subversive moment wherein the perceived differences between Malcolm and me were leveled through our shared laughter that signaled the ridiculousness of the idea that Malcolm would cause anyone harm. In that interaction, we all refused that positioning of Malcolm and offered to Malcolm the positioning he opened to others when he said in September, "You can travel into other people's worlds; you don't know how far you can go" (September 18, 2012). He had told me, "I keep trying to relate to people. If there is something that I don't understand I'll ask. You know?...Some people, they just criticize, and they need to reconstruct their own self."

Perhaps in this moment of shared laughter Malcolm was practicing this notion of revisiting whom he was presenting himself as in seeing himself the way that I saw him, being silly. If I had not walked into the video, Malcolm's intended ending image would have lead

centrally back to Mo Stacks, even adding the intimidating death threat; but, in readily accepting the disruption of that persona he welcomed the nuances, the comedy, introduced through my presence in the video. In that moment of shared laughter, Malcolm's perception of what his video offered to an audience shifted so much so that he took the symbolic action of inviting a larger audience into the comedy of the video at that moment in the afterschool session. It is important to note that the audience in that moment who he invited into share the laughter with him were students from Black Lit. His invitation positioned that larger audience to include several people who understood this aspect of the backstory of this video, and who would have shared insight to the joke, and thus would have a very different take away than an audience would who didn't have access to that aspect of the DMP's backstory and narrative construction. This representation of Malcolm as a comedian starkly contrasted with his notion of his school identity at large.

Within the school context, Malcolm was attuned to his characterization as a failure and a criminal. His discourse throughout our work sessions suggests that he struggled with those labels. From the stories he told about himself in the present moment and in the past, it seemed clear that those labels had not been part of his school experience early in high school when he was on the football team but had emerged in the time since. Malcolm approached autobiographical digital storytelling with a sense that his audience judged him unfairly, while at the same time, he held himself accountable in his own admission of having made poor life choices. Moreover, his negotiations of audience also included him sharing intimate threads of his life as he constructed a narrative of a wounded warrior, a survivor, who was destined to arise through the turmoil and revive his former self and become a famous and adored rap star.

## CHAPTER 6

### Gabriel

**“There’s football Gabriel, and there’s Gabriel, Gabriel. And Gabriel is actually sensitive”**

#### **Gabriel Bartuah.**

This chapter tells the story of a student’s experiences negotiating multiple identity discourses, which particularly included discrepant identity discourses between his perceptions of how others knew him and how he knew himself; in this manner Gabriel’s perception of audience significantly informed his constructed self-representation and digital narrative. Gabriel considered himself to be a private person; yet, his status as a successful football player kept him in the public eye. Thus, negotiating the public platform for autobiographical digital storytelling necessitated that he carefully navigate telling a story of himself in relation to his perception of what others knew of him. His notion of what others knew of him was informed by his sense of their capacity to know him. Throughout, I refer to the peer audience discourse. This term refers to a discourse that Gabriel constructed around his sense of his peer audience. This peer audience read Gabriel via mainstream racial and gender norms that conflicted and were in tension with his emergent sense of self. In this chapter, I discuss how Gabriel employed the peer audience discourse to rationalize his composition choices and illuminate the tensions he experienced in liberating his constructed subjectivity from oppressive and flattening storylines.

In what follows, I begin with descriptions from interviews and interactions that show key ways in which Gabriel was negotiating his peer audience. I then discuss the first work sessions that Gabriel and I shared together, which include a word document on which I captured notes from our first DMP planning conversation. Gabriel engaged the peer audience discourse in these early conversations to rationalize his digital media project composition choices. Throughout, he

deleted elements of the story he told me in our first meeting and drew on the peer audience discourse. Finally, I discuss the discourses Gabriel engaged in his final DMP, I draw on the conversations Gabriel and I had about his school identity, his sense of his peer audience, and his reflections on his past and future life. Resonant in these conversations are notable distinctions that Gabriel drew between a sensitive self that he admittedly shared with few people and his football identity, which he believed most people knew him by; this football sense of self seemed at odds with his sensitive side. This chapter illustrates Gabriel's negotiations between two senses of himself to tell a story that was admittedly about him, but were in his words, for others' viewing.

### **Negotiating Contested Subjectivities**

Gabriel's school identity seemed to be dominated by his position as a star running back on Regional High's football team. The team was experiencing a rare success according to Gabriel, and everyone watched as the team won games week after week eventually going to the state championship. Gabriel spent a lot of time in the spotlight that semester—as I documented throughout my field notes, he gave televised post game interviews, he was photographed prolifically on the football field, and teachers frequently greeted him in the school hallway with high fives and commentary on the most recent or upcoming football games. He conversed with his peers about football games and peers sought out his opinions about football related information. Gabriel always returned high fives and replied with thoughtful, hopeful remarks regarding his teachers' and peers' comments about football and he frequently teased and laughed with his peers in their interactions.

Over the course of the three weeks that Gabriel and I spent together as he composed his DMP, I witnessed Gabriel respond to his peers' and teachers' attention. Yet, in our conversations

about the DMP, Gabriel shared a personal, private story of himself, one that he was not discussing openly with others. Over time, notable discrepancies emerged between how Gabriel interacted with people publically, and how he described himself and his personal thoughts about his relationship to his peers. Despite Gabriel's positioning as a star running on a successful football team informing his salient school identities, Gabriel did not see football as forming the core of his sense of self. He told me that "the letters from college recruiters, the trophies, they just sat there" and playing football was only a means to an end (November 19, 2012). Gabriel's motivation to succeed stemmed from a deep desire to make his mother proud. "Everything I do, I do for my mom," he had said several times, including when Gabriel was telling me about himself in our first conversation about the DMP (November 14, 2012). The following day, as I observed him edit details from the original transcript I had created from our first conversation, he explained his edits. For instance, he felt he didn't need to include his college plans in his DPM, which was a typical practice for many of the students, particularly among those who followed the suggested *where I've been, where I am, and where I'm going* story structure. He explained, "I'm not doing it for them. I'm... that's my attitude is that I'm not doing it for nobody but myself and my mom, so I can care less about what they [think]. I just don't feel like telling them" (November 19, 2012).

Gabriel's rationale for not sharing the sensitive details of his life with his peers seemed in part on his family's cultural practices. he explained, "It's how I've been brought up too. We don't put all of our personal life into the public." He then identified the classroom as a "public place" (November 19, 2012). However, despite being a private person generally, Gabriel expressed that his choices around sharing were strategically circumstantial. He explained, "I look at each situation before I put certain things out there" (November 19, 2012). Similar to Darius

and Malcolm, Gabriel expressed a felt separation between himself and his peers. His discourse suggested that this separation was largely on account of him believing that his peers did not care about him, or, in other words, the things about him that mattered most.

For instance, in his college essay he felt compelled to share the information about his life that he shielded from others because he felt it was necessary; Ms. Buchannan had asked him to, and he felt it would matter to the college admissions officers to know this information (November 19, 2012). The DMP, however, was going to be shared in a public space with a peer audience. He explained that he had shared personally sensitive information in his college essay because, “that’s for people who actually want to know about stuff like that” (November 19, 2012) as opposed to his peers whom he explained, “won’t care about” the reasons he had to emigrate from Liberia to the United States (November 19, 2012). As evidence of their lack of care, he explained that his peers would have limited patience for watching one another’s DMPs. He said, “They’ll get into it for a while and once they see it’s going on, then people will start to lose interest. That’s not what I want. I don’t want that to happen” (November 19, 2012).

In each of these explanations, Gabriel implied a sense of the DMP’s purpose as well as expressed his desire to create a project that attended to his perception of his audience. For instance, his concern about his peers’ attention span indicated he had a sense that he should take his audience’s interests into account while composing. He generally believed that his peers had little interest in the details that happened to be most meaningful to him. This belief that his peers would dismiss the details that mattered to him seemed to be the main impetus for his composing decisions. Ultimately in his interview, he shared that he had composed a story that was safe rather than personally meaningful. He explained that it “doesn’t really, ah, you know, it doesn’t really tell anything that I don’t want people to know. All the things that’s in there, I feel

comfortable with people knowing about it. So, I have no problem with people viewing it”  
(December 17, 2012).

Moreover, Gabriel’s inclinations to withhold information rather than divulge, were informed by his perception that his peers were vindictive. Gabriel explained why he had chose to keep his sensitive side secret from his peers.

..a thing some teachers might not understand is some kids are evil. And if they can find anything they can to use it against you, they're gonna use it against you. So, by you telling a part of you that might be very special. And just average people knowing about it; they could use it, you know? (December 17, 2012).

I asked Gabriel if he had had the experience of his peers in Black Lit holding personal information about him against him.

Gabriel: It happens; it happens all the time.

Becky: Yeah?

Gabriel: It happens in elementary, middle school. No matter where, it happens.

Teachers [are] just not around to see it happen.

Becky: Mm hm.

Gabriel: That's why I feel like they don't understand why when certain projects they give us to do.

Becky: Mm hm.

Gabriel: Why kids hold back=

Becky: =Mm hm.

Gabriel: Instead of like really letting it out there.

