Creative Writing, Identity and Change:
A Case Study of
American University of Beirut Students
In Post-War Lebanon

by

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2001
For my father, Michel Saad,
who always believed
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Abstract

The thesis explores connections between diaspora, exile and the re-entry of displaced youth into a post-war society. The study is based on a sample of sixty creative writing students at the American University of Beirut (AUB). Questionnaires were administered, interactive interviews conducted and autobiographical narratives analyzed to isolate and examine the themes that foreground their texts.

Some of the significant findings reveal that the sample of returnees under study are hybrids, cosmopolitan travellers who are everywhere but nowhere at home. Their position of “suspended inbetweenness” situates them in the margins of whatever society they happen to be in. Yet paradoxically, it is the experiences of multiplicity that hold immense possibilities. For when channeled into creative expression, and reinforced by the formation of spaces where silent and muted voices can speak, they enable this marginalized group to serve as vectors for forging new cultural identities and fostering change.

In parts of my thesis I inevitably utilize the more conventional form of academic writing that locates the work in its appropriate theoretical context. Overall however, it assumes the shape of an experimental, narrative ethnography. The mode of ethnographic writing captures, in my view, the evocative elements inherent in “life as lived” by the sample of returnees as well as myself. To achieve this, a reflexive approach, which places my work in an interpretive/narrative perspective seemed most appropriate. Among other things, it fuses the humanities with the social sciences, the personal with the professional, and my lived experience with my research. Accordingly, my research narrative is interspersed with personal vignettes that run parallel to the texts and conversations of the students. I have also applied a number of methodologies to meet the multi-layered and shifting demands of the study.

Given the sampling frame and exploratory nature of the study, a set of assertive or unequivocal conclusions would be of questionable validity. Instead, I think it more consistent with the spirit and nature of the study, to extract a few relevant inferences about the role of creative writing students in a post-war setting. First, creative writing classes have allowed students to take up identity positionings not available to them in other areas of social life. This was made possible by becoming part of the process of establishing a community of writers with shared goals. Second, I have come to view emotional narrative engagement as much more than a powerful tool for communicating defiance and nonconformity. It creates the conditions whereby students’ private discourse is transformed into something akin to a public realm, a “third space”, where negotiation occurs in ways that, I believe, will eventually unsettle fixed positions of identity and behavior. It is my premise that in these spaces, perceptions of the “other” can be altered to serve as venues for genuine openness and civility in a post-war society desperately in need of multiplicity and creative alternatives.
Foreword

This experimental and reflexive ethnography originated when I began to teach creative writing courses at the American University of Beirut setting into motion a collaborative communication process between my students and myself, and creating a research world that immediately took on immense personal significance. Consequently, the crafting of my research narrative assumed the metaphor of a journey in which students were invited to abandon the margins in search of literary spaces that celebrate visibility and voice. In no time at all, my group of hybrid, silent writers started to link their literacy practices to feelings of empowerment that challenged the forces embedded in a post-war society that aimed to silence them. Their narratives, written from a biographically subjective point of view, revealed how this particular group exist, react and function in the face of cultural and social difference.

In order to better clarify the nature and direction of this work, it is perhaps necessary to locate my research and writing within an interdisciplinary context as it is an attempt to connect Literature to Education and the Social Sciences. Recent developments in Sociolinguistics and Education, specifically in the area of literacies would have certainly provided an appropriate, although altogether different framework and theoretical foundation from which to proceed. I could, for example, have applied linguistic analysis instead of textual interpretation to the autobiographical texts under study.

Regardless, given the nature and spirit of my work, a humanistic perspective seemed more evocative in foregrounding the lived experiences of my students and myself. Our lives and work could now be imaginatively connected. We could creatively explore ways of making our lived experiences worthwhile. It provided an adequate framework for better understanding the power of language and experience, including the role they play in making new and different worlds possible.
Chapter One

Overview: A Reflexive Approach

The social science model of writing, in effect, requires researchers to suppress the story of their own research, the human process through which the work was constituted over time...Narrative is the best way to understand the human experience because it is the way humans understand their own lives...If we wish to understand the deepest and most universal of human experiences, if we wish our work to be faithful to the lived experiences of people, if we wish to reach a variety of readers, or if we wish to use our privileges and skills to empower the people we study, then we need to foreground, not suppress, the narrative within the human sciences. How and for whom we write lives matters.

Laurel Richardson, Writing Strategies (1994)

I. Introduction

This is a study about the lives of sixty creative writing students. It all began from reflecting on my own life, from an attempt to compose something coherent and significant out of the conflicting strands, the shifting settings and circumstances that constitute the fabric of my existence. After a little over a decade of involuntary exile, I found myself back in Lebanon, pen in hand, struggling to make narrative meaning of my life. My sense of place was not quite right. This was not the Lebanon I had known or imagined. Perhaps the Lebanon I thought I knew and loved existed only in my imagination. Aciman (2000) borrows the term “arbitrage” from the world of finance to explain how one always longs for the other home, but home, as one learns soon becomes a place where one remembers other homes. “Mnemonic arbitrage”, Aciman explains, is when the present is grounded on the past, and the future on the past recaptured.

Historically marginal, dislocated and uprooted groups have had to discover alternative, and often unusual venues of expression primarily because they exist in the “inbetween” places and spaces of whatever society they happen to find themselves living
Life in this context, though rich in experiences, is infinitely more complex. As Edward Said (1994) explains, none of their identities is mutually exclusive; each influences and intrudes on the other. Consequently, they must learn to negotiate the various contradictions of their biographies.

