Constructing the Self in/as Thirdspace: New Potentials for Identity Exploration in the Composition Classroom

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Spiritual Kingdom
As you look around, your impulse is to believe that you have come to the wrong place. This simple little white-walled apartment is hardly anything you would liken to a spiritual kingdom. You feel duped, like you were tricked into ordering something off of one of those infomercials. . . .

Evelyn
You see an eccentric woman of indeterminate age sitting on a motorcycle. Her feet are bare, her red toenail polish chipped. . . . Her white tank top is splattered with red mud—or is that spaghetti? Her curly hair is frizzed and tangled from riding too fast in the wind. You think you see a bindi or a small tattoo on her forehead; then you realize it's mud.

House on Paper Street
You search for the little sheet of paper on which you wrote down the address, 1123 East Paper Street. But you already know the old broken home in front of you has to be the right one. Not because it is the only house left standing on paper street surrounded by abandoned warehouses and run-down factories . . . but because the house had a heartbeat. You could hear the walls breathe and the structure pulse. By the time you reached the door, it was unmistakable, the house was alive.

The descriptions above are excerpts of identity constructions created by students in my composition classes. Rather than having students relate themselves linearly through narration, I encouraged them to construct their identities spatially in the online, virtual reality of the U-MOO. This kind of construction, what I call Thirdspace identity construction, provides students with an opportunity to explore their assumptions about what constitutes identity and to articulate the heterogeneity that characterizes their postmodern subjectivities.

Offering students opportunities to explore their postmodern subjectivities in the classroom is important because it works to challenge what cultural theorist Iris Marion Young calls a "culture of logic” that pervades identity.
construction in Western culture. Young characterizes this logic according to several traits that configure the self as something that can be "identified, counted, measured" and as something that seeks to reduce our plurality of selves to a single unifying principle in an attempt to flee from the "sensuous particulars of experience" and repress the "play of differences" that constitutes the postmodern subject (239). Exploring our subjectivities in the classroom is vital because we cannot come to fully appreciate the "difference" of others and of the broader social contexts in which we communicate until we come to appreciate and understand the heterogeneity inherent in our own selves.

Despite this, composition instructors have not done enough to counter this culture of logic in the classroom. In his book Fragments of Rationality: Postmodernity and the Subject of Composition, Lester Faigley argues that personal writing assignments common in composition primarily create selves "that achieve rationality and unity by characterizing former selves as objects for analysis—hence the emphasis on writing about past experience rather than confronting the contradictions of present experience" (129, emphasis added). This practice furthers the assumption that the self can be coherent and contained—understood and fully examined from a detached vantage point—and cancels out the prospect that the self is heterogeneous and multiplies without limit. Over a decade has passed since Faigley's book was published, though not enough has changed in the practices of teachers with regard to exploring identity in the classroom. In his 2004 book chapter "The Database and the Essay," Johndan Johnson-Eilola challenges the assumption that "[w]e understand reading and writing subjects as ongoing, contingent constructions, never completely stable or whole. In short, we're at ease with postmodernism" (199). In fact, Johnson-Eiola argues,

> While we live in a time of contradictions and contingency, we often fail to recognize these features in the worlds we live in day-to-day, in our classrooms and offices. We tend, despite all of our sophisticated theorizing, to teach writing much as we have long taught it: the creative production of original words in linear streams that some reader receives and understands. (200)

There have been pedagogies that suggest alternatives to the personal essay and more traditional ways of exploring the self (see, for instance, Alcorn 2002, Atwan 2005, Davis 1998, Davis 2000, and Rouzie 2001). Yet often, new ways of exploring the self continue to further the notion of students as stable and contained. Greg Ulmer put forth a multi-textual approach to student self-exploration in his textbook Internet Inventions: From Literacy to Electracy. Ulmer presents a series of assignments as part of a new genre of text that he calls "mystory." He claims that one of the goals of general writ-
ing classes should be to provide students with "models of self-knowledge for living the examined life" (5). Ulmer's students develop "widesites" in which they reflect on their relationship to and experiences with four institutions: career, family, entertainment, and community. Students compose a variety of texts throughout the semester (including websites and micronarratives), culminating in the "mystery" which is an explication of the "guiding image" of the self that each student has discovered after examining their collection of widesite texts at the levels of image and sensory detail (rather than levels of meaning and theme).

Having students create widesites provides them with ways of "inventing" the self through a variety of texts. However, reducing those texts to a single "guiding" image that characterizes an a priori, identifiable self, is problematic in its reduction of the possibilities for the self. Ulmer suggests, Everyone's life manifests such patterns: every person possesses a wide or guiding image (actually an interrelated set of four or five primary images) if only in a potential state, as a disposition or propensity. Moreover, all the elements contributing to the pattern of "being"—the state of mind—expressed in the image of wide scope are in place by the time a person reaches the age of eighteen. (18, emphasis added)

The concept of these patterns being "in place" by the time students enter college minimizes the extent to which students continue to grapple with the change and growth that occurs in their lives as college students. Moreover, the assumption that students will find a pattern or "guiding image" that is present in each of their widesite texts suggests that the texts students create are not so much a collection of diverse selves, but instead are mini-representations of a single self, thus reducing the diversity and heterogeneity of the self to a stable, static core.