Becky: Mm hm.



Gabriel: That's, that's how I feel.

Ultimately, in that conversation, Gabriel described his final DMP as a “fancy little project” that lacked the “heart-felt emotions” he would have included should his audience have been solely Kira and me.

*Composing the digital media project.* On the first day of our work together (November 14, 2012), Gabriel and I sat down to plan his story. This involved his sharing his ideas, me taking notes in a word document, and us discussing what a few of the slides could look like. Gabriel then edited the original word document with his peer audience in mind. In the next section, I discuss the evolution of this storytelling process as Gabriel shifted his narrative in relation to his perceptions about different audiences.

“What’s the story you want to tell, and how do you want to tell it?” I asked Gabriel as we sat down to work together (November 14, 2012). He shared that he had emigrated from Liberia to the United States with his younger brother at the age of seven, ten years prior to that present moment in time. He explained that most people did not know, or believe, that he was Liberian, and he wanted to emphasize his nationality in his DMP. Gabriel’s emigration story embedded his understanding of the emotional and life consequences of his parent’s decision to send him to the United States to live with his uncle and cousins in Colorado. He had to grow up without a mother in his daily life and took part in raising his younger brother. As a result, he emphasized that everything he did in life was to make his mother proud and demonstrate that the sacrifice was worth the pain it had caused her, and him. As he narrated this story, I took notes in a word document. I shared this document with him and told him that he could use it as a draft for his DMP. He read over the document and selected what he wanted to keep for his project. I asked him to track changes as he made his edits.

*Story Planning.* Below is a copy of the document that Gabriel and I were working from as an outlined draft for his DMP. The comment boxes in white, to the right of the script, include the sections that Gabriel deleted from what I had recorded from the initial story he had told me

From West Africa

The flag shows my true colors. I want to let everyone know, right off the bat where I'm from. The flag represents something about who I am.

The fist represents struggle and at the same time stay strong; that is why it holds together like that. It means to always keep fighting, no matter how tough the situation is.

We moved here for a better life for education.

Because of the war, I had to move to the United States.

My mom is still in my country.

Everything I do is for my mom. My mom is my heart and soul.

The song: battle scars, Lupe Fiasco. Even though all of these things I'm doing, the sadness isn't going away. I'm no closer to my mom than when I left her.

My dad is a man. I know that he can tough it out.

We still talk on the phone.

I've been away from my parents since I was seven years old.

Football is one way for me to go to college. Why not do something that you love doing while you get your education.

Right now, I'm interested in sports medicine. You get to be around athletes who are doing something that you did before.

**Comment [1]:** Gabriel made these edits from the first draft that I documented. 11.20.12

**Comment [2]:** Picture of W. African Flag (Liberia)

**Deleted:** For some reason, my friends don't really believe me.

**Deleted:** Liberia is always at war. It can never seem to get under control. Past presidents have put the country in such bad hands. It's almost like people are free, but they aren't. There are kids my age or younger who are killing people. It's crazy.

**Deleted:** I stay with my Uncle, but I have a hand in raising my brother.

**Comment [3]:** Picture of mom.

**Deleted:** My mom.

**Deleted:** Everything is for her

**Deleted:** It's hard because she hasn't been able to see that part of me. It gets hard when you are winning all of these awards and she can't see them. You win it but you aren't happy because there isn't anyone you can show it to.

**Deleted:** I do what I do to make my mom proud. I don't want any of it to be a waste.

**Deleted:** My brother is turning 16 soon. I have been like a father for my brother, at a young age. It's been hard, but at the same time, it's made me into a stronger person. Now, I know that if I can get through that at such a young age, there is nothing that can stop me from what I want to do.

**Deleted:** I've gone through injuries as a football player. I want to be able to help other athletes who are coming up. It helps me to stay around the game.

about himself. The main elements that he revised were comments he had made about the civil and political unrest in Liberia, his emotive description of how he missed his mother, how he had felt that he had a hand in raising his brother, and what football meant to him. Each of these plot points were present in his final DMP and formed the organizational framework, but they remained in largely truncated form of the original narration.

Gabriel made his edits primarily in relation to his perceptions of his peer audience and how they would react to certain details in his story. The deleted sections illustrate the personal and sensitive details that Gabriel had shared with Kira and me, but did not seem comfortable

sharing with his peers. Below, I will discuss his process of constructing each slide, as well as how the peer audience discourse informed his choices.

***I want to let everyone know right off the bat where I'm from.*** Gabriel shared that he wanted to start his DMP with an explanation of where he was born. I asked him how he would describe where he was from. He responded, "Like, cuz, I came. . . I'm from West Africa. I came here at the age of seven" (November 14, 2012). He suggested how he might start. He said, "So, I don't know, have my country's flag and just born and raised, but not born and raised, but I don't know. It (laughter), this is not really. This is all new to me." His comment that this was "all new" to him could have just been about composing the DMP, but he also seemed to be implying that he did not normally talk about himself and perhaps his nationality in particular. I encouraged him to go on, "...so we're just kind of brainstorming here, so I'll take notes while you're talking. So you want to talk about how you're from West Africa?" and he agreed, "Yeah", and I suggested, "you could have a picture, um, of [the] West African flag {typing}" and he corrected me, "Yeah, Liberia" (November 14, 2012).

***"The flag shows my true colors"—using the DMP as an opportunity to establish nationality.*** Gabriel ended up selecting an image of a fist painted with the markings of a Liberian flag. The music paused and Gabriel's voice spoke,

The flag shows my true colors. I want to let everyone know right off the bat where I'm from. The flag represents something about who I am. The fist represents struggle at the same time, to stay strong. That is why it stays together like that. It means to always stay fighting no matter how tough the situation is. As Gabriel finished the sentence, the instrumental opening song to "The Boondocks" resumed playing.

Gabriel had wanted to open his DMP with a Liberian flag. He explained, “I just feel like to have my flag, it shows my true colors.” He continued, “They,” meaning his peers and some teachers at Regional High, “think I’m still from here [The United States]. They think I’m like lying. I actually had a teacher once like kind of she got mad at me.” He explained she thought he was pretending to be from another country and making fun of his foreign born peers (November 14, 2012). Yet, when he questioned me about whether I would have assumed he was born and raised in the United States, he had shared his own sense of how his so-called normalcy in his ability to pass as American was also always up for question.

Gabriel: Like, so would you have thought I was from another country?

Becky: It wouldn’t surprise me knowing the population [at Regional High].

Gabriel: Yeah, but you know? So I kind of have to prove to people sometimes where I’m from because=

Becky: =So interesting.

Gabriel: They feel like, they’ll ask me how come my English is so good or something like that. I don’t know (November 14, 2012).

Gabriel decided to label the image of the fist with the word, Liberia, because he expected people wouldn’t recognize his flag. (November 14, 2012). In asking me whether I thought he was from another country and recalling people commenting on his spoken English, Gabriel implied that how he looked, dressed, spoke, and carried himself signified that he was born and raised in the United States and not of Liberian nationality. Yet, he wanted to disrupt these misperceptions and believed that showing the Liberian flag in an autobiographical project would establish his true nationality among his peers who may have believed otherwise.

Gabriel and I searched Google Images for Liberian flags, and he selected a fist painted with the Liberian flag to establish his nationality. We talked for a few minutes about the flags' significance for Gabriel. He explained that the Liberian flag looked similar to the American flag. I asked him about what this meant and suggested that he share some history about Liberia with that slide and explain what the flag meant to him. After a brief discussion, he prompted me to take notes. Gabriel's voice recording that plays during the first slide was taken from this conversation.

Gabriel: ...so, I, are, you gonna write what the fist means?

Becky: Yeah.

Gabriel: I said it represents struggle but at the same time to stay strong; that's why it holds together like that. {typing} And to always keep fighting no matter how tough the situation is. (November 14, 2012).

I asked him to define what the fight was. "It's just war," he stated matter-of-factly. He continued. Just it can never seem to get under control. I don't know. Cuz past presidents we've had just put the country into such bad hands. It's almost like people, they're free, but they're not free at the same time. If that makes sense. Cuz people still live in fear. I don't know, in my head that makes sense, but I don't know, because peop- you're free to do what you'd like but at the same time, you're still scared because there's war going on. Like there's kids my age or younger that are killing older people. It's it just crazy; it's crazy.

While initially Gabriel had stated he "mine as well go all out" (November 14, 2012) in explaining the struggle represented by the fist to his peers, when it came to composing the slide, Gabriel deliberately excluded these notes.