The personal texts of my creative writing students bear witness to the fact that they are cosmopolitan travelers who feel everywhere and nowhere at home. Their plight can generally be attributed to a brutal civil war which engulfed the country for almost two decades imposing forced exile on families who fled to safer parts of the world in order to escape the escalating, random violence. Yet, when viewed from a more positive perspective, their homelessness became a source of creativity, a focal point for reflections about individual and cultural identity (Rammer, 1994). This postmodernly ironic situation is perhaps best addressed in Said’s crucial question. “If exile is a condition for terminal loss, why has it been transformed so easily into a potent, even enriching motif for modern culture?” (1994, p. 137).

As seasoned travellers who cross boundaries, these students are in continuous flux and states of exile even in Lebanon, their country of origin. They have become outsiders, living on the edge of no matter what society they happen to be in. They write to illustrate the dilemmas of living between worlds. Coping with a fluid identity means coming to terms with the disparate strands of their existence. In light of this, the self assumes immense importance, often taking the liberty to comment on the choice of content in the texts. Consequently, the identity of these student authors assumes a critical and central stance. In their autobiographical texts, students kept returning over and over again to their “melancholy tension”, to the felt separation from their origins. For these young people who have lived within different cultures, experiencing multiplicity with all its torments and possibilities, life becomes a constant struggle to understand the many dissonances that characterize their existence. That they manage to engage in this activity with dedication and imagination is, I believe, an enormous achievement.
In many ways, my work is an experimental search for a textual form worthy of telling students' stories. But how does one actually construct a format that explores the textual possibilities of telling stories, that situates researchers not so much as experts that interpret meaning from data generated, but as human beings who explore the lives of others as well as their own? One way, of course, is to hope that the subtextual and intertextual practices work to displace direct commentary. To acquire a mode of thinking and conveying research which is contextual and narrative rather than formal and abstract. Decisions concerning the format grew out of my interest in nonlinear, many-layered textuality, out of a need for interpretive practices that work toward a multiplicity and complexity of layers and ideas. I needed a format which allowed my students and I to write separately and then combine these texts. A text that accumulated meaning as it progressed. Throughout my research, I diligently continued to jot down my day to day experiences, impressions and feeling, the intention being to weave a personal narrative into this study that runs parallel to the narrative texts of my students. Polkinghorne (1997) urges researchers to conceive of their research as "journeys whose destination is the increased understanding of human beings" (pp. 18-19), and to use the narrative format to report their investigative travels.

I would like to take a moment to say that this study is rooted in cooperation. Whenever I think of it, I am reminded of what I owe to the sixty students whose lives, along with my own, are juxtaposed in the research. Many of the issues explored are sensitive and painful to write about, yet despite the difficulties they eagerly cooperated often offering useful suggestions and assisting each other during crucial points. Their personal narratives have done more than provide material for my work. By writing around their stories I gained insight into my own life. As a result, the metaphor of a journey imposed itself quite spontaneously in this study. Together we embarked on an adventure, exploring unknown, little-known and well-known territory. Their willingness to share remarkably diverse experiences and insights was of enormous significance in the shaping of my text and the ultimate significance of the study. Emotional narrative engagement became the essential framework for the past, present and future perceptions they have of the Lebanon that I wish to understand. I thank students for their trust and for the commitment and long hours devoted to writing and discussing the themes that
compose the following pages. I would also like to take this opportunity to express the hope that their dedication and creativity, their new ways of thinking, will eventually foster significant and meaningful change in the fabric of Lebanese society.

- Reflexivity

Ever since I started working on my doctoral studies at Leicester University, much of my concern has focused on the need to experiment with a new kind of ethnography. At first, I intended to follow a fairly standard academic discourse with all the proper forms of linear argumentation and the required distance from its subject matter. Very soon, however, the standard forms of expression, the traditional academic commitment to rationality, objectivity and subject/object as well as other dualisms limited my research and writing. The process through which the proper academic subject is researched and reported silences the writer's self, renders it invisible and replaces it with the tone of remote authority. Susan Krieger (1991) writes about how often some discourses remove all evidence of a text's author by "minimizing the self, viewing it as a contaminant, transcending it, denying it, protecting its vulnerability" (p. 49). Yet despite all this, the self is mobilized as a tool for representing research. Krieger's insights along with her suggestion to move away from academic traditions in which social scientists paint pictures in which they don't exist became extremely enticing. I was not alone in experiencing frustration and difficulty when trying to apply standard academic rhetorical strategies and practices to my research and writing. There are others who view personal experience as a source of insight and knowledge in analysis, who are eager to explore a qualitative approach in which their voices and the voices of their respondents are regarded in a different light.

I would like to briefly acknowledge the long and important tradition of ethnography that developed from Hyme's ethnography of communication and interactional sociolinguistics (Gumperz and Hymes 1972; Hymes 1974), as well as Goffman's (1964) contribution in the situated character of communication in social interaction. From this seminal work mushroomed a very substantial body of research, namely ethnographic microanalysis (Erickson, 1992).
One construct in particular, that of communicative competence (Hymes, 1966), is of significance to my study in that creative writing students possess the social and cultural tools and knowledge necessary to function in acceptable ways in their society, yet they have taken a conscious decision not to do so. Erickson’s (1992) study of how interaction is organized in subtle ways is also relevant in revealing how local occasions of interaction both influence and are influenced by the wider society in which they occur.

In retrospect, I am aware that my research could easily have drawn from the methodological strategies put forth by the proponents of ethnographic microanalysis. Instead, it took another direction when I opted for a more reflexive approach that went beyond verbal/visual participant observation in order to explore a realm of textual analysis in which my students and I came together to shape an experimental, narrative ethnography.

As an ethnographer I intend to learn about my informants, but as a reflexive ethnographer, I also intend to learn about myself in the process. Reflexivity presents the opportunity to achieve awareness and produce a “better representation” while engaging in research. It minimizes the distance and alienation inherent in conventional notions of “objectivity” or objectifying those who are being studied. What it offers finally, is a more mutual research process, one that puts the researcher closer to the reality being experienced. According to Myerhoff and Ruby (1982), reflexivity is the process by which a researcher understands the social background influences that shapes his or her beliefs. This self awareness shapes what and how the researcher observes, attributes meanings, and interprets actions and dialogues with the informants.