Despite these critiques, Ulmer's work is important because of the ways in which he challenges the primacy of narrative and linear self-exploration and proposes alternative constructions of the self through his concept of the widesite. Ulmer allows for invention in ways more complex and messy than instructors often allow and encourages students to explore their selves through images, metaphors, and other avenues not traditionally offered in the composition (or any) classroom. But rather than reducing the self to one guiding image as Ulmer does, I propose providing students ever-open possibilities for exploring and negotiating the heterogeneous elements of their selves. In this article I introduce a concept I call "Thirdspace identity construction," which instructors can use to understand what happens in students' texts when such ever-open possibilities for identity exploration are allowed. This concept borrows from the work of critical geographer Edward Soja. Soja's "Thirdspace" represents a dynamic realm in which established
 binaries/dualisms that dominate our contemporary cultural understanding (such as subject/object, social/historical, center/margin, real/imagined, material/mental) are reworked in an effort to open up other possibilities for understanding (5). Soja uses Thirdspace as a lens to analyze what he calls “real-and-imagined” urban centers, such as the city of Los Angeles. As Thirdspaces, Soja shows how urban centers exist as triads of the spatial-social-historical, despite our tendency to consider them exclusively in the realm of the social-historical.

I apply the notion of Thirdspace not to urban centers, but to understanding constructions of identity in the composition classroom. Offering students the space in which to negotiate the infinite ways they are spoken—by their cultures, histories, and experiences—and the opportunity to compose new ways of speaking, engenders constructions of the self the dynamics of which we can better appreciate through the lens of Thirdspace. Thirdspace identity construction—as a way of understanding the compositions of students that take place when non-traditional approaches to identity are allowed and encouraged—can help instructors reinvision the possibilities for personal writing in the classroom and open up avenues for students to articulate real-and-imagined, spatially-situated selves that engender a new kind of agency: one that embraces complexity and refuses reduction. Further, when allowed to conceive of and create more complex possibilities for identity, students come to value the diversity of their selves and in doing so appreciate the diversity of others.

The Origins of Thirdspace

Soja’s concept of Thirdspace was greatly influenced by Henri Lefebvre’s *The Production of Space*. Soja borrows from Lefebvre’s theories about the relationships people have with space to argue that people are able to ignore the spatiality of their lives by conceiving of it entirely in the realm of the physical (what Soja calls “Firstspace” and Lefebvre calls “spatial practice”), as one does when experiencing space as measurable and self-evident (i.e., engaging with space by mapping it, collecting information about it, and dividing it into segments), or by conceiving it entirely in the realm of the mental (what Soja calls “Secondspace” and Lefebvre calls “representations of space”) as one does when speaking metaphorically and philosophically about space (6).

“Firstspace” describes the tendency for us to see space as self-evident, existing, and there to be measured and studied (Lefebvre’s “illusion of the real”). We find more and more ways to collect and study space (Google Earth, satellite pictures, infrared readings, etc.) under the assumption that the more data we collect the more theories we can derive from them. This has become increasingly pervasive as digital technologies have improved the ways in which we are able to observe, catalogue, and replicate material
space. However, it furthers the assumption that we exist apart from space and ignores the ways in which people operate in space: the “lived” interactions with space and with people (producing space, not just occurring in space) that we have on a daily basis (Soja 75-78).

“Secondspace” describes the privileging of mental and philosophical constructions of space (Lefebvre’s “illusion of transparency”) that also ignore the “lived” interactions that occur in material space. There are “internal” and “external” ways in which this is realized. An example of internal privileging of Secondspace might be when theorists ask people to draw a picture of the city in which they live. These pictures can be useful in showing various conceptions of space, but more often, they are used to create simplistic categories of how people conceive of space (“men conceive of space in streets and numbers, whereas women tend to see space in terms of objects”). An example of external privileging of conceived space occurs when epistemologies attempt to provide overarching frameworks for organizing and explaining the material world (as the Modernist -isms usually do), again ignoring the lived interactions that are actually occurring in space (Soja 79-80).

These appropriations set up a binary between material and metaphorical space that forces one conception of space over another. This binary is one that both Lefebvre and Soja bring together through an act of “thirding” to produce a triad that includes lived space. Developing other (third) options to established binaries such as material/metaphorical space is what Soja calls “thirding-as-othering,” a process that describes the contiguous restructuring of binaries that represents the larger concept of Thirdspace.

Soja’s act of “thirding” doesn’t just combine or exist in-between established binaries, but actively transforms them. According to Soja, thirding is much more than a dialectical synthesis; it introduces a critical “other-than” choice that speaks and critiques through its otherness . . . It does not derive simply from an additive combination of its binary antecedents but rather from a disordering, deconstruction, and tentative reconstitution of their presumed totalization producing an open alternative that is both similar and strikingly different. (61)

Thirdspace is an ever-open space that allows contradictory and seemingly incompatible ideas to coexist and be creatively restructured in new ways to produce new meaning.

**Thirdspace Identity Constructions in the Composition Classroom**

Soja’s theory of Thirdspace can help instructors better understand the complexity of student self-constructions in the classroom and encourage ever-open possibilities for identity exploration using metaphorical and material tools and spaces perhaps never before considered. While teaching both
first-year and advanced composition courses, I developed an assignment that offered students the opportunity to explore identity through the construction of their selves in/through a space on the U-MOO. An on-line, virtual reality environment, described through language, U-MOO allows users to log on as characters and navigate through the spaces that constitute the MOO “architexture” (Haynes and Holmevik). While in a MOO, characters can communicate with other characters who have logged on, and they are often granted the ability to build their own spaces and objects to contribute to the already existing MOO framework.