***“They won’t care!”*** When I questioned his choice for removing these notes during our next work session (November 16, 2012), Gabriel responded, “They won’t care!” and laughed. I questioned, “Really?” and proceeded to name a few of his peers whom I had observed to be interested in Black politics, history, and pop culture. He explained his rationale, articulating his understanding of the DMP purpose in relation to his perceptions about his audience. He said, “Cuz the whole the whole, to me, the whole reason is to tell your story, but also you want to grab their attention and I mean they’ll listen, but I just feel like it’s not important to them, truly.” Here, he acknowledged that the expectations were for students to tell a personal story, or “your story,” but his strong sense of his peer audience’s need for entertainment with information relevant to them complicated notions about whose interests this autobiography were in fact intended to serve. Attending to his audience, Gabriel established a strong hook for his story, concurrently demonstrating his sense of the narrative genre. He continued, “That’s just a lot to say too. I don’t want to sit there and say all of that. I feel like just. (5 sec) I don’t feel like I need this.” He reiterated this idea as he deleted the information about the war in Liberia and his feelings about being separated from his mother. “See like this, they only care about this (he he he). They just won’t” and finally shared, “Ye::ah. I just feel and then, to me, I don’t care that they know about this cuz that’s for me...” Gabriel’s final statement “that’s for me,” indicated the separation he felt between himself and his peers’ values. The details he deleted from his autobiography mattered to him and, as a consequence, he would only share them with people who would care about them as well.

Gabriel indicated that select peers, his teacher, and I were people with whom he was willing to share these personal details. For instance, as he discussed his efforts to self censor, he said it was good that I was recording, as though aware of the irony that he was allowing me to

record. He additionally shared that his friend Ben, “knows a lot of, all this stuff. Cuz that’s like, that’s like the only person that I talk to” (November 16, 2012). He continued, “Most of the people in the class, I already don’t like them anyways...so I don’t want them to know. I don’t like too many people.” He laughed, and I asked, “In general?” and he responded, “I don’t know, I hope you don’t think it’s stupid. But that’s just the type of person I am.” I reassured him that I did not think that his caution was stupid. His concern for my impressions of him seemed to underscore the care that Gabriel felt for the impressions he made on people. Thus, his composition choices seemed to be made primarily in relation to his sense of how his audience had and would perceive him.

*Would have been deeper.* Gabriel distinguished between different audiences and these distinctions informed his authoring choices. For instance, he explained that if he had just created the project for his teachers (Kira and myself in this instance), it would have been different, but in creating it to show to his peers he literally constructed a different story (December 17, 2012). In the interview he had explained,

Gabriel: I don't know. Like I said, if it was just for you,

Becky: Mm hm

Gabriel: the teachers, then it coulda been, it probably would have been a more deeper.

Becky: Mm hm.

Gabriel: You know?

Becky: Mm hm.

Gabriel: I feel like that was good enough, for audience and for teacher.

While much of his peer audience discourse consisted of Gabriel’s beliefs about his peers’ insensitivity, he also expressed a desire to compose a project that his peers would want to watch.

Perhaps because he had his peers in mind, for this first slide, Gabriel had selected a soundtrack popular among his peers, the opening instrumental music to the show, ‘The Boondocks.’ ‘The Boondocks’ was an animated television satirical comedy series featuring a Black family living in a predominantly White suburb (Witherspoon, et al., 2013). While Gabriel and I never discussed why he wanted to use this particular song, Kira had shared in Black Lit that this song was her ringtone and many of the students in Black Lit had recognized it when it played in class and expressed that they found it cool that this was Dr. B’s ringtone. Thus, even as he worked to subvert a dominant belief among his peers and teachers regarding his nationality, Gabriel’s music seemed chosen in relation to what was popular among his peers. In this regard, Gabriel was perhaps establishing his normativity, his connection to his peers, even as he othered himself by indexing his nationality.

*“When you see me...you probably [think], he's a tough...But truly, I'm a sensitive guy. I wouldn't lie”.* A lone image of Gabriel’s mother appeared as the second slide. Viewers first saw the bottom of an image of a woman dressed in a pink skirt. As the next song, “Battle Scars,” by Lupe Fiasco played, the camera panned up revealing a young woman. She was holding a cellphone. There was a gold ring on the ring finger of the left hand and a gold watch or bracelet is strapped around the left wrist. She wore small earrings and smiled directly at the camera. She wore a silver necklace around her neck. Her hair was tightly braided on her head. Lupe Fiasco sang,

War heals, but it never does. That’s because you at war with love. You at war with love.

Yeah. These battle scars, don’t look like they’re fading, don’t look like they’re ever going away, they ain’t never gonna change. These battle. Love, never let a wound ruin me--



Gabriel's voice spoke the words, "Everything I do is for my mom. My mom is my heart and soul."

As previously discussed, when Gabriel selected this picture of his mother, he had called her his "heart and soul" underscoring the centrality of her role in his life and the pain he felt vibrantly that she could not share in his accomplishments given their being half a world away from one another. For his recording he said, "Everything I do is for my mom. My mom is my heart and soul." In this choice for what to record from what he had shared with me, he deleted the longer explanation he had given about the pain he felt in their physical distance.

As I discussed earlier, these were details that he had felt his peers would not care about. They also revealed his sense of his "sensitive side". For instance, in rationalizing his choices to edit the version of the story that Gabriel had shared with me, he explained,

I just don't care for them to know. That's just how I feel like. Because we are going to do this, present is, and it's going to be over with. They don't need to know my whole, like life story or what not. Like, I don't know. Cuz watch, when we see other people's stuff.... It's not gonna have all [of this information about people]. And this is like, this is kind of like my how do you call it? Sensitive side? (November 19, 2012).

In addition to the several reasons I discussed in an earlier section for why he did not want to share his sensitive side with his peers, here, he suggests that he did not expect his peers to share their sensitive sides, so he would not share his. In this regard, sharing of the self seemed a non-normative practice at least within his peer audience discourse.

Yet, Gabriel's choice to not share his sensitive side also correlated with his belief that others thought of him as "tough," or the opposite of sensitive. During the interview Gabriel expounded on this idea.

Gabriel: Like when you see me like with, you probably oh you know, he's a tough=

Becky: =He he he.

Gabriel: =person, but I'm truly, truly, I'm really, I'm a really sensitive person.

Becky: Yeah.

Gabriel: Like, I'm a sensitive guy. I wouldn't lie. (December 17, 2012).

Here, Gabriel demonstrated his belief that most people read his subjectivity through a masculine discourse. He implied that his general demeanor signified his toughness. Yet how he believed other people saw him conflicted with his own sense of self, wherein he described himself as “a sensitive person.” In reassuring me he would not lie, he underscored the deep-seated notion that his masculinity overpowered his sensitive self in his performed identity and the only way to disrupt this discourse was through his own self-revelation. Gabriel kept this side of himself hidden from most people. He explained, “it takes a lot for me to open up. Like truly, (laughter), like not too many people have seen me cry” (December 17, 2012). Here, crying would signal his sensitive and arguably feminine side, as it seemed to be in conflict with his masculinity, indexed by his toughness. In other words, he seemed to believe to understand crying as being in conflict with his peers’ false and seemingly gendered assumptions of his tough demeanor and recognized that I might not believe his claim to a sensitive side on account of this incongruence.

At a different point in the interview, he engaged a similar gendered discourse in differentiating between his parent’s and his own emotions in relation to their separation. He explained, “dad, he's a man, so you know. I know he can tough it out too, but my mom, that's like, everything I do is for her and through, like, everything is just for her {typing} (November 14, 2012). Discursively, Gabriel aligned his emotions with his father, a man who could “tough it out too.” Yet, while still signaling that he would expect a mother to not have the same toughness,

as indicated through the words “but my mom,” he seemed to also be aligning his emotions with his mothers’. This suggests that his sense of himself did not adhere to the gender dichotomies all the while recognizing even as he recognized that as a man he was perceived as tough and was expected to be toughing it out. Gabriel’s agency to openly subvert a normative gender discourse seemed to be suppressed within the classroom context via his assumptions about the peer audience and the gender policing he implies would result.

However, even with his editing, the frame of Gabriel’s mother was perhaps the most emotionally revealing and arguably agentic in his DMP. Gabriel seemed to construct this slide from a position of attending to the emotions he associated with memories of his mother. Gabriel instantly knew that he wanted to play the song, “Battle Scars,” while her image played on the screen. We listened to the song together. As Lupe Fiasco sang, “...These battle scars don’t look like their fading, don’t look like they’re ever going away—” Gabriel said, “See right there that part.” We stopped the music and he continued, “Like what he said, like even though all of these things I’m doing like he said, it’s almost like the sadness is not going away {typing} because I’m no closer to my mom than what I was when I left her, you know?” Tears had formed in my eyes. “I’m so sorry” I said, and “you’re making me sad!” He laughed and said, “I don’t really talk about this that much” (November 14, 2012). I thanked him and he continued talking about the pain of being separated from his mother.

In response to my reaction and in further explaining why he edited out the explanation he originally gave me about his mother, Gabriel expressed that he did not want to invite people’s sympathies or pity with his DMP. He said, “I don’t want to be looked at like [I’m] this sad kid walking around.” He continued, “I don’t want my whole presentation to be like this, this sad story. Like there is no happiness in my life” (November 19, 2012). While the coupling of the

image with the song and Gabriel's explanation of what his mother meant to him triggered my melancholy tears, Gabriel believed that his peers would not react as I had, nor did he wish to invite that reaction. However, he acted on his sense of his peers' response by editing words, not image or music. Thus, he seemed to ascribe words with more power to affect an audience than images or music.