Scholarly writers have long been expected to work silently and in the shadows, to keep their impressions, feelings and voices out of the reports they produce. In the words of Charmaz and Mitchell (1997) “to emulate Victorian children: be seen (in the credits) but not heard (in the text).” (p. 193). Modern social science succeeds in regulating and restraining authors’ voices. Silent authorship is viewed as a sign of mature scholarship. In fact, the correct voice is no voice at all. Researchers are required to remain detached observers as there is no merit attached to audible scholarship. During the course of my
research I became all the more convinced that evocative forms of writing are not merely desirable; they are essential. It made infinitely more sense to study and report on situations as encountered and lived by others as well as myself. A reflexive ethnographer does not simply report "facts" or "truths" but actively constructs interpretations of experiences in the field and then questions how these interpretations came about (Clifford and Marcus 1986; Rabinow 1986; Van Maanen 1988). According to Hertz (1997), by bringing subject and object back into the same space, authors give their audiences the opportunity to evaluate them as "situated actors" or active participants in the process of meaning creation. Reflexivity requires a shift in our comprehension of data and its collection. It can only be achieved through internal dialogue, and constant scrutiny of "what I know" and "how I know it." It calls for a continuous examination of experience while simultaneously researching the project in question. Helen Callaway (1992) has argued that reflexivity though often condemned as apolitical, is quite the opposite as it can open "the way to a more radical consciousness of self in facing the political dimensions of field work and constructing knowledge." (p.33).

Reflexivity clearly infiltrates every aspect of the research process. It demands an awareness of the ideology, culture and politics of those we study as well as our audience. Moreover, as active participants in the research process, researchers are required to understand their location of self. Personal accounting throughout the research process assumes particular significance. Researchers become aware and sensitive to how their own positions and interests are present during the various stages of the research process. This in turn influences who they study and who they ignore, the questions asked and those considered unimportant. Even problem formation, analysis, representation, and writing are directly influenced. Harding (1986) is of the opinion that reflexivity in research has the ability to put forth more real and less distorted views of the social world. Through the use of reflexivity, numerous studies have been able to explore the conflict of identities between researchers and their informants including the attempt to account for and accommodate personal differences. Moreover, it has allowed scholars to openly admit to becoming sympathetic to views they did not necessarily share or understand (Ginsberg 1989; Stacey 1990). Others have been able to reveal, even lament the inability to comprehend or explain the values and beliefs of those they study. None of these
thoughts, impressions or feelings can be shared if traditional formats for recording and reporting research remain the only acceptable course to take. Often it is the unexpected twists and turns in a research project, and the impressions and observations made by the researcher, that retain far more significance than the research itself.

- **Text**

  Usher (1996) is of the opinion that there is a strong tendency for the research text not to draw attention to itself as a text. Writing, is instead, transformed into a means “for communicating a reality that is ‘outside’ the text” (p. 33). He stresses the urgency to recognize and give importance to this ‘repressed’ textual dimension in research. As no research can be produced without writing, it is time to address textuality and reflexivity in an entirely different light. Furthermore, educational research takes place within a community, and as such it becomes a social practice, not a contextless procedure “carried out by isolated, genderless individuals without a history.” (p. 34). Research is not only involved with reporting the world, it also ‘creates it’ through representation. The researcher constructs a researchable world by identifying the subject of inquiry, assuming a specific theoretical position, asking certain questions, analysing and making sense of the findings in a particular way, and presenting a text. Here research becomes similar to literature as a textual practice. Both are involved with ‘creating’ worlds. Usher insists that if we can overcome the “habit of simplistically counterposing ‘fact’ to fiction and equating fiction with ‘untruth’ then we can begin to see that research is just as ‘fictional’ as literature. (p. 35). By conducting research in a literary mode and presenting our ‘findings’ in the form of a literary text, researchers create a world just as much as if they had followed a linear model. As both research and literature use writing to construct worlds they are both ‘fictional’ and, as such, both need reflexivity. Similarly, my own research and writing have created a particular world that also calls for reflexivity but unfortunately, “the communal paradigm in which our research is located is likely to approve of the latter and disapprove of the former.” (p. 35).

  Reflexivity, Usher explains, is as old as Western philosophy and simply implies that the “activity of the knower influences what is known since nothing can be known apart from these activities.” (p. 35). Thus if research is dependent on the activity of the
researcher, then as researchers are we merely researching ourselves? Can it be, he asks, “a subtle form of writing the self - a different, non-literary way of writing one’s autobiography?” (p. 35). When viewed in this light, reflexivity leads to a “personalization” of research to finding out about oneself through explanation and self-understanding. From this perspective, reflexivity ceases to be a problem. It allows us “to recognize that we are a part of rather than apart from the world constructed through research.” (p. 35). Furthermore, by becoming aware of the use of reflexivity as a research tool, power, discourse and text, elements that go ‘beyond’ the personal, come into play. This means that although research is conducted by individuals it has implications beyond the personal. Foucault (1980) is of the opinion, that the will to truth is also a will to power.

Scepticism concerning value - neutrality and a ‘disinterested’ stance has become more prevalent in educational research. This perhaps is due to the realization that reflexivity, in various degrees, is inevitable in research and, as such, it needs to be viewed not as undesirable, but rather as enabling researchers to acquire deeper insight into the research process. Another important aspect of reflexivity is that the background and values of a researcher are no longer ignored or considered irrelevant.