The spaces that students in my classes built could consist of any number of “rooms” and objects, in any conceivable (or inconceivable) order, described in any way. As a part of the actual site construction, each student had to name and describe their MOO character (the persona they embody when they log onto the MOO) and include it/him/her/them in some area within their site. In addition to the site, students were required to write an analysis essay that attempted to account for the details and descriptive decisions they made throughout the site (whether planned or unplanned, understood entirely or not). What “self” or “identity” meant for each student was up to them and could be interpreted how they saw fit.

I incorporated this assignment (see Appendix A) during various semesters of my first-year, honors, and advanced composition courses that I taught over a four-year period. The essence of the assignment remained the same throughout each course, though there were some contextual differences. In my first-year composition courses, this assignment served primarily as a replacement for the traditional personal exploratory essay that was required by my department at the time. In my advanced composition courses, this assignment served as part of a larger investigation of how various media and technologies work rhetorically in our culture. Despite the differences in course levels, the creative depth and the level of analysis that many students engaged in with their sites was surprisingly consistent throughout, whether in first-year, honors, or advanced.

I developed the term “Thirdspace identity constructions,” to help explain the sites students in my classes constructed that reflect the ways in which binaries that people use to inform the self—including male/female, margin/center, white/non-white, public/private—have been disrupted and creatively restructured to give way to alternative understandings of the self. Thirdspace identity constructions are characterized primarily by the ways in which they expose the binaries that people use to simplify the complexity of identity—reducing it to a series of either/or classifications—and creatively restructure such binaries, producing other options that address, by their very nature of being “other,” the false choices created by such binaries. Restructuring binaries does not serve to negate the existence of such binaries. Rather, Thirdspace identity constructions describe sites that do justice to
the complexity of the self by giving space for the existence of binaries as well as third/other choices. These constructions reveal a gathering together of the dichotomous elements of a person's identity and a juxtaposing and restructuring of those elements in an attempt to better understand the relationships between them, and how those relationships, as much as the elements themselves, contribute to a person's sense of self.

The two student sites I have chosen to analyze as examples of Thirdspace identity constructions are *The Long Closet* and *Berkembang River*. These sites are compelling because they were composed by students who are both first-generation American citizens, but who have very different relationships with American culture. Elements of these sites are also reflective of the struggles that many of our more traditional American students grapple with, and there are any number of sites that I would enjoy discussing in this article that reveal the struggles students have had trying to negotiate the dichotomous and conflicting areas of their lives, especially in the liminal space of their college experiences. Such sites include those of students who are negotiating dichotomies between family expectations and a student's own expectations or goals, or between a student's sexual orientation and the societal pressures he/she feels to be something different. Sites also negotiated larger philosophical dichotomies that pull at students' selves, such as their dependence on technology coupled with a desire to escape into some non-technological space, or between material desires (like clothing and other status-revealing items) coupled with a desire to be free of such items.

### The Long Closet

*The Long Closet* is a site that attempts to negotiate the tension one student feels between her multiple beliefs and cultural affiliations. This site was constructed by Maya, the MOO character of a student who is a first-generation American, born and raised in America after her Indian-born parents attended graduate school here and decided to stay. Maya sets up a number of binaries in her site that she struggles to negotiate, most notably between her Hindu faith and her American upbringing. Her site is composed as a closet within which are four spaces that a visitor to the site travels through, including “First Impressions Entryway,” “Middle Tunnel,” “Panel of Trust,” and ultimately, “The Café.” The spaces within her site capture her struggles on a variety of levels and her site ultimately exemplifies a Thirdspace through the final space of “the Café” that Maya constructs. As a Thirdspace, “the Café” disrupts the divide Maya has fostered between her American and Hindu cultures and is a place where both come together to inform her sense of self.

*The Long Closet* is Maya's attempt to find spaces for her diverse and conflicting cultural values to coexist. She struggles as both an insider and outsider to American culture; Maya shares a common geography with other
Americans but expresses a feeling of alienation from Americans because she is a “different race” and has different “values.” As she writes in the essay that accompanies her site,

My site embodies many of the insecurities I have had growing up in an environment where everyone around me was a different race than myself. I was born and raised in the United States, but I have retained a variety of cultural roots. The cultural roots my parents have instilled in me through Indian practices have given me morals and values. Despite this, I am very insecure about revealing these morals and cultural values as I feel that people may not be open to them. This is why when a person first meets me I put up a façade that shows I am just as American as anyone else.

Maya's site is constructed as a closet, typically the part of a house in which things are stored away and kept out of the sight of others. Michael Brown, whose book Closet Space: Geographies of Metaphor from the Body to the Globe discusses the metaphor of the closet in relation to gay identity, argues that “the closet is a term used to describe the denial, concealment, erasure, or ignorance of lesbians and gay men. It describes their absence—and alludes to their ironic presence nonetheless—in a society that, in countless interlocking ways, subtly and blatantly dictates that heterosexuality is the only way to be” (1). For Maya, the closet symbolizes not her sexual orientation, but her need to conceal her Hindu cultural heritage because of the “denial,” “erasure,” and “ignorance” of it by Americans. As she states in the excerpt from her essay above, Maya sees herself as a “different race” than most Americans, so her cultural heritage is present in her skin color, yet made absent by the lack of acceptance she feels from other Americans. The fact that this closet is “long” is indicative of the fact that Maya has struggled with her conflicted sense of self since childhood and that coming to terms with it may prove to be an equally long process. The three areas of The Long Closet are representative of the various levels at which Maya reveals her cultural beliefs to others and feels accepted by others.