***“...you might see a person smiling so big in a picture. But yet, you might not know, like [what's] behind that smile.”*** In our interview, I had asked Gabriel whether he felt he had represented his “true self” in his DMP. Gabriel began, “...pictures can only tell so much. Because you could put a lot of pictures and people might see your pictures, and they won't really understand. Ok, what's the purpose of this picture?...”

Becky: Mm hm. So do you think that like, do pictures say something that words can't? Or do pictures say the same thing?

Gabriel: Pictures say le--; I think they tell you less. Words can tell you so much more than pictures can because you can see a lot of pictures and not understand that person, like you might see a person smiling so big in a picture. But yet, you might not know, like behind that smile. What's going on behind that smile? Like they might be behind that smile, there might be a sad person, something deeper. (December 17, 2012).

By his rationale, “words can tell you so much more than pictures can,” words were necessary to contextualize how images should be read. In the absence of words, the pictured people's smiles would signal happiness and therefore prevent his audience from detecting the “something deeper” he, the author, associated with these images. Editing the words, then, served to mitigate the risk of sharing the image of his mother with his peers.

Gabriel also seemed to be discounting the combined effect coupling images with music could have on an audience. When we had discussed the potential affect that music might have on shifting people's understandings about the author, Gabriel had laughed at my suggestion that a song could do such a thing saying, "It's going to stay the same no matter what"; yet, he reflected, "People might not expect me to use Battle Scars...that's a song they might not expect" (November 27, 2012). As I discuss later in this chapter, Gabriel's sense of the impact of music choice on emotive responses to others' narratives shifted over the course of the DMP project, as he watched his peers' projects.

*"I been away from my parents since, I was seven years old."* Following the slide of his mother, Gabriel included a picture of his parents. They looked happy and lighthearted. Gabriel's dad looked directly at the camera, smiling. He wore a light pink button down shirt and a silver watch on his left wrist. Gabriel's mother sat by his side, and looked off camera with a slight smile on her face. She was wearing a light pink blouse with half sleeves and held a carton in her hands. Behind the couple is an egg-shell colored stucco wall and a window or doorframe with black coloring where the glass would otherwise be. Lupe Fiasco sang,

But I feel like ruin's wooing me. Arrow holes that never close from Cupid on a shooting spree. Feelin' stupid cause I know it ain't no you and me. But when you're trying to beat the odds up been trying to keep your nods up know that you should know and let her go.

In our interview, Gabriel alluded to this image as he again discussed the limitations of image for revealing personal information about the author.

Cuz, like, like the pictures of my parents. I mean, some people that I tell that my parents are not with me, they probably know that...but other people that really don't know me

like that, they see the pictures, they won't really think any differently. They'll just say, oh, those are pictures of his parents. That's it. They won't know oh, he's been away from his parents for this long or stuff like that. (December 17, 2012).

Given his assumption that his audience's understandings of what these pictures meant to him was predicated on what he had elected to share with them, he suggests that he expects his peers to default to a normative reading of his subjectivity. He expected that those he kept in ignorance about his personal life would read the significance of this image through a heteronormative family discourse and would think, "oh, those are pictures of his parents." The preceding image established the woman as his mother given his spoken words, so through a heteronormative discourse within the context of an autobiographical story, this man would likely be Gabriel's father, and any deviation from that discourse would demand further explanation. Gabriel and his father also shared similar facial features and skin tone, likely serving as further signals that this man was his biological father.

His explanation of his assumptions of how his peers would read the image further demonstrated that he believed that the music surrounding the image would give away his emotions or information about his parents. As the image is displayed, Lupe Fiasco continued to sing of fruitlessly holding onto lost love:

But I feel like ruin's wooing me. Arrow holes that never close from Cupid on a shooting spree. Feeling stupid cause I know it ain't no you and me. But when you're trying to beat the odds up been trying to keep your nods up know that you should know and let her go.

Despite knowing that he needed to move on from his lover, the song's protagonist could not give up hope, singing, "when you're trying to beat the odds." Gabriel seemed to believe that his peers

would preference a normative discourse rather than read the semiotic re-signification emergent through these modal pairings. Gabriel had explained that the song resonated with his feelings about his mother because “I’m no closer to my mom than what I was when I left her, you know?” (November 14, 2012). Perhaps the lyrics, “Arrow holes that never close from Cupid on a shooting spree” described his heart break across the distance, but he never seemed to indicate that he felt foolish for holding onto hope as the lyrics, “Feeling stupid cause I know it ain’t no you and me” might suggest. Rather, he had expressed that he just wanted to make sure to make the sacrifice worth the pain it has caused him and his mother. He had explained, “I mean I do it, I do what I do because I feel like I have to to make her proud also, by her sending us here {typing}. I don’t want it to be a waste, you know?” (November 14, 2012).

Gabriel’s peer audience discourse also implicitly discounted the significance of the sequential ordering of Gabriel’s slides. While he had edited the details of the original story he had shared with me about himself, he did not change the plot sequence. Much in the way a similar map functions in the film, *Sleepless in Seattle*, that Lupe Fiasco references in these song lyrics, Gabriel included a moving globe while playing Lupe Fiasco’s song to make visible the journey he had traveled from Liberia to Colorado. Including this globe coincided with Gabriel’s original intentions of establishing his Liberian nationality among his peer audience.

He started with selecting a red dot in Western Africa that he labeled Liberia. The red line followed the curved lines of the earth across the Atlantic to New York, marked by another red dot and the words, New York. As the globe rotated, a new red line traced across the curve of the globe to a dot marked in the current state where he lived and stopped. As the globe rotated, Lupe Fiasco sang.

...But the fear of the unknown. Holding another lover's phone sends you back into the zone. Go, go, go. With no Tom Hanks to bring you home. Another night of fighter from the frontline with a poem. Trying to write yourself a rifle. Maybe sharpen up a song. To fight the tanks and drones of you being alone. I wish I never looked, I wish I never touched. I wish that I could stop loving you so much.

Subsequent to this image appeared a picture of wide eyed young Gabriel and his brother sitting side-by-side on a couch. Gabriel smiled at the camera; he wore a white tank top and he held a green ball in his hands. His brother looked at the camera and held his lips closed. A picture hung on the wall behind the couch and child sized small jackets hung from a wall coat rack. Lupe Fiasco sang.

Cuz I'm the only one that's trying to keep us together. When all of the signs say that I should forget her. I wish you weren't the best; the best I ever had. I wish that the good outweighed the bad. Cause it'll never be over, until you tell me it's over. These battle scars.

Gabriel was seven years old in that picture; it was taken shortly after he arrived in the United States. Seventeen year-old Gabriel had just celebrated his birthday. He marked the passing of time in relation to the number of years that had passed since he had last seen his mom. I was asking Gabriel whether he talked to his mom on the phone when he mentioned that he had just spoken to her on the phone.

Gabriel: I, I talked to her, actually Monday was my birthday, so=

Becky:= Oh, happy birthday.

Gabriel: Thanks, I just turned seventeen. So

Becky: Cool



Gabriel: (he he) yeah. So I mean. I been, I been away from my parents since, I was seven years old.

Becky: Whoah.

It was in this conversation that Gabriel also told me about his relationship with his younger brother.

Gabriel: And my brother who's gonna be turning sixteen here soon. Well, not soon.

Becky: Does he go [to Regional High]?

Gabriel: Yeah, he goes here too. Basically, I had to like be a father but not, like, I was a father for my brother you know?

Becky: Mm hm.

Gabriel: But at a young age. I guess. So, I don't know.

Here Gabriel recognized another way that his parent's decision had impacted his life. I asked him what the significance of being positioned in that role was for him.

Becky: So what does that mean to you? Like what has that been like?

Gabriel: It's been hard, but at the same time, it kinda made me into a stronger person.

{typing} Because now I know like, if I can get through that at such a young age, as I get older, there's nothing really I feel like that can stop me from doing what I want to do.

{typing}.

This conversation was the only time that Gabriel engaged a survivor discourse in relaying that he felt unstoppable after living through what he had in his early years. In this conversation, Gabriel implied that his childhood had been cut short as he had to assume a father figure role for his brother at an early age. As I showed earlier, Gabriel deleted the content of this entire conversation from the notes that informed his final DMP.

Each image Gabriel selected for his DMP showed him smiling and elicited good-hearted laughter and comments about his cuteness from his peers when he played his DMP for the class during presentation week (FN: December 11, 2012). The next two images appeared to be school pictures of young Gabriel. In the first of the two, Gabriel stood against a rock with foliage in the backdrop. His arms were crossed and he smiled broadly at the camera. He appeared to be around ten or eleven years old. The project transitioned to a younger version of Gabriel posing against a blue background for what appeared to be a class picture. His broad smile revealed missing front teeth. As these images played across the screen ‘Battle Scars’ continued to play, and Lupe Fiasco sang the lyrics included below.

Don’t look like they’re fading. Don’t look like they’re ever going away. They ain’t never gonna change. These battle scars don’t look like they’re fading. Don’t look like they’re ever going away. They ain’t never gonna change. These battle. They just leave them. And I hope you never come back. Shouldn’t have happened but you said it. Shouldn’t have happened but you let it. Now you’re down on the ground screaming ‘medic.’