In my study, I have become concerned with personal reflexivity which focuses on the researcher’s own identity as an individual within a social context. As an individual, I believe that my research is inevitably an expression of my personal interests and ideas. Thus I cannot deny that the topic of my study is also a direct result of my personal involvement and concerns. Personal reflexivity is directly related to ‘autobiography’ because it derives from the researcher’s lived experiences which in turn has to do with the researcher’s values and standpoints that determine the choice of subject as well as how the research is conducted, how ‘data’ is generated and evaluated. “Autobiography simply and transparently reports ‘lived experience’; it somehow ‘translates’ this experience into a publicly communicable form.” (Usher, 37). Reflexivity focuses attention on the problematics of the researcher’s identity as well as on the identity of the researcher.
In sum, Usher is convinced that the process of research always involves a reflexive element and that we need to view this reflexive understanding as a resource rather than a source of bias. Of course, one way to do this as researchers is by “subjecting ourselves to critical self-scrutiny, in other words by being reflexive (p. 38). Personal reflexivity, however, deals both with the ‘psychological’ as well as the ‘social’ subjective. The self of the researcher has an autobiography influenced by gender, ethnicity, class, etc. These socio-cultural products cannot be dissociated from the process of writing - they influence the form and outcomes of research. The knowledge produced by any piece of research is always relative to and conditional upon that which is already known. (Derrida, 1982).

Our pre-understandings as individuals are also part of a ‘tradition’, an interpretative culture, which indicates what is ‘worth’ knowing and thus leads research in certain ‘worthwhile’ directions (Gladamer, 1975). Being reflexive means uncovering the pre-understandings which inform research and gaining awareness of how these change during the curse of the research. This awareness becomes a necessary on-going process. Although reflexivity involves finding out about ourselves, it is always within a historical and social context. “Reflexivity foregrounds the implication of the personal within what is ‘beyond’ the personal.” (39).

- **Voice**

  Reflexivity includes voice, but voice is more concerned with the process or representation and writing whereas reflexivity focuses more on the process of problem formation and data gathering. Voice is how authors decide to express themselves with an ethnography. In the writing of the respondents’ accounts and the representing of their selves, the author’s voice becomes essential in representing the author’s self. Caplan (1993) explains that being an ethnographer involves studying the self as well as the other. In this way the self becomes “othered”, an object of study, while the other, due to familiarity and a different approach to fieldwork, becomes part of the self (p. 180).
Voice exists on many levels. There is the voice of the author, the voices of the respondents within the text, and finally the self as the subject of inquiry (Cortazzi, 1993). There are many ways in which the author’s voice is present in ethnology. The voice of the author may be absent or it may be the subject of inquiring as in “experimental representations” (Richardson 1994). Often the author is the narrator and coparticipant in the text. Of significance here is the fact that the respondents’ voice becomes filtered through the author’s account. It is the author who selects whose stories and quotes to reveal and whose to ignore. While examining data and theory, scholars must decide about the voices and significance of respondents within the text. Interactional situations and decisions became complex. Richardson points out that truth claims are less easily validated now; desires to speak “for” others are suspect, and the greater freedom to experiment with textual form does not necessarily guarantee a better product (p. 523).

While Richardson’s observation holds some validity, these “experimental representations”, insist Ellis and Bochner (1996), permit the author to experiment with different ways of conducting social science. Being able to focus on self-knowledge and personal experience as a legitimate source of data is fast becoming acceptable as a means of understanding social life and human behavior. (Ellis 1995; Williams 1991). From this perspective, the self becomes both the subject of the study as well as the narrator. Self-discovery becomes a part of the research participant’s narrative.

Manning (1967) discusses the role of “situated actors.” He urges researchers to draw on the richness of their own experiences, especially if they are studying what they have also experienced. It is helpful to let the audience know that the author’s life parallels that of the respondents”. The author’s voice helps the audience situate the author and assess the author’s perspective regarding the topic. How to skillfully interject the author’s voice without detracting from the voices of the respondents becomes a great challenge. Authors must position their own voices at certain points along side the subjects. In this way, an individual’s history becomes representative of the author’s experience or feeling. The placement of an author’s voice can validate the respondent’s experience. It is not always easy to detach the author’s voice from the voices of his or her subjects. Yet the subjects must be given voice independent of the author’s in order to
reflect another direction. This distancing and fusing is a delicate dance the author must learn to choreograph.

Other scholars have also joined in challenging the myth of voiceless writing (Charmaz and Mitchell 1997). They do not consider voice to be a technical feature of writing. Instead, they view it as an interactive and emergent part of the empirical experience and the theoretical frame of a study. The relationships they establish with their respondents fosters a voice shaped by commitment and enthusiasm concerning their individual studies. DeVault (1997) writes that in every study it becomes essential to explore what a personal element contributes in an analysis as well as what it adds to the entire project. Clearly to write about one’s self is to write about social experiences. It allows scholars to move away from the kind of academic discourse that thwarts other ways of conducting research. Mykhalowskyy (1997) challenges scholars to consider a number of issues when placing themselves at the center and experimenting with multiple voices. There is the question of who should be the subjects of our work as well as the issue of how to represent the self and position our voices.

• The Self in Research

As situated actors we bring to each interview our own histories (Manning, 1967). It is perhaps naïve to assume that one can begin anew instead of within his or her historical situation. Because they are active participants in the research process, it is essential that researchers understand their location of self. They must be aware of how their positions and interests are present during all stages of the research endeavor. There is the need to determine how to present the author’s self while simultaneously recording the respondents’ accounts and representing their selves. The author’s voice is directly connected to the author’s self. It also, to some degree, determines the presentation of the voices of the respondents within the text. It is, after all, the author who must decide whose stories to quote and whose to leave out. In order to draw meaning and comprehend what is observed or what is told, it is natural to rely on personal experiences, especially if one has experienced what is being studied. Interviews conducted may remind the author of his or her thoughts or life. Unfortunately, traditional scholarship
stipulates that it is unprofessional and not academic to let the audience know that the author's life is similar to that of the respondents. Yet increasingly there is a "postmodern" literature which recognize the interview as co-constructed and complex. Clearly there is an advantage to introducing the author's voice in the account. It allows the audience to situate the author in order to access the author's perspective to a particular topic; to understand why certain actors' voices are included over others. Numerous scholars have argued that "the self is the key fieldwork tool." Reinharz (1997) even offers a framework to explain how the self actually serves as "the key research tool", by investigating the self we bring to the field as well as the self we create in the field. Her study of a Kibbutz led her to isolate 20 'selves' that she divides into three separate categories: "research-based selves," "brought selves," and "situationally created selves." Reinharz believes that the three general categories of selves can be applied to any field setting. The specifics within these categories, however, are related to the culture of the particular setting. Understanding the self in fieldwork, Reinharz insists, will help document how and why the self is the key research tool.