Maya’s character is located in the Long Closet, but outside any of the three areas that the closet contains. Her character description embodies her struggle between the diverse cultures of which she is a part and how limited she often feels interacting with “typical” Americans her age:

Maya
You see a person [who] looks so typical but yet so different, but you see that there is unique difference about her. She dresses and likes what most like, but you see that she has more to her. She looks to others for guidance on what she should be doing. Her hair, her face, her constant smile make you feel like she is hiding something about herself.
Maya sets up a binary between what a visitor to the site “sees” in her character and what they “know” of her. She critiques the tendency of the visitor to judge her by her physical appearance and reveals the limitations of that tendency by using her appearance to remind the visitor that there is something they cannot see.

Maya describes American culture as materialistic and homogenizing and constructs the first area of her site, “First Impressions Entryway,” to reflect the immense pressure she feels to look and act exactly like other Americans her age.

**First Impressions Entryway**

As you walk into the long closet you see a large mirror that takes up the whole wall. You are drawn to this mirror, it reveals the essence of the room it is located in. In a distance one can see a faint flickering flame. As you come in you sense a feeling of familiarity, you feel like you have been here before. You see in a corner a computer and television, the television is flashing familiar faces and familiar conversation. There is a large cherry oak armoire with antique faded gold rims and handles. The door of the armoire is slightly ajar allowing you to look inside. As you look into the armoire of clothing, you notice an element of clothing you have, as you continue you see that all the clothes look familiar. You see magazines and a music selection that you have heard and seen before. You suddenly realize that this is much like your room, you continue to walk and see the distant flame come more into your vision.

“First Impressions Entryway” is a remarkable collection of all the things Maya feels that a “typical” American teenager is expected to have, wear, and watch. Maya takes advantage of the second-person perspective that all spaces of the MOO are described in (you see . . . , you hear . . . ) to impart an intense feeling of familiarity on the visitor of the site. She includes objects in the room that symbolize the homogenizing effect she feels that American culture has on young people, including a mirror, an armoire of clothing, a computer, a television, and a stereo. She provides additional descriptions of each object that paint a picture of the pressure she feels to conform:

**The Mirror**

This mirror is so large it seems like it takes up the whole wall. It watches everything you do, and also acts as a constant reassurance that you are fitting in with the surroundings of the entryway.
The Television
This television is as big as a movie screen. It's perfect for watching movies and shows and at the same time getting the theatre like presentation. This television is playing constant episodes of Beverly Hills 90210 and Friends. You get a sense that the owner is much into shows about her age group. The television is constantly running it seems to never have a blank screen.

Armoire of Clothing
This armoire is elegant and has fine detail. The armoire is dark cherry oak with antique gold rims and handles. As the door is slightly ajar; you see many shirts, pants, skirts, and shoes, they all look so familiar. It seems if you have these same articles of clothing. There is something [about] these clothes that reflects comfort and classic, they [are] clothes that never really stand out in a crowd.

Maya's accompanying essay that addresses this section of the site is equally stark and reflects her insecurity in an almost matter-of-fact way. She presents a reality of living in America that is not often acknowledged:

Looking at the mirror, the visitor sees an aspect of himself or herself, because at first glance I want to seem like everyone else . . . I fear that if I am not typical, people will not accept me. The mirror covers a large part of the wall, which reveals the magnitude to which physical appearance plays [a part] in my life as well as the lives of others in society. Since I am a minority I also feel strongly about my physical appearance and do everything possible to fit in to the norm of society. I try to fit, due to my need to entice visitors to go further in the site in order to get to know me.

Maya's account becomes slightly more complex as she vacillates throughout her essay (and site) between herself and the American culture she blames for her “having” to conform to the typical interests of young people in America. On the one hand, she describes feeling that she must possess certain things to “keep up with society.” She depicts herself as a victim of American culture by claiming that “this is my attempt to show how substantially American culture and technology has influenced me, since these objects say nothing about my beliefs or my desires.” But on the other hand, she admits that “this entryway is filled with things I like that have been shaped by the society I live in.” As much as she wants to dismiss the way she's been influenced by American culture as somehow existing apart from a deeper self, she slowly comes to terms throughout the rest of her site with the fact that her likes and dislikes, however typical or materialistic, are still a part of who she is. Not surprisingly, the concerns Maya has about the extent to which she has been tacitly shaped
by the material elements of American culture is a common theme that appears in the sites of many students in my classes, not just those whose families are new to America.

The variety of spaces and objects that make up The Long Closet compose complex negotiations among various aspects of Maya's self, which she continues to vacillate between in the second space of her site, "The Middle Tunnel," where the visitor is surrounded by a cacophony of objects from American and Hindu culture:

**The Middle Tunnel**

As you make a slight swift turn right you see another part of this closet. You sense a feeling of heritage and culture, you look around you feel you know just a little more about the occupant of this space. To your right you see a plush stiff red couch covered with red silk embroidered pillows. Next to that a table with Christmas candles, and children's books, and an worn out library pass, next to the chair you see a cactus which survives from the illumination from the sun, which the glass walls provide. Across from that you see a large portrait of the Taj Mahal which seems to illuminate the room in its large silver carved frame.