Given Gabriel’s apparent age in the pictures and the way in which he had organized his DMP chronologically in terms of how the events of his life had unfolded in relation to his immigration to the United States, these images were likely taken shortly after Gabriel arrived to the United States. The lyrics playing as these slides displayed on the screen signaled the pain Gabriel associated with these memories of first leaving his mother. As previously discussed, Gabriel selected this song because of how he could relate to the persistent pain resonant in the words. In this respect, including these images of himself while paired with the lyrics, “These battle scars don’t look like they’re fading. Don’t look like they’re ever going away” illustrated the depth of

Gabriel's painful and melancholy emotions, which he associated with being separated from his mother.

Although we did not discuss the significance of these images specifically, his comments, shared above, that an audience can be kept distant from the idea that behind broad smiles there might be "a sad person" who felt "something deeper," implied that these images were chosen with that axiom in mind. In other words, his other comments in reflecting on his process suggest that the choices for self representation were made in relation to the peer audience discourse that maintained that audience members would understand that Gabriel had lived a happy childhood as his smiles in these photographs would indicate. Including smiling images of himself further coincided with Gabriel's expressed desire to demonstrate that he did have happiness in his life. Yet, he associated sadness with the images of his mother, and the subsequent years of separation from her; thus, these seemingly conflicting tones between music and image illustrated how Gabriel's choices were reflections of how he was negotiating between audiences, him being among that audience.

*"I don't know how people would look at it like oh he's using a song by a girl..."* Gabriel decided to change the music for the second half of his DMP. He relayed that 'Battle Scars' fit the mood he wanted to set, saying "Yeah this song is matching up with everything pretty good [with the pictures]" (November 19, 2014). But, he wanted to change the mood later in the DMP. He explained, "I haven't figured out what song I want to use. Because I don't really know what the mood I want to set with the pictures. So it's kind of like. I don't, I don't just want to put-" "Like any old music?" I interrupted. "Yeah," Gabriel agreed (November 19, 2014). I asked him what kind of mood he wanted to set in the first part of his DMP, and he responded, "The first, the first part is pretty, the, the mood is pretty good with the song. Now it's just like, because I mean, most

of these pictures now is gonna be mine” (November 14, 2015). Here, Gabriel implied that he had wanted to express a sad, and heartbroken tone at the start of his DMP. His song choice for the second half of the DMP coincided with his expressed desire to show the happiness he experienced in his life.

After much deliberation, Gabriel decided to play a popular song at the time, Rhianna’s ‘Diamond in the Sky.’ Gabriel initially expressed surprise at how cumbersome selecting music was, as he perseverated over all the choices running through his head. He shared, “I thought picking music was gonna be easy, but it’s not!” (November 19, 2012). I asked him if he wanted a happy tone, and he said, yes. I asked him what music he listened to when he was happy. He shared, “the songs I listen to are dumb. But I like em’. Like Two Chainz and stuff like that.” I reminded him that this was his movie; he should include what he liked, and he laughed and responded, “If you heard the song you’d be like, what?” We laughed together and he continued, “It’s called crack,” still laughing. Here, in calling the music he liked “dumb” he seemed to be recognizing that while crack was a song that made him feel energized and happy, the lyrics were not likely to have that same effect on other audience members, like myself. We listened to the first few lines together, as 2 Chainz rapped,

Started from the trap now I rap.

No matter where I’m at I got crack.

Started from the trap, now I rap.

No matter where I’m at, I got crack.

After we listened to the lyrics and laughed together, Gabriel asked, “You see why I don’t want to use it? That’s actually my game song. I play it before every game” (November 19, 2015). As the song continued to play, we laughed together at the lyric, “Car so big it got a stripper pole.”

Gabriel commented, “Yeah, you see why I can't use it?” Gabriel’s response further demonstrated his awareness and attentiveness to his perception of his diverse audience’s values, and perhaps specifically the “teacher” audience members like myself and Kira.

His sensitivity to song lyrics in relation to his perceived audience were further implied in his turn to instrumental music. Gabriel briefly considered using instrumental music from the one “White” band he admittedly liked, but none of these songs seemed to fit the tone he wanted to achieve. Thus, while he had an awareness of needing to select music that was audience appropriate, he continued to search for music that he enjoyed.

After thinking a moment, Gabriel discussed another song he had been considering.

Gabriel: You know that song I was thinking. But, it's by a girl, (he he), but you know, Diamonds, I don't know how people would look at it like oh he's using a song by a girl, or what the heck? Like.

Becky: Well, {I search for the song and it started playing}

Gabriel: Yeah.

Becky: I don't know, you're man enough to have a girl's song.

Gabriel: Shine bright like a diamond, but it's by a girl.

Becky: So what?

Gabriel: See I like that song; the lyrics is really good.

Becky: Well, we can just download it and see how it feels.

Gabriel: I can tell my girlfriend to download it for me (laughter).

Gabriel began this conversation by making note of a sexist value system specific to the peer audience discourse. His initial hesitation about the potential inappropriateness of this song was predicated on his notion that his peers might uphold rigid gender norms around song

selection. My reading of his hesitation at the time was that he feared his masculinity might be called into question in using this song, and I responded accordingly in telling him that I expected that his masculinity would remain unchallenged should he include that song, which reinforced the gender and hetero normative discourses Gabriel was negotiating as he considered what it meant for him to select a “song by a girl”. Ultimately, Gabriel decided to keep this song demonstrating his own movement to disrupting dominant gender norms specific to song selection (December 4, 2012).

Rihanna’s song, “Diamonds” played over the next two images of present day seventeen year-old Gabriel. His girlfriend’s father was a professional photographer and had taken the couple’s senior pictures. The first photograph included Gabriel and his girlfriend; the happy couple smiled at the camera. The girl held her arms lovingly around Gabriel’s torso. Rihanna sang, “Shine bright like a diamond. Shine bright like a diamond.”

The next image was a picture of Gabriel sitting in front of a tree. He wore a light pink shirt, a diamond stud in each ear, and he smiled directly at the camera. Rhianna sang, “Find light in a beautiful sea. I choose to be happy. You and I, you and I.” The song lyrics coupled with the photograph of Gabriel and his girlfriend and Gabriel smiling alone worked to establish the happy tone that Gabriel had wanted to achieve.

*I have like my football personality and then just Gabriel. And Gabriel is actually sensitive.* The four remaining images were of Gabriel posing as a football player. On November 27<sup>th</sup>, in one of our later work sessions, Gabriel and I looked at hundreds of professional photographs posted on the photographer’s company website that had been taken of him over the past football season. As Gabriel scrolled, he commented that there were so many pictures. I asked him if there was a particular idea that he wanted to convey with his football images. At

this point, Gabriel had become accustomed to me asking him questions throughout the process, and as though poking fun at my quest to find meaning in all of these choices, when I asked, “like what’s the idea that you want to convey with the picture?” Gabriel laughed, “I don’t know. That I play football! (short bursts of laughter). I have no clue” (November 27, 2012).

When Gabriel was first planning out his DMP in mid November (November 14, 2012) he had described football as an avenue to college. I had asked him about what playing football meant for him and he explained, “Yeah, that’s a that’s another way for me to get to college. I mean I have the grades, but why not do something you love doing while you get your education?” Here, he described playing football as his passion and recognized that he could enter college on academic merit, implying that some people leveraged athleticism alone to get into college. As I discussed early in this chapter, he concurrently recognized the importance of pursuing an alternative career path, sharing that he was interested in Sports Medicine because “you still get to be around athletes...that you once was.” Knowing that “there’s a lot of injuries” in football from personal experience, Gabriel wanted “to be able to help other athletes who are coming up...” while “still [staying] around...the game of football” (November 14, 2012). Gabriel articulated sophisticated future college plans, which included recognition that he would not play football indefinitely; rather the game was a means to getting his education. These were among the recorded notes from this conversation for Gabriel to use in his DMP that he elected to leave out.

As Gabriel deleted my notes from this conversation about his college plans he drew on peer audience discourse to rationalize his choices, emphasizing, as I discussed earlier, that “They won’t care about this” and “I don’t care if they know about this, because that’s for me. I don’t want to sit there and tell them my whole life plan of what I want to do.”(November 19, 2012). Rather than viewing the DMP as an opportunity to subvert a dominant discourse about his

subjectivity, Gabriel engaged the peer audience discourse to rationalize his sense of the salience and inalterability of this discourse. Gabriel illustrated his assumptions that his peers did not value knowing more about Gabriel the person and in effect, he preferred to maintain that separation in calling his peers “just classmates” he “could care less” about.

By including football as the culminating slides in his DMP, in combination with his description of who he felt he was and who he felt he was perceived to be, Gabriel delineated two discourses to describe himself. His “football personality” aligned with the peer audience discourse. Gabriel believed that people knew him only as a football player, and therefore only as tough and mean. Yet, he recognized himself as a multidimensional person who could be both a tough football player and a sensitive guy.