David Miller (1974) explains that personal identity is not fixed. The person may experience himself as many selves, each of which has a life of its own. We contain a multitude of possibilities any of which may be revealed in a specific research situation. Lincoln (1997) uses the concept of multiple selves to argue that "we might chose a "self" or one particular identity which was evoked by some aspect of fieldwork, or by some interactions with research participants, by some confluence of circumstance, that we might evoke for a given text" (p. 40). If this is true, a researcher may choose a voice, range and register for a given text. Who we are and how we portray ourselves in a text becomes "largely a function of intense analysis of the self-in-context." (p. 41).

Matching my self in the text vis-a-vis my research participants was not as difficult as it might seem. The range of choices and voices was narrowed down to the aspects of self that are similar to my students, the self that is interconnected. In large part, I was helped by our shared sense of destiny. Although my students have a multiple range of voices, they quickly found and focused them in their discussions and texts. The classroom atmosphere provided the necessary conditions for meaningful communication.
with their fellow writers. Together we explored ways, mostly through narrative engagement and discussions, of shifting voices from the margins, out of the shadows and into the center. As students created and recreated themselves in their texts, I began to construct and reconstruct my selves. Together we co-created the research text allowing for new possibilities, both textual and relational to take shape.

Self-reflexive ethnography, however, is accompanied by ethical considerations. Revealing oneself is never easy. There are difficulties involved in drawing the line between giving sufficient information about the self without becoming too self-indulgent. Second, there is the risk of looking foolish when revealing vulnerabilities. Traditional scholarship sets researchers apart from those they study thus allowing for distance as well as authority, whereas self-reflexive ethnology makes the researcher vulnerable. It is a delicate matter because the comfort level for personal disclosure varies enormously from one individual to another. Moreover, there is the problem of guaranteeing anonymity to respondents who are suddenly allowed to speak for themselves. This is easily achieved in traditional scholarship when the individual is merely representative of a category. Finally, it is important to point out that there are ethical considerations involved. Studying issues that are relevant from our own subjective perspective means revealing private experiences which involve people close to us. The discretion of the researcher with regard to what and what not to reveal in the narrative research format holds serious ethical and moral considerations and implications.

• The Narrative Format

Polkinghorne (1997) has called for experimentation with a narrative format for reporting research. He contrasts the conventional synchronic approach to report formats with a diachronic format to support his notion that research should be understood as a human practice, and as such, is best presented in a diachronic format. The synchronic approach displays the structure of the research project; the diachronic captures the human actions and temporal character of the research process. The diachronic perspective, expressed through narrative discourse, becomes more meaningful in terms of reporting research in the context of the new science.
Consequently, Polkinghorne encourages researchers to conceive of “their research endeavors as journeys whose destination is the increased understanding of human beings and to use the narrative format to report their investigative travels.” (pp.18-19). The conventional format does not appear to be designed to communicate the knowledge claim, but rather to communicate its validity. Practitioners whose interests focus on the usefulness of knowledge claims do not find the conventional format of the reports a useful means for displaying the significance of the knowledge for practice. Polkinghorne argues that the conventional approach comes with the standard format for reporting research which “confines the presentation of research to a logically ordered justification of results and disregards the process of discovery and decision that are essential in the actual production of research.” (p. 4).

Although there has been increasing experimentation in the use of narrative data in qualitative research, most of these narrative inquiries resort to reporting their results in the conventional form. Moustakes (1961), Golden (1976), and McLaughlin and Tierney (1993) are among the few researchers to present the results of their data and analysis in narrative form. Golden published a collection of twenty-one narrative research reports titled The Research Experience. In describing them she noted that they took into consideration “the unplanned as well as the planned aspects of discovery.” They also revealed the “feelings, thinking component” or, in other words, the human side of the research. The narratives “confront the disorderly, overlooked, the unpredictable, and even the boring and routine aspects of research.” (p. 30). Doob and Grass (1976) also include in their narrative format incidents that changed their design. Although narrative reporting makes possible this kind of relevant detail and rich description, to a large extent, it remains absent in traditional formats despite the advantages. To Golden, the conventionally formatted reports serve the process of justification. “Science,” she writes, “tells us what ought to be done.” (p. 30). Contrary to the conventionally formatted reports, the narrative research reports gathered by Golden are presented in the form of a story in which the researcher is the protagonist who aims to generate knowledge about a specific question and follow the drama to its conclusion (the completion of the project). Between the beginning and ending there are both planned and accidental happenings, the motives, strategies and
actions undertaken by the protagonist and other characters (research participants, assistants, etc.), and the weight these factors had in moving the research process forward either toward the goal or away from it.

Although examples of research reports in narrative form are relatively rare. Moustakas as early as 1961 conducted an investigation of loneliness. Using a narrative format to record his findings, he reveals the story of his inquiry beginning with the illness of his daughter. The research is used to take us on a journey which illustrates his increased understanding of his experience of loneliness. McLaughlin and Tierney (1993) compiled a collection of studies about the experiences of people who have traditionally been excluded from the educational mainstream. The contributors in this volume relate the stories of how their research was conducted, including their connections with the participants that are the focus of the studies and the process through which their encounters with the participants produced the results.