For Maya, these objects "reveal my history, and symbolize aspects of my cultural heritage that have shaped the person I am." Maya's analysis of these objects shows what they symbolize for her, but also reveals the tension that she feels between who she "is" and who she would like to become. For instance, by clicking on the object of the children's books, visitors to the site learn that "these books all look worn out as the pages are folded and the covers are slightly torn." In her essay, Maya claims that these books and the worn-out library pass reflect her love of reading that started as a child, and that "fiction allows me to feel emotions that I am not getting from my own life." And yet, she admits that the worn out pass "reflects that I have been overdoing this escaping. I feel that I have escaped too much and I need to start spending this time changing aspects of my own life that may bother me." Maya's love of reading has enabled her to foster dichotomies between fiction/real life and escape/confrontation. Her realization of these dichotomies and the ways in which they have limited her sets the stage for her Thirdspace identity construction revealed in "The Cafe" located in the next area of the site.

The Thirdspace of "The Cafe" is a space where the dichotomies that she has set up between her American and Hindu cultural traditions are deconstructed and reconstructed to form an/other option—one that allows her two cultures to come together to inform (rather than divide) her sense of self in ways that Maya had previously thought impossible.
The Cafe

The cafe has a large bar serving any possible beverage from Cappuccinos to Coke. There are comfortable red chairs which are covered with beaded white pillows. There is Indian art covering the wall, they all seem to tell a story as they are so detailed. There are pictures of Indian people, temples, and culture all around the cafe.

The Cafe is representative of what Maya describes as a "very American" coffee shop, but it is one that is filled with Indian artwork and furniture which serves to create a "perfect mix of Indian culture as well as American culture." “The Cafe” is a space in which Maya can “reveal this blend of cultures” to others—enjoying the company of her diverse friends and educating those who she meets about her two cultures in ways she previously avoided for fear of rejection.

However real the division between her two cultures has felt for Maya, the Thirdspace construction of “The Cafe,” tacitly “critiques through its otherness” (Soja) the very existence of that division. Maya is able to bring together cultural elements she had previously assumed to be incompatible, and the hospitality she shows to her guests in this space reflect how complex a reconstruction has actually taken place:

In order to show appreciation to my close friends around me, I give them all the possessions I have. I want them to relax and have every luxury that I may possess. Being hospitable and taking action in order to cater to the needs of your guest is a significant part of Indian culture. In order to be hospitable I provide tangible things rather than actions, providing tangible things is a technique I have learned growing up [in America].

The hospitality that Maya sees as inherent to her Indian culture is facilitated through her giving of material possessions to her guests—something she sees as inherently American. More than “The Cafe” being a space where her Indian and American cultures simply coexist, Maya has selected and creatively restructured elements of each culture. The power of this reconstruction can be best understood through the lens of Thirdspace, which reveals how Maya can transcend the divide between her cultures and compose an/other option with which to inform her sense of self.

Berkembang River

Evelyn is a first-generation American of Palestinian descent. Her site reveals a sophisticated synthesis of her diverse Palestinian and American cultural influences. Rather than understanding her site as a Thirdspace through just a single room as we did with Maya’s site, Evelyn’s entire site, including her character, can be understood
as a Thirdspace identity construction. Throughout every space in her site, Evelyn selects elements from her Palestinian and American cultures and arranges them to form an/other identity, one that is neither exclusively Palestinian nor exclusively American, but is an exciting and vibrant construction that takes selectively from each. Evelyn feels a strong connection to her Palestinian heritage and has family both in America and in the Middle East. But instead of these two cultures being at odds with each other, Evelyn's site is an adventurous cacophony of myriad cultural elements that come together to reveal a Thirdspace identity that flourishes in diversity and contradiction.

Throughout her site, Evelyn mischievously challenges the visitor's expectations and seems to revel in the unique facets of the various cultures of which she is a part. Evelyn's site both begins and ends at "Berkembang River." Her site takes visitors through places such as the "Pedantic," "Genesis Tributary," and "Habeeb Bazaar" on their way to what seems like some final destination. In fact, just when visitors are nearing the final space of the site, they find themselves back at "Berkembang River" to begin their journey all over again. Evelyn explains that the organization of her site is but one of many paradoxes that she came to realize are "outgrowths of the subconscious tensions between different beliefs, loyalties, and cultures within me." She continues:

At first, the layout of my rooms seems linear. The visitor follows the text and arrows from one room to the next, each representing different parts of me or my life history. But the story line is, in a sense, both backward and circular. The visitor begins at the end, Berkembang River, which is the destination for two smaller rivers . . . This intermingling of beginning and ending reflects my observation that beginnings—my roots and past experiences—influence my present mood, behavior, and beliefs in an almost random way. This explains why my rooms contain out-of-place objects; there is often no logical explanation for the influence of childhood memories or family histories.8

By characterizing the journey through her self as being both backward and circular, visitors to Evelyn's site approach her self from a variety of directions, angles, and perspectives that are exemplary of a Thirdspace identity construction.

Evelyn's character exemplifies Thirdspace and contributes to part of her site's larger Thirdspace identity. Her character conveys a sense of excitement, adventure, and abandon that comes from the intermingling of her past, her present, and the various cultures with which she associates:

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You see an eccentric woman of indeterminate age sitting on a motorcycle. Her feet are bare, her red toenail polish chipped. Silver bangles hang from her skinny ankle. She is wearing gym pants under her wrap-around sarong. Her white tank top is splattered with red mud—or is that spaghetti? Her curly hair is frizzed and tangled from riding too fast in the wind. You think you see a bindi or a small tattoo on her forehead; then you realize it’s mud. Sometimes when she smiles, a faint dimple appears in her right cheek; other times, her eyes just wrinkle up.