Seeing the DMP as a potential opportunity for Gabriel to subvert a dominant discourse about his salient school football identity (FN, November 27, 2012), I asked Gabriel to consider how he might strategically select images to proffer an identity storyline that might resonate more closely to his sense of self. I invited him to consider how an image could convey a storyline about him as a football player, and suggested that different images would relay varying narratives about him depending on what the image had captured. Gabriel seemed to hold a singular view of football, responding, “I mean it’s aggressive. It’s just nasty” (November 27, 2012). In this respect, while Gabriel held a complex understanding of his subjectivities, he seemed to view his peer’s perceptions of him as unalterable. Despite his commentary, only one of the four pictures Gabriel selected for his DMP indexed a dominant discourse about football players.

The first image signifying football was a professional photograph of seventeen year-old Gabriel. In the photograph, he wore a black vest over white shirt. He clutched a football with two



hands at chest level. A gold chain necklace hung around his neck. He tilted his head to the right, and he smiled. A logo for the photographer's company was inscribed horizontally on the picture indicating the photographer's company. Rhianna sang, "You're a shooting star I see, a vision of ecstasy. When you hold me, I'm alive. We're like diamonds in the sky. I knew that—".

In selecting photographs for the football slides, Gabriel had expressed a desire to remain humble. He had asked me whether I (the digital storytelling "expert") thought he needed more pictures, and I said, "You're the storyteller." He responded, "Yeah, it, it's about me, but I don't want everybody to be like dang, every picture, you just love yourself. You just have too many" (November 27, 2012). Thus, while Rihanna's lyrics, "You're a shooting star I see, a vision of ecstasy" might have been interpreted as Gabriel having a self-inflated ego. Gabriel's sensitivity to that potential occurrence mitigates such a reading of these modal pairings. His sensitivity to how his choices might be interpreted illustrated the influence his sense of audience had on his composition process. His sensitivity was heightened in relation to his articulated awareness that there were already hundreds of publically accessible images of him playing football (November 27, 2012). To which I had joked that there was no shortage of images of Gabriel if people wanted to find more.

Gabriel included action shots for the next two images. The camera panned up revealing Gabriel standing on the field, dressed in Regional's purple and white uniform. He stood leaning forward with one hand on each knee. He wore black tape around his wrists. His eyes were squinted. Rihanna sang, "I knew that we been from one—" The music volume lowered and Gabriel's voice said, "I love football but it doesn't define who I am as a person." Rihanna's voice resumed, "At first sight I felt energy of sun rays. I saw the life inside your eyes. So shine."

A close up of Gabriel's arm pressed hard against an opposing player's helmet filled the subsequent screen. As the camera panned out, a full body image of Gabriel dressed in uniform, showing the number 28, and an opposing player, dressed in a white jersey with black lettering came into focus. Gabriel clutched a football close to his body as he leaned forward as though captured in a forward running motion. Indistinguishable letters imprinted the photograph signaling that this image had been taken among the photos on the photographer's website. Rihanna continued singing, "So shine bright tonight, you and I. We're beautiful like diamonds in the sky. Eye to eye, so alive. We're beautiful like diamonds in the sky."

As Gabriel and I were looking over the pictures on the photograph company website (November 27, 2012) he noticed two images that were markedly different than others on the site. These pictures were of his number one fans, his cousins standing in the stands at one of his recent games. When he noticed them, he laughed and commented, "That's me right there. (Short bursts of laughter) I didn't know that was on there. Wow, nice. That's pretty crazy." He explained what he meant, "It's like weird, but I like it cuz right in the back, that's my flag right there. Those are my cousins holding it cuz it's just crazy how it happened like that. That's why I like that picture."

Gabriel included both pictures from the website that included his cousins. In the first, his cousins were in the far backdrop and not immediately recognizable. In the foreground Gabriel sat on a bench on the football field next to two of his teammates. A cheerleader danced behind them. The photographer had captured Gabriel lifting his jersey and looking down; he appeared to be holding something in his hands. His teammates looked up and smiled at the camera. The camera panned to the left top corner of the photograph. As the camera panned, two figures holding a Liberian flag came into view.

Perhaps in anticipation that his peers would miss the significance of the subsequent image, the project transitioned to a close up photograph of Gabriel's cousins. The Liberian flag hung over the railing that the men were resting their arms on. Rhianna sang. Shine bright like a diamond. Shine bright like a diamond. Shine bright like a diamond. We're beautiful like diamonds in the sky. Palms rise to the universe. As we moonshine and molly. Feel the warmth. We'll never die. We're like diamonds in the sky.

Gabriel momentarily considered whether he should include more pictures. He first looked to me for advice. He asked, "Do you think I need more pictures?" I responded, "I don't think I can tell you that." He laughed and said, "You're like the expert." I retorted, "You're the storyteller!" Despite this being Gabriel's story, he attempted to position me as the "expert" who should be making a final decision about when and how to conclude his project. Refusing that positioning, I tried to position him as the expert of his own story. In response he turned to the peer audience discourse saying, "Yeah, it, it's about me, but I don't want everybody to be like dang, every picture, you just love yourself. You just have too many." Gabriel's sensitivity to his peer audiences' perceptions of him overwhelmed his decision making processes so much so that he rationalized his choices about the number of pictures of himself he should include by way of mitigating anticipated backlash. Yet, Gabriel had also previously described himself as a private person, and he concluded, "Cuz, I feel like in my head the whole time I thought of football pictures these are the only pictures I felt like I needed to use" (November 27, 2012). Thus, he weighed both the peer audience discourse and a cultural discourse in his conservative approach to including self-portraits. At this point I offered my opinion agreeing that these were apropos images to conclude with, as they brought his DMP full circle. I explained, "Like you start with

your flag...One image of your flag and then you have a very different of the same flag again.” To which Gabriel responded, “I didn’t notice, yeah, that’s true” (November 27, 2012).

While Gabriel and I discussed that this image rounded the story out well, the story seems incomplete. Gabriel had plans to attend college and was being actively recruited. He also knew what he wanted to major in and why. These pieces of his future remained missing from his project because he had expressed defensively that he did not want to share this information with his peers. It seemed to be for his mother alone, and he would share with people whom he felt needed to know. Gabriel’s engaged the peer audience discourse, a discourse that primarily described an uncaring, selfish, vindictive, and possibly sexist audience. He seemed to believe that most people knew him as, “football Gabriel” rather than sensitive Gabriel (December 17, 2012). The peer audience discourse included patriarchal, heteronormative, ideologies. Gabriel seemed to use his peer audience discourse to challenge or undermine his willingness to share what could be interpreted as more non-normative, feminist discourse of challenging the dichotomies through which he felt interpreted by classmates. This suggests the importance of deconstructing oppressive discourses while providing youth and educators with the tools to contend with their roles in perpetuating these belief systems.

This chapter illustrates Gabriel’s negotiations between two senses of himself—to tell a story that was admittedly about him, but were in his words, for others’ viewing. Throughout his process, he negotiated between what he was and was not willing to share of his life and the emotions and motivations he associated with his life narrative and the important people in his life. Further, as he constructed his self-representation he additionally weighed how his choices that he felt would violate his peer’s perception of him and whether he was willing to take what he framed as a risk to violate social norms specific to gender construction. Meanwhile, he expressed

doubt that his peer's racial sense of him as a football player was unalterable. Thus, this chapter reflects the complexities of how perceptions of peer audience function for students contending with school identities when composing identity-saturated projects within schools.

## CONCLUSION

The primary aim of this dissertation study has been to understand how non-dominant youth negotiate subjectivity within the school context when composing digital autobiographies. Using feminist poststructural and critical discourse analytical methods, I analyzed multimodal discourse data for three African American young men over the course of a semester across school spaces. Through the three ethnographic case studies, I present findings derived from my close readings of student digital compositions that were importantly informed by additional data drawn from students' interactions during their African American Literature class, their talk and interactions while authoring their digital autobiographies, and in their reflections following showing their narratives in class. In the preceding chapters focused on each of the students, I shared my analysis of how each young man crafted his DMP in relation to larger discourses of race, gender, class, and definitions of success in school and school literacies. Situated within those larger discourses, the young men navigated what it means to navigate the personal and public in relation to a school project focused on sharing the "self" with an audience of peers and teachers, as well as multiple subjectivities and histories within and outside of school. In this chapter, I zoom out further from the three case studies to discuss three salient themes from the case studies specific to the relationships I find between agentic authorship, audience discourse, and the affordances of multiliteracies for repositioning student literacies in the school context. I then discuss implications for practice.