Polkinhorne (1997), to my mind, is correct in suggesting that “the next step in the development of qualitative research informed by the new philosophy of science is to move out from under the conventional format of reporting research.” (p. 18). Although there is continuing experimentation in data collection and analysis by qualitative researchers; far less experimentation is evident in the format for reporting results. Van Maanen (1988) and E M. Bruner (1986) have joined Polkinhorne in calling for new formats when it comes to reporting research. They too propose that organizational and anthropological research results be presented in narrative form. A change in the research report format would not only produce more appropriate venues by which to report qualitative research, but more importantly, perhaps, would advance the acceptance of diverse and innovative reporting formats for research using qualitative methods.

In the narrative research report stories are recollections and recreations of past happenings. For the telling of the story only certain elements are selected. Those which are irrelevant to the plot’s development are excluded from the narrative research report. This process is known as narrative smoothing (Spence, 1986).
"Narrative can select and organize the various acts and events of a research endeavor from the perspective of their positive or negative contribution to the accomplishment of the purpose for which the project was undertaken." (Polkinghorne, 1997, p. 15).

In reporting the findings of my study, I attempt as much as possible to experiment with a narrative format. I try not to use the voice of a logician or to codify, objectify and fragment what my "subjects" have to say into distinct categories. Despite my role as a researcher, my aim is to use the voice of a storyteller rather than the impersonal voice of the logician or arguer. This also allows me to speak in the first person as the teller of my own tale. Second, by altering my voice to that of the story teller, I also hope to change the way in which the voices of my "subjects" or participants are heard. They are allowed to speak and acquire a voice of their own in my research narrative. As characters in the story they become co-authors actively affecting and contributing to the unfolding research project. They are able to reflect on what they have to say without having their impressions chopped up into supporting examples or themes. Once they assume their own voices or speaking roles, they start to interact with me as a research protagonist, and together we contribute to and shape the story's denouement. We engaged in a co-operative research project over a period of eighteen months. During that time, I became even more convinced that the only meaningful way of reporting what took place was through narrative accounting. It seemed logical and right for a project that covered a certain span of time to have a beginning, middle and end, the basic elements of a story (Aristotle, trans. 1954).

- **The Insider/Outsider Debate.**

  Countless scholars have debated over whether familiar or unfamiliar situations should be researched. The insider/outsider dichotomy, the debate over whether it is more effective to conduct fieldwork as an insider or an outsider to the groups studied was never a dilemma because I immediately realized that I could not approach or study this particular group of students as an outsider. Academic writing seemed to take me far away from the worlds and experiences of my life: clearly one operates better and more freely when not forced to dissociate from what one understands best.
Luckily the emphasis on the connection between personal and representational process offers a new ethnology in which the dilemmas in research can be negotiated by the positionality of the researchers (Bolak, 1997). How we represent and account for others’ experiences may now be related to who we are. There is recognition of a growing need for self-reflexivity in both doing and writing research. Bolak points out that feminist social scientists have been increasingly responsive to this plea by exploring the implications of self-understanding in doing research (Altorki and El-Solh 1988; Chodorow 1989; Stacey 1988).

The factors that motivated my research emanated out of the similar background, situations and experiences I shared with my creative writing students. The common ground seemed to lesson the tensions that often exist between researcher and respondents. I was aware that through personal accounting, different parts of my biography would become important at different points in the research and how inevitably this would influence what is reported. Yet it was necessary to contextualize my experiences. There was a need for my research self to explore and measure personal reactions against the experiences and feelings of the respondents.

The “insider” versus “outsider” debate, i.e. whether it is more effective to conduct fieldwork as an insider or an outsider to the groups studied (Pollner and Emerson 1983) seems to consider these positions fixed or static rather than shifting. “Outsiderness” and “insiderness”, when applied to my particular research situation, became static and constructed a false separation that obstructed the interactive process. At times, although I was an insider to the group of students under investigation, I often felt like an outsider. Collins (1986) identifies a researcher’s “outsider within” position as particularly informative. She associates it with “creative marginality” and believes that intellectuals can enrich and strengthen their disciplines by learning to “trust their own personal and cultural biographies as significant sources of knowledge.” (p. 29). Accordingly, the difficult issue of how to use location or position as a source of knowledge is solved by the “outsider within” status or “creative marginality” which provides a special standpoint on self, family and society as well as broadening the sociological paradigms on how these are conceptualised.
While conducting research, my status was simultaneously that of an insider and an outsider. I am an insider by virtue of my national status; I have lived in Lebanon - on and off - all my life until 1984 when, together with my husband and children, we moved to Princeton, New Jersey after enduring ten years of brutal civil war. What was supposed to have been a sabbatical year, stretched into eleven years of voluntary exile. Like most of my students, I returned to The American University of Beirut shortly after the war had ended in 1995. I too am a multi-lingual, cross-cultural returnee who spanned countries, crossed cultural boundaries and dreamed of returning to a Lebanon that I soon realized no longer existed. I also come from a middle class professional family that placed the highest priority on the education of their children. My personal, cultural and intellectual biographies were informed by factors very similar to theirs. My life experiences render me, like my students, an “outsider within” my own country and this chance situation made me feel even more strongly that a new and reflexive way of doing research had some validity both academically and as a personal record of my students’ lives as well as my own. It seemed right and natural to tell the story of their lives against the background of mine.