In Evelyn’s case, her character scarcely resembles her real life physical appearance, making it even more symbolically significant. It is useful to recognize Evelyn’s character as a Thirdspace because of how it creatively assembles diverse elements of her self and more importantly, how it suggests an/other option to the either/or categories of race, religion, and culture that people use to characterize themselves and others. Visitors to the site are unable to reduce Evelyn’s character to a series of simple categorizations. For instance, visitors cannot tell whether the splatter on her shirt is mud or spaghetti sauce, and they mistakenly attempt to find deeper meaning in her physical appearance by assuming that a spot of mud on her forehead is the more culturally significant symbol of a bindi. But Evelyn’s character challenges not just the visitors, but the contradictions that Evelyn herself sometimes feels. In her essay, Evelyn explains it this way:

I tried to depict a person who is a nonconformist—not deliberately, but incidentally. The conflicting beliefs and impulses within her are simultaneously manifest in her oddity. For example, my character is “wearing gym pants under her wrap-around sarong.” The gym pants represent both activity and Western culture; the sarong represents femininity and Eastern culture. The blend of these two garments symbolizes my partial discomfort in either the East or the West, either as a tomboy or a “girly” girl. I am most myself when I blend both hemispheres and both aspects of my personality. The character is also barefoot on a motorcycle—a dangerous situation. Likewise, I love adventurous undertakings, but I am not always prepared for them. For example, the tension of living in unstable Muslim countries just prior September 11th actually excited me. But I was not emotionally ready to cope with my friend’s imprisonment on religious grounds or my teacher’s death in a terrorist bombing. Still, my character is resilient and forward-looking, as I hope the visitor is as he begins his journey at Berkembang River.

Evelyn’s acknowledgement of her own conflicting impulses is refreshing in its resistance to either/or simplification. Evelyn can be both adventurous and unprepared, uncertain and resilient. By understanding Evelyn’s char-
acter through the lens of Thirdspace identity constructions, instructors can see the importance of allowing opportunities for students to explore the both/and, and restructure dichotomous elements of their identities in such a way as to evolve to something that is fuller than the sum of its parts, as reflected in the resilience and forward-looking stance of Evelyn’s character.

Like her character, the first space of her site, “Berkembang River,” acts as a deliberate arrangement of diverse and unexpected elements that exemplify a Thirdspace identity construction. There is a pine forest enveloped in fog and “moist, cool air,” but the visitor sees a palm tree and notices that “the soil is rocky and dry.” If you look more closely at the palm, it is a supple plant, from which blooms a red and yellow flower, “but the tips of the leaves - like the stalk - are rough and dry.” Evelyn explains the significance of the wet/dry, warm/cool interplay of the tropical plant in the midst of a pine forest:

berkembang is the Indonesian word for “plant,” reflecting my memories associated with that nation, as well as my love for foreign languages. This tropical plant seems incongruous amidst the pines. It is meant for the moist, rich soil of a rainforest, not the rocky dirt of a dry forest. Indeed, I wanted this plant—this representation of me—to clash with its environment, as I have so often done. I remember visiting an open market in Indonesia. I was a head taller than anyone around me, and I was surrounded by a cacophony of Indonesian, Javanese, and other local dialects. I remember acutely feeling my whiteness amidst the broil of brownness; I wanted to convey this through the little plant, surrounded by aspens and pines. The other trees are wrapped in fog, so the visitor sees the plant more clearly than the other trees. Likewise, I am usually more aware of myself than others. I feel invaded when others try to meddle in my life, so the image of the pines that “pierce the fog with their gaunt limbs” is deliberately bleak. But when the visitor shows genuine interest in knowing “this strange plant,” it blooms “into trumpeting flourishes.” . . . When I do reveal more about myself to others, our differences become more pronounced but also more beautiful.

For Evelyn, differences are not to be feared, but explored and celebrated. The visitor is exposed to the differences Evelyn perceives within herself, and the way she has played with and restructured the differences she discovers between herself and others.

This celebration of difference is revealed throughout the remainder of Evelyn’s site and exemplifies Thirdspace to an even greater degree with each area presenting an alternate but simultaneously existing perspective that informs her sense of self. While Evelyn’s character communicates her own feelings about her self, The Pedantic is a space that represents how Evelyn feels that she is perceived by others and how their perceptions inform her own sense of self. Genesis Tributary is a space that represents how her past
informs her sense of self, and Habeeb Bazaar represents how her Middle Eastern heritage informs her sense of self. Evelyn included these perspectives in her site because she came to recognize how the self is not simply an island that exists apart from all other people and cultural influences, but is enriched by its interactions with others.

For Evelyn, The Pedantic represents how she feels she is perceived by others. As she explains,

In this room’s planning stages, I meant it to be only a picture of how others see me—not the “real” me. But I realized that perceptions of me affect the “real” me, and these perceptions are not always wrong. The Pedantic characterizes me as focused and bookish, which I am. The room is sparse, suggesting a preoccupation with the abstract. Although sometimes I am abstract, I think I am more absent-minded; abstract is what I hope to become! Still, I love to read and reflect, and I appreciate silence and solitude, all of which are central to this space. The red Persian rug, though, with its intricateness and unexpectedness, throws off the predictability of the room. I purposefully demonstrate that I am not only how others perceive me; I am multi-dimensional. Classmates are often surprised that I play rugby; friends usually wonder how I maintain my G.P.A. if I am such a daydreamer. The detail of the trap door under the rug, which leads from the enclosed room to an open river, is a hidden message that I have “ways out” of being contained or confined by one definition. But I am also willing to let others see these different definitions, if only they try.