### **Learning from Darius, Malcolm, and Gabriel: Themes Across Cases**

**Agentic affordances.** Hull and Katz (2006) have written at length about the agentic affordances of digital storytelling for marginalized youth. Their framing of agency asserts that, "individuals and groups can learn to fashion identities as competent actors in the world able to

influence the direction and course of their own lives.” They continue, “Our sense of self-determination at any given moment is tempered by the constraints of specific social, cultural, and historical contexts” that profoundly shape the experiences of people who are “members of oppressed or disadvantaged groups.” Hull and Katz (2006) see in digital composition unique opportunities for authors to leverage semiotic means to “develop agentic selves” (p.47). Implied within this framing is a sense that agency involves authoring empowered self-representations that counter oppressive discourses that marginalized people contend with. Darius’ narrative illustrates this form of agency in how he drew on the lyrics of hip-hop artists and philosophical thinkers who engaged socially critical discourses specific to racial oppression in the United States. Both Darius and Malcolm saw elements of their own life stories in the song lyrics they selected for their DMPs specific to racialized struggles endured by Black males in the United States. Both articulated sophisticated awareness of the impact of racism in how it formed interlocking systems of oppression. Each framed his narrative in tandem with a hero’s journey, American Dream storyline where each overcame life struggles and was well on his path to realizing a dream. Gabriel’s DMP did not reflect his dreams of making a better life for himself and his family; although he certainly expressed how his personal life narrative paralleled an American Dream storyline of an immigrant child who had moved to the United States for a better life. His approach to digital storytelling seemed more related to his desire to remain a good student and compose a digital story that met the assignment requirements so that he could earn a good grade. Yet, his dream was to reunite with his mother. Gabriel and I discussed how his struggle to live without a mother in his daily life could be understood as a consequence of oppressive forces; he focused on his personal experience in living that consequence.

Speaking to the affordances of digital media serving as a tool for agentic self-representation Jones (2011) discusses how skateboarders draw on skateboard culture and edit videos towards materializing idealized future selves. Through editing, he argues, skateboarders can construct representations of themselves as though they have become the professional skateboarders they were planning to be. While Malcolm similarly materialized his future rap star self in his DMP struggled to believe in the feasibility that he might actually achieve the constructed ideal reflected in his digital media project, despite his talents as an artist and a poet. Darius' spoken discourse reflected that he had a sense that he was on his way to achieving his dreams, but he seemed to be haunted by a past life he wished to discard. Rather than presenting his ideal future self, Darius left open possibilities in labeling the end sections, "When Dreams started coming true" coupled with his sign off through which he implied he had not yet reached his dreams.

Gabriel's DMP did not reflect or anticipate his idealized future; rather he ended with photos of himself in present day.

In each case, the authors discussed how their composition choices were made with the intention of managing an audience discourse.

**Self-Perception and Audience Discourse.** Past research on the impact awareness of audience has on authoring practices has demonstrated direct linkages between author's perceptions of audience member's cultural, or home knowledge (DeGennero, 2008; Hull & Nelson, 2008). Composing digital autobiographies positioned Darius, Malcolm, and Gabriel as authors of their own life narratives; yet, as Gabriel astutely noted, while the story was about him, it was made for his peer audience. The autobiographical genre forced a focus on the self. Yet, this awareness of audience shaped each author's approach to composing a digital product for



public consumption. A post structural reading reveals how each student's perception of audience compromised his agency, or his abilities to subvert oppressive discourse. Moreover, each seemed to take up local oppressive discourses in his articulation of his subjectivity. For instance, as Malcolm constructed his digital self representation as a rap star and signaled his latent success, he lamented about his failing grades, vacillated when he talked about his future plans, and expressed his desire to escape his present reality on several occasions. Darius seemed to be held back by his past life that he too wished to escape but seemed to be anchored into a shameful past he knew was a normative experience for Black males resulting from systemic racism and pervasive poverty and single parent households in African American and Black dominant geographical communities. While Gabriel struggled to embrace his sensitive side, a move he believed would compromise the masculinity he perceived he was expected to perform in school and life. It was also for this reason that he believed he should not embrace the sadness he felt in being estranged for his mother. Men were supposed to tough it out while the women mourned.

At the same time, each intended to engage discursive narratives to counter pervasive school identity discourses, and local manifestations of racist and sexist global discourse. For instance, Darius and Gabriel perceived that people viewed them as mean football players, while they described themselves as sensitive. In approaching his DMP construction, Darius expressed that he did not want to include football pictures in his digital media project, and that he knew his peers would expect him to include them. Darius inadvertently reified his school identity as a mean football player with the inclusion of images of himself looking violent and aggressive on the football field, but he presented these images as evidence of his culminating dreams. However, he did not include in this an explanation that football was his pathway to an education. Whereas, Gabriel included one image of himself in action on the football field, while the other pictures

functioned to establish his nationality and he included his voice expressing that football did not define him. Despite his discourse suggesting that he had little faith in himself to achieve success, Malcolm, astutely aware of his failure school identity constructed a counter narrative of himself as a success in his DMP. He also associated football with how he expressed his achieved dreams, and his future. Although the image he included of football included children, so what he intended by dreams was unclear. Malcolm further complicated the notion of future success by expressing that achieving success meant keeping a clear self-determination in the face of life threatening obstacles and leverage your community resources to achieve your dreams.

***Audience.*** Each case reflected the students' perception of audience and how this perception shaped how and what he told of himself in his digital media project. Their audience perception also revealed barriers to their own abilities to construct their subjectivities agentically, or to complexly reject taking on oppressive discourses in their own self-constructions. Darius feared judgment for the life he lived and he did not blame people for judging him; he wished to completely erase his past; yet, he felt compelled to tell me about it. Malcolm struggled to reject a failure label he felt criminalized in his school, and was ostracized from his church and family community. He took ownership over his actions and was looking for help. Gabriel resisted openly characterizing associating himself with feminine characteristics such as being sensitive; yet, he overcame his reservations in including a "girl" song in his DMP that he felt his peers might be surprised by. Elements of these aspects appeared in each student's narratives, but not so visibly that anyone thought his vulnerabilities would be evident to his peer audience.

**Locating School Literacies in Multiliteracies.** Presenting facets of literacy as disparate skill-sets fails to account for how language functions in practice (Moje & Speyer, 2008) and endorses a systematic erasure of cultural differences. These conditions present a special

challenge to educational researchers interested in maintaining the integrity of learning experiences grounded in diverse practices (Gee, 1989). Under these challenging conditions, digital storytelling has arisen as a potential curricular conduit between new and mainstream literacy practices. Scholars have widely argued that digital storytelling affords students opportunities to demonstrate academic and multiliteracy aptitude (Gutiérrez et al., 2011; Ranker, 2007). Moreover, sociocultural literacy scholars have importantly asserted that digital storytelling transgresses other school norms by circumventing dichotomies between home and school (Gutiérrez et al., 2011; Vasudevan, Schultz, & Bateman, 2010). Malcolm, Darius, and Gabriel's approaches to digital storytelling and their products build on these findings. While Malcolm struggled to understand and relate to many of the novels and short stories students read in African American literature, he had no trouble locating his personal narrative in music or composing new storylines in his poetry, which he threaded through his project. Similarly, Darius found a resonant storyline in the song he opened his digital media project with and purposefully organized his project thematically and complicated a familiar coming of age plot structure with a childhood innocence and hero narrative storylines all against the backdrop of a socio-critical discourse, concurrently demonstrating an example of digital storytelling as critical literacy (Garcia, Mirra, Morrell, Martinez, & Scorza, 2015; Nixon, 2008).

Gabriel understood the DMP as an opportunity to challenge what might be called a home school divide between how he understood himself as a Liberian national, and his sense that within the school context, people saw him as African American. In this regard, the DMP was his opportunity to establish his nationality within the school context. Gabriel performed well by standard literacy measures and he believed that words were much more expressive than pictures. In reflecting upon the digital storytelling composition process, Gabriel admitted that music

offered opportunities for students to know one another emotively as they could locate one another in music. While he did not harness that mindset until after he had completed his DMP, he reflected that should he compose another digital story in the future he would apply this realization towards future song selection.

### **Implications for Practice**

Darius, Malcolm, and Gabriel's DMPs show how Digital Storytelling is, indeed, a multiliteracy practice with the potential to powerfully reframe school literacy and students as literate within school. This multiliteracy practice can be used as a tool wherein students can demonstrate aptitude with print and multiliteracy practices while accessing and negotiating multiple subjectivity discourses. In this section, I turn to some of the specific implications of this study for the integration of digital, multimodal narratives in English language arts classrooms. This study illustrates the important and multiple meanings embedded in the layered texts and literacies within digital stories. Each of those layers opens important opportunities for students to analyze their own textual constructions as sites of multiple subjectivities and multiple literacies.

**Music.** For instance, music and particularly Hip Hop music, played an important and complex role in each of the young men's digital stories. Students saw their storylines resonant in song lyrics. For instance, Darius used Biggie's "Juicy" to relate his life to Biggie's song protagonist. Biggie rapped about being a young Black man selling drugs on the street to support his family and getting harshly judged by his neighbors, and in another sense his geographical, racial, ethnic, and cultural community for his illicit actions. Not only did Darius see his personal narrative in "Juicy" but he also parallel his digital narrative's plot and theme with the song's. Similarly, Malcolm read his personal narrative in mainstream Hip Hop music and narrated his fictionalized life from the position of a successful rap star, and he populated his digital narrative

with his own poetry. Gabriel however, viewed music as a form of emotional expression and chose to use Rihanna's song, "Diamonds in the Sky" instead of 2 Chainz' "Crack" given his sense that his audience would find the lyrics obnoxious as did he. At the same time, he hesitated in his choice to include a "girl song." He believed that his peers might challenge the gender discrepancy between himself and the female music artist, Rihanna. Music, thus, is a potentially powerful agentic space, where teachers can engage students in conversations about the music they listen to, how it resonates with them, and their interpretations of how it helps them to understand themselves and how they interpret the ways music choices positions them in relation to their perceived audience.