One salient theme in their writing, that of being boundary spanners, became an instant and constant topic of discussion during our class sessions. As I too had spent many of my earlier years travelling extensively and living in countless places, we immediately began to joke about how at home we feel in airports. Geography, at least to us, is a displaced form of departures, arrivals, farewells, exile and belonging. We are all “outsiders within” in a country that is supposedly our own. At the same time, I am an outsider to my respondents by virtue of my professional position and the gap in age and experience. The difference in time between my life today and the lives of my students now is vast. Even my life then, though strikingly similar, remains different from their experiences now. In sum, the distance created due to my professional status, experience and age cannot be ignored, but then again, neither can the similarities.
In this study, I focus on my experience of doing research on a selected group of creative writing students at The American University of Beirut, and on the shifting boundaries in the self-other relations that developed. It may be important to point out here that the self-other is twofold: First, it has to do with the respondents’ relations to the culture and society they now live in. As returnees they occupy a rather precarious position. Second, it has to do with my position as an “outsider within” and the relations that developed as a result of my situation. Both the professional and personal relationships assumed priority remaining fluid and situational throughout my interactions with the respondents.

I would like to say here that at no point did I find my insider/outsider position restricting. While I am aware that “a foreign researcher runs the risk of being culture blind; and an indigenous researcher runs the risk of being blinded by the familiar” (Bolak, 1997), contrary to this, I feel that my insider/outsider position was empowering. Reinharz (1994) is, I think, astute in suggesting that it can be employed as a vantage point for “rethinking the familiar.” Or as Jackson (1989) believes, the familiar can be made strange, and the strange, familiar. My text will be interspersed with examples on how this position informed my researcher role and my perspective on findings that resulted from the research.

Oakley (1981), and Finch (1984), as well as many others in the field of social sciences, argue that knowing will help change the lives of informants. Certainly knowledge is a form of empowerment. The insights gained in research should, ideally, empower the researcher as well as the informants by helping to change their lives. Still there is usually an inevitable tension that develops between knowing and changing, but I believe, there remains much more potential for change inherent in the reflexive approach than in more traditional ones. The learning itself empowers the researcher, while the recording may change the informants’ lives.

Ellis (1997) has experimented extensively with evocative auto ethnography, with writing emotionally about her life. Death, illness and other dramatic life experiences, a
passion for the sociological imagination, an ethnographic approach and an engaging story led Ellis to connect social science to literature, academic interests to personal ones, and emotions to cognition (Ellis 1991; 1993; 1995). By focusing on the self in a social context, her writing becomes more connected to her lived experiences. Feelings and participatory experiences are examined and discussed (Ellis, 1993). It is a movement away from abstract theoretical accounting to one that encourages the writing of other lives and the telling of new stories. "Emotional processes are crucial components of social experiences." (Ellis, 1992, p. 2), and as such should be viewed as a series of solvable problems (Neumann, 1989). Neither should lived experience be subordinated to the "tyranny of reason" or the "consolation of order" (Jackson, 1989, p. 16). Instead an attempt should be made to cultivate "being in uncertainties, mysteries, doubts, without any irritable reaching after fact and reason" (Keats, 1958, p. 193).

My dissertation should be viewed as an attempt to make use of innovations in textual form. To relate fiction to ethnography (Krieger, 1984), narratives to lived experience, and my interactions as an ethnographer to my students. Connecting these strands is delicate but by not attempting to do so, by not experimenting with new approaches and innovative textual formats, the opportunity to discover a new way of telling will be missed.

In commenting on my research findings my voice will occasionally assume the role of an academic by citing authorities, and attempting to classify and analyze the data generated by the study. At other times, my voice will reflect the extraneous happenings and distractions of everyday life (Carr, 1986; Polkinghorne 1997). It will be more personal, emotional and reflexive, attempting to connect my perceptions and lived experience to what I am studying. In doing this, I hope to achieve an interplay between "personal" narrative and a more academic style for the gathering and reporting of data

One obvious danger of involving the self in research is that of self-indulgence. Personal writing when woven into research should be straightforward and immediate without being self-conscious. The story of one's life cannot be told entirely. Relevant
and selective details must be carefully crafted to create a plot. The narrator has the
difficult task of deciding what to tell and why by selecting what details to exclude as well
as include. Narrative and autobiographical strategies must often rely on impulse when it
comes to excluding and including material. In my own research and writing, I rely
heavily on spontaneity and simultaneity. While reading the narratives of my students,
vivid memories and details from my own life were rekindled and this greatly influenced
some of the choices I made. In general, however, what I select to constitute my personal
narrative depends on the analytic significance and connections to the substance of the
research findings. I try to focus on what is appropriate and useful in supplementing the
research material, on what kinds of emotive accounts make the substance more
meaningful. The challenge, as I see it, became how to connect analytic skills to my own
lived experience without becoming self-indulgent. To experiment with attempts to bring
feelings, experiences and insights into the text in order to enhance the research findings
and render them more meaningful.

Bruner (1993) argues that it is only natural for an autoethnographer to be involved
in his or her world as well as the process of research. Ellis (1997), also believes that it is
unreasonable, even impossible, to believe that the self can be separated from research, or
to assume that an attempt at objective reporting protects “the self of the ethnographic
author from close and critical scrutiny.” (p. 122). Jackson (1989) is, I believe, correct in
saying that our understanding of others is only possible from the perspective of our own
experience.

To narrate my own story within the research context is one way to describe its
specificity, to show that the self is worth examining. On a different level, however, the
exploration of the writer’s self is at the same time about the “other”, while the work on
the “other” is also about the self of the writer. To write individual experience is to write
social experience: this social dichotomy means that although I am a character in the story
my journal tells, I do not stand alone in the text. I write in relation to my students. The
aim of my work is not merely to put forth biographies to be reviewed in relation to one
another but to reveal the social processes through which subjectivities are shaped, to
connections made between individual experience and social processes. Particular experiences and feelings as reflected in students’ autobiographical narratives, as well as my own, will reveal our feelings and experiences, our reactions to a socially constructed value system, brought about by particular situations and demands in the society we live in.
Chapter Two