The visitor then travels through Genesis Tributary and on to Habeeb Bazaar. Upon entering, the visitor is immersed in a “vibrant” city that includes both traditional and contemporary, Eastern and Western cultural elements, revealing Evelyn’s experience living in a more complex Middle Eastern reality:

**Habeeb Bazaar**

A vibrant city bustles before you. The air is hot and dry, and sand blows against stone churches, goatskin tents, and the copper pots clanging from the vendors’ stalls. You move among the displays of sarongs, veils, prayer mats, figs, cashews, camels. Men wearing turbans, white robes, business suits, and jeans walk past. Women glide by under swaying, black, curtain-like robes. Dusty-toed children bump into you in the narrow alleys. Clove cigarette smoke wafts among the vendors’ calls, “Itfaddali, shufi a lal tafah. I geeve you good deal, special price!” The minarets broadcast to their faithful, “Bisme Allah arahman, araheem.” Hidden among folds of linen on a display table, a calendar lies open.
Evelyn is able to locate herself in this city through the symbol of the calendar, which blends in, "hidden among the fold of linen" on the merchants table, but which is laid open to reveal images and a schedule that is distinctively American:

**Calendar**

You flip through the calendar. It has typical pictures of United States national parks. Appointments, practices, and classes are scheduled in scribbled pencil: piano 4:30. Recognition Dinner 7. Rachel's play 5:30. At the bottom of the December page is written, "A new year, a new place. All endings renew at Berkembang River."

Evelyn's commentary on this object reveals the deeper cultural difference between Western and Eastern conceptions of time that she has experienced:

Habeeb means "love" in Arabic, and this space illustrates my love for the Middle East. Habeeb Bazaar is realistic, with its displays of food, religious materials, forms of transportation, and a variety of clothing. Again [like the object of the plant in Berkembang river], the featured object—the calendar—seems out of place. Time is a significant source of cultural clash between East and West. Easterners say, "Time is a rubber band," emphasizing its flexibility; the Western adage is, "Time is money." The calendar, with its emphasis on date and time, is a very Western object amidst the vivid Eastern images. I, too, felt out of place in the Middle East, like an object that belonged in a different hemisphere. Yet because I see myself as that struggling, out-of-place plant by Berkembang River, I—like the calendar—really do belong in the Bazaar.

The reflections Evelyn makes in this last paragraph show the extent to which her site acts as a powerful Thirdspace identity construction. Both her site and her self embody myriad philosophies, languages, and material objects that allow her to transcend the limitations of an either/or choice between cultures and arrive at an/other space from which she can speak to her own struggles and the ways in which she is able to negotiate her unique cultural experiences. These experiences, the importance of which are illuminated through the lens of Thirdspace, have broadened Evelyn's sense of self in rich and colorful ways. Evelyn's assertion that she really does "belong in the Bazaar," boldly embraces her position as both/and—Eastern and Western, in-place and out-of-place, a "head taller than anyone" and "hidden among folds of linen"—in ways that break wide-open the possibilities for understanding and articulating the complexities of the postmodern self.
The identity construction assignment that I’ve discussed throughout this article arose out of my desire to offer students the opportunity to build more complex understandings of themselves and their relationships with the world. The sites of students like Maya and Evelyn are examples of a new kind of identity construction that instructors can understand through the lens of Thirdspace. Instructors can use this understanding to inform their classroom practices to offer students the opportunity to bring together the dichotomous facets of their selves and creatively restructure them, drawing selectively from each, and arriving at other options that open up greater possibilities for the self than ever before. A Thirdspace self is one who is comfortable with the unfamiliar and the ambiguous, but also one who has the ability to adapt, change shape, and see the I as an all—as an infinite sum and ever-changing total. But more than opening up new possibilities, these constructions offer students the opportunity to question the perceived dichotomies pulling at their selves and the confidence to call such dichotomies into question, giving rise to alternative possibilities that expose the fragile logic on which such dichotomies depend.

The concept of Thirdspace and the practice of “thirding” rely on the notion that we engage in a restructuring. The potential for restructuring occurs when we identify the dichotomies that we have settled for and seek new combinations in response. MOOs and other online spaces such as Second Life easily facilitate the practice of thirding because they are real-time, interactive virtual realities that are often modeled after real-life places, thus situating MOOs in a unique space between fantasy and reality, calling into question our definitions of each. Located in/as the space between traditional dichotomies, MOOs expose the instability and emptiness of such dichotomies (Davis 1998) and provide a Thirdspace in which to reimagine what’s possible.

But instructors can help facilitate Thirdspace identity constructions outside of the MOO as well, and rather than focus on building the self through a virtual space, engage in a construction of the self through a variety of different media or textual genres that will provide other options through which to break apart the limitations to how identity can be realized. One assignment I developed asked students to explore how our presentations of the self through a variety of media inform our ideas about identity. Students explored how various writers and artists composed their identities through the production of essays, artwork, photographs, websites, and poems. This was intended to help students recognize the material dichotomies we set up between ways of exploring identity—dichotomies that usually result in the privileging of writing over other mediated forms. After studying the works of these artists and writers, I offered students the opportunity to compose themselves in three separate works: a written text, a visual text, and a spatial
text or map (other possibilities might include a moving text (animation or film), an interactive text (game), or and aural text (sound or song). I then asked students to write an essay analyzing how each of their compositions communicated a particular conception of themselves and the effect created by the interplay between all of them.