*Images.* Images functioned in multiple ways for each author. For instance, Gabriel expressed that people's interpretations of selected images were easily divorced from the author's intentions when he shared that someone could be smiling in a picture but that smiling person might feel deep and hidden pain. Darius chose to select images that only reflected his happiness despite associating painful memories in his life with when he was the boy in those pictures. This choice suggests that he shared Gabriel's sense. Malcolm selected many of his images that reflected positive images of him. Each had been or was a football player at Regional High as a high school student. The Internet enabled the students to access pictures of themselves playing football via Facebook and a professional photographer's website. Darius, Malcolm, and Gabriel each associated hyper masculinity with football. Malcolm labeled a football picture of himself "Beast Mode," and Darius and Gabriel associated the words, "tough" and "nasty" with the sport. With his peer audience in mind, Gabriel reframed both his nationality and his football image in including two football related images for the purpose of returning to the Liberian flag. Darius struggled with the choice to include football images and despite not wanting to initially, he

included several images, including one of himself yelling. At the same time, he introduced the football images with the statement, “When Dreams Started Coming True” signaling his investment in football as relating to his drive to succeed in education and to gain economic stability.

***Text, Voice, and Video.*** Darius used words as labels for images and he juxtaposed images with quotations and his own words to forward critical storylines specific to family and growing up as a Black male in the United States. Darius concluded his DMP with his recorded voice and reiterated his theme in his summary statement. Darius used video to create humor. Malcolm intertwined images with words from a poem he had started in Black Lit class. His words underscored his latent success and access to the necessary components to achieve that success: strength and determination. He used video to construct himself as the embodiment of his successful future self. Gabriel felt self conscious about the masculine tenor of his voice and had to work up courage, or manliness, to record himself speaking. He spoke of his love for his mother and that football was not his entire identity. He used text to label his pictures and his interview shared that words said much more about a person than images.

From conversations on these embedded modes within digital stories, teachers can facilitate student awareness of how their subjectivity is constructed through multiple discourses, including the presence of audience discourses when crafting a narrative “self”. Music, image, video, text, and voice and how they are configured and chosen in relation to one another, thus, are the textual layers through which teachers can support students in both constructing multimodal texts and engaging in the deconstructive analysis of those texts.

Curriculum that positions students to engage critically with their peer’s and their own texts must necessarily be coupled with feminist and critical epistemologies. Kira introduced

these discourses through literature, poetry, SLAM poetry, and through her own pedagogical practice as she facilitated group discussions and spoke with students individually (in writing and face to face). Through these mediums, students interrogated normative race, gender, ability, sexuality subjectivity discourses in their written and spoken responses. Yet in writing and composition they struggled to subvert their sense of how their subjectivities were problematically formed in relation to dominant discourses.

As we invite students to discuss and locate their subjectivity in multiple discourses we must concurrently equip them with the tools to locate ingredients to compose, imagine, and recognize agentic selves. Supporting curriculum with feminist epistemologies that complexly considers multiple subjectivities in relation to activist and coalition building efforts situates students to envision powerful, resistant, and connected selves.

### **Negotiating Subjectivities, Discourses, and Literacies**

Darius, Malcolm, and Gabriel each named macro discourses pertaining to gender and race, or more specifically Black masculinity, in narrativizing their subjectivity and discussing their sense of how they were perceived by others. Each contended with oppressive discourses related to these subjectivities in their approaches to digital composition. However, each also struggled to liberate himself from the stronghold these discourses seemed to have on his sense of self in relation to how he believed others perceived him. This study centrally illustrates the necessity of attending to how subjectivities are relationally constructed through a digital storytelling project in a high school English class. These subjectivities, I found, are laden with crucial global and local power discourses. This genre lies within and reveals the important complexity beyond binaries of personal-public, empowering-disempowering, and reveals the always-constructed nature of subjectivity. In other words, this genre in ELA classrooms can be

productively engaged through, as Bronwyn Davies (2000) writes, “Deconstructive thought thus requires us to take on board contradictory thoughts and to hold them together at the same time” (p.134). As I argue, students’ navigations of those tensions in this burgeoning genre in schools must be the focus of analysis for researchers and teachers and can also be productively part of students’ engagement with this genre. Only then can we locate its affordances and constraints.



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## APPENDIX A

### DIGITAL MEDIA IDENTITY PROJECT: I AM....

1) Write your own “I am...” piece/poem/essay, etc. It can be a list, a poem, a free-write, an essay—whatever floats YOUR boat. This will help you prepare the TEXT of your project.

2) Plan out your project. It will have to include the **TEXT, VISUAL SUPPORT (images, photos, film, etc.) and MUSIC** for your production. You can do a Powerpoint, or an iMovie, or a Windows Movie Maker project, whichever you prefer, but your final project will have to include **TEXT, VISUAL & MUSIC** (Visual can include images created or found, photographs, art, film clips, interview clips—anything and everything goes). **\*YOUR PLAN IS DUE NOV. 19TH**

4) Gather your materials. Collect your images, photos, film clips, music, text, IDEAS—all of the materials and tools you need to put your project together—and make sure they are available for you to use digitally.

5) Create your masterpiece! IT WILL BE IMPORTANT TO PROOFREAD YOUR WORK—ALL TEXT INCLUDED IN YOUR FILM MUST BE WRITTEN CORRECTLY!!!

## ALL PROJECTS DUE DEC 10<sup>TH</sup>

This project is meant to be a FUN, CREATIVE exploration of your IDENTITY, and the things that have influenced and continue to influence it. You are making the project assuming a certain AUDIENCE—but you are really making it for YOU, and you will have complete control over who sees or does not see it. THE POINT is to produce a piece of digital media art that is ALL ABOUT YOU.

I can't wait to see what you extraordinary, wonderful, beautiful people come up with! :0)

## APPENDIX B

### Student Interview: Beginning of the project

1. Tell me what your story is going to be about. Why did you decide to tell this story?
2. How are you thinking you would like to tell (organize, order, language) your story? Why that way?
3. Who is the audience for your story? How do you feel about sharing your story with the class, in other words and you including or excluding information because of who you will be showing the movie to?
4. What do you think is different about this project from other course work you do in this class?
5. Is there anything else you would like me to know about regarding what we have just discussed?

### Student Interview: End of the project

1. Tell me about the process you went through to create your story. If you kept a notebook, or drafted out your ideas, tell me how that worked for you.
2. What were your goals for your digital media project? How did these goals and objectives shift throughout the process? How does the final project compare to your original plans? Why do you think/ or why did these shifts occur?
3. Many people talk about how digital storytelling allows authors to tell stories that speak to their true selves in the world. Do you feel like you were able to represent your true self through this project? What allowed/ hindered this?
4. What did you learn about yourself from the digital media project?
5. What would you have done differently if you were to create your movie again? Why is that?
6. How did people react to your story? Was there anything surprising about their reaction?

### *Other people's stories...*

1. What did you like about the stories that you watched?
2. What did you learn about someone else in this class from this project?

### *The Assignment...*

1. What do you think should absolutely be a part of the digital media assignment (ie. a certain requirement)?
2. What criteria do you think students should be graded on?
3. How can we change our approach to this assignment for future students?
4. What do you think should absolutely be a part of the digital media assignment?

## APPENDIX C

## Teacher Interview: Beginning of the project

1. What do you hope your students will learn from this project?
2. Describe your gauge of your student's literacy at this point in the year. What are your goals for them as readers, writers, English Language Arts students as we advance to the end of the year?
3. What struggles do you anticipate the students might have with the digital storytelling project? How do you plan to address these struggles?
4. What struggles do you anticipate you might have as a teacher of the digital storytelling project? How do you plan to address these struggles?
5. What presence does digital technology currently have in your class? Why is that?
6. How do you see this project meeting your goal of bringing more technology into your curriculum?
7. Is there anything else you would like me to know about what we have discussed?

## Teacher Interview: End of semester

1. Please reflect on the process of teaching students to create digital stories: what went well, what would you change, general thoughts about the project (likes/ dislikes)?
2. How was your teaching impacted by student's engagement with the project?
3. What changes (if any) did you notice in student's writing as they were working on the digital storytelling projects?
4. What observations did you make about student's attitudes towards their writing/ reading/ work in English class/ contributions in class discussions/ small group work as they were working on the project?

## APPENDIX D

Transcription Key (adapted from, Jefferson, 2004)

= Interrupting talk

:: pause in talk

: extended vowel sound

(.) short pause

↑ rise in pitch

↓ drop in pitch

[ ] overlapping talk

## APPENDIX E

## Dissertation Data Sources

	2012			
	SEPT	OCT	NOV	DEC
Audio content recordings of class discussion and small group work		X	X	X
Ongoing conversations with case study students	X	X	X	X
Audio content recordings of students talk while digital story telling			X	X
Formal interviews with students	X			X
Student print writing assignments	X	X	X	X
Informal and formal conversations with teacher	X	X	X	X
Research journal and field notes	X	X	X	X