Assignments like this offer students the opportunity to actively construct their identities using materials, objects, and spaces, and thus see identity and meaning as constructed. Through such assignments, students are offered the opportunity to explore their own multi-faceted identities through a number of different lenses and learn how various media communicate rhetorically in different ways to serve a variety of purposes and audiences. So instead of the image being binary to text, or subservient to it, the creative restructuring of both can help us move beyond our traditional language-based modes of communication.

But for any of this to happen our classrooms must also be Thirdspaces—radically open places in which students are encouraged to be messy and inefficient, and to engage with knowledge in new ways through alternative avenues not traditionally taken in composition classrooms. This kind of identity exploration has a place in the composition classroom because such exploration is never simply concerned with investigating the inner-workings of an isolated self. It involves the broader exploration of how cultural and ideological forces shape our ideas about our selves and the voices with which we feel empowered to engage in meaningful communication.

Recognizing the complexity of identity facilitates a recognition of the complexity of culture and communication; identity construction assignments can thus serve as models for larger knowledge exploration and construction. The models that can challenge our assumptions about identity and better articulate the potentials of Thirdspace identity construction are the same models that can drive our interrogation of literacy practices and lead to further inquiry into what the composition classroom should do.9
Appendix A

Identity_Crisis@moo.university.edu

We have spent this unit exploring how we negotiate ideas about identity and authenticity in our culture. The purpose of this project is to play with those ideas and in the process raise your awareness about who you are and what kinds of self-representation are possible on the spatially driven world of the MOO.

For this project you will construct your self/identity through a character and site on the MOO. This will require you to name your character, describe your character in-depth, and build a site on the MOO for your character. The character and space you create on the MOO is going to serve as a representation of who you are. We all have ideas about what constitutes our identities, including what things we value and what cultures we associate with. Now it is your job to translate those ideas into spatially metaphorical descriptions in the virtual world of the MOO. This may feel like a difficult process because you will be constructing yourself primarily in terms of descriptive, metaphorical language. But it will also be a process that may provide you with new languages and new angles from which to consider your identity.

You will accompany your character and site with a 5-7 page reflective/analysis essay in which you examine the metaphors and descriptive imagery of your space. I would like you to consider “who” it is that you’ve attempted to capture in your site and how the spatial environment of the MOO has influenced your perceptions of your self/identity. In your analysis, I would like you to reflect upon how your site is organized, what objects are included in your site, and how each object and space is described. Overall, how do your character, object, and space descriptions, as well as the organization of your site contribute to the self-construction that your site represents? When you take a step back and look at your site: who have you become?

The process by which you begin constructing your site can take a variety of forms. You may choose to brainstorm ideas by writing down anything and everything that comes to mind when you think about your self. Or you may choose to just begin outlining and composing your site with no overall picture or organized plan. As there is a due-date for this project, you will not have the time to construct yourself in all the ways you may wish to. Knowing this, try to pay attention to the decisions (consciously and unconsciously) you make throughout the construction process and consider not just what appears in the site, but what does not appear as well.

The design and content of your MOO space are up to you and I will not evaluate you on these elements. Instead, all students will begin at a flat score from which points will be removed only if the space is incomplete, unedited, or unnavigable. The essay will be graded for organization, clarity of prose, and quality of analysis, all of which will be discussed more extensively in class before a draft of the essay is due.
Notes

1. “MOO” is an acronym for “Multi-user domain, Object Oriented.” U-MOO is a pseudonym.
2. Web-based MOOs also allow for the use of visual icons and images to accompany the textual descriptions of their spaces.
3. A “MOO” is not a single “room” on the Internet that people go to interact, but is in fact comprised of myriad “rooms” that are described using spatial and sensory detail. For example, when a user logs on to the U-MOO, they will start at the “Walkway” and see this description on the screen: “You find yourself strolling down a walkway, heading toward the Fountain of [U-MOO]. Several benches sit beneath the huge palm trees that line this walkway . . .”). The U-MOO is just one of dozens of MOOs, all of which have different names (i.e. LinguaMOO, DUMOO etc.) and serve a variety of purposes. The MOOs I've listed here are all educational MOOs, but in fact, MOOs started out as social spaces for people to log onto and engage in role-playing games or social interaction. As long as you have an Internet connection you can be logged into a MOO—from New York to Norway. Educational MOOs are developed to simulate a variety of educational settings, usually including classrooms, meeting spaces, instructor offices, student spaces, community spaces, and others.
4. A pseudonym.
5. Excerpts from student essays will appear in plain text, while excerpts from student sites will appear italicized. Incorrect or non-standard usage in sites and essays has not been corrected.
6. Though never mentioned in her site or essay, this assignment began shortly after September 11, 2001 and in my opinion, the anxieties of being of Indian descent and not feeling accepted in American culture following 9/11 no doubt played a huge role in this site construction and reveal how very oppressive the experience can be for someone who is both American and not.
7. A pseudonym. Evelyn's character name was the same as her real life name so it has been changed.
8. Because of the depth of Evelyn's own analysis of her site, I quote extensively from her essay throughout this section.
9. The icons accompanying each description are part of the U-MOO's enCore Xpress Graphical User Interface and are used with permission from Jan Rune Holmevik and Cynthia Haynes.

Works Cited


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