Methodology, Data Collection and Research Design

- **Rationale of the Study**

After being discouraged, for one reason or another, from offering a creative writing class at the University, I finally managed to convince a very reluctant English Department to give it a try. Within an hour of announcing the course, and to everyone's surprise, there emerged an alarmingly large number of receptive students who were already predisposed to creative writing. As they eagerly filed into my office to register for the course, I was amazed at how much they had already written. One political science student showed me a forty page play she had completed over the summer, a history major explained that she was half-way through her second novel and an aspiring medical student asked if I would look over a collection of poems he had written. The following semester witnessed an even sharper increase in demand and additional sections were offered to accommodate the growing number of students. Contrary to all expectations, they come from a variety of disciplines: Architecture and Engineering, English Language and Literature, Physics, Biology, Chemistry, Medicine and Nursing, History and the Social Sciences, Agriculture, etc. Classes are also composed of undergraduate as well as graduate students. At present, I coordinate six introductory sections in which training is offered in four genres: fiction, drama, poetry and creative non-fiction, as well as two advanced sections that allow students to refine their skills in one genre of their choice. Presently we are working on a proposal to offer an M.A. degree in creative writing.

Every time I teach a new section, I am intrigued by how many of my students share a profound need to express themselves in their texts, and I wonder what makes them so eager and unafraid of written expression with all its tedious demands for work and concentration. Clearly their motivation to write distinguishes them as a group. I soon began to realize that despite their diverse disciplines and ages creative writing students appeared to have a great deal in common. At the time I had come across a study that captured my attention. In it the authors write:
Today the youth no longer walk secretly in dim, dark streets. They no longer send passionate messages nor keep intimate diaries. They do not often dream. They only get involved in practical matters; they reject melancholy reveries. The war has diminished their ardor a little and maybe their imagination.


This, of course, had also been my observation regarding the students who took my other courses at AUB. But now one thing had become obvious: the students in my creative writing classes were not that way and I began to wonder what, in fact, accounted for their interest in writing. In order to answer this question, I began a study that would investigate their background and isolate their profiles and shared attributes. I wanted to collect data that delved into their lives because I was convinced that as a group, they must share common defining elements. From our class interactions, I could tell that without exception, they were multi-lingual and multi-cultural, hybrids, highly mobile, cosmopolitans who are passionate about reading and writing. Another factor they seemed to share had to do with living between *society* rather than within *society*. Mostly if not entirely, they perceive themselves as “outsiders.”

Normally this should be a condition of self-affirmation, yet there was something post modernly ironic here. Beneath the self-confidence and sophistication, I soon realized, lurked feelings of unease and tension that hinge on their state of being “everywhere and nowhere”. This feeling was later to be eloquently expressed in the personal narrative of one of my students:

Because I did not adhere to traditional ways of life I was treated differently. The disapproval I received from neighbors and relatives created in me feelings of isolation and I began to feel like I lived “outside” Lebanese society. People grew suspicious of me but I was not pure Lebanese so they could not exercise the usual means of social control. (Hind)

The absence of ethnological work on this group of intelligent, creative, yet marginalized group of students eventually prompted my decision to carry out a small in-depth study. The data collection took place over the span of eighteen months (four semesters), and was initially confined to questionnaires and interviews, but later
expanded to include personal and autobiographical narratives. At first the study was more quantitative in nature, but as my work progressed, I felt an urgent need to explore more qualitative venues. I could no longer continue to be a detached observer searching for objective resolutions to extract from students' evocative stories. Like them, when I returned to Lebanon in 1995, I was thrown into a period of transition and adjustment, and as I followed students through the process of trying to reconstruct their notions of self identity and develop new understandings about their community, I realized that we were grappling with very similar problems. As returnees they have no intention of being subsumed by the powerful, and they resent the "social constructs" which have, unwittingly or not, attempted to silence their voices. Neither can they accept the defined boundaries and strictures erected by an inflexible society. An analysis of the personal narratives of my students invoked events and feelings that I had experienced in strikingly similar situations. Suddenly I was forced to reconsider my own life, to come to terms with my own subjugated history.

As a result of this, I began to consider venues that would highlight the parallels and intersections between my life and the lives of my student/informants. Without hindering the application of systematic methods of investigation, I needed to apply a more immediate and personal approach and format in carrying out and reporting my research findings. Since I felt unable to edit myself out of my research, I decided to make myself an experimental subject, to reveal my feelings and impressions, to explore the emotional and cognitive details of my lived experiences in relation to the experiences of my students. In sum, I wanted to write emotionally about our lives (Ellis, 1997).

Realizing that the personal material I would select to write about depended largely on the analytic significance and connections to the substance of my research findings, I began to faithfully keep a process journal in which I systematically recorded the ideas, impressions, feelings and experiences evoked throughout the research process. Mostly, I reflected and wrote about experiences and situations that highlighted and paralleled those expressed by my students. Eventually, what I recorded provided the material for the telling of my own story within the research narrative. Thus the process of thesis writing...
allowed me to interweave a realistic ethnography with a narrative story, representation and evocation.

Initially it took time to negotiate my professional identity with regard to the study. For example, I was eager to treat my student respondents as collaborators rather than mere “subjects”. It was important to engage their interest by making them feel involved. In as much as possible, I wanted to blur the self-other relationships in order to elicit the most meaningful results. To me this was essential because much of the study is based on experiences as told in students’ narrative texts and discussions. I needed to know how they use language and stories to infuse meaning and direction into their lives. From my initial discussions with students I realized that those who can’t find meaning and space in their writing ultimately lose faith and/or leave Lebanon. In fact, over the past few years, foreign embassies have been swamped with young Lebanese trying to get immigration visas. The exodus, according to articles in local newspapers, is even higher than during the war. The Australian Embassy alone has been granting up to eighty visas a day for the past year. Although I began my research in order to learn more about my creative writing students, half way through I was astonished at how similar their experiences were, not only to each other, but to mine. Consequently, it became inevitable that the interaction that ensued between my students and I provided valuable, meaningful, and insightful information that I could not have obtained by using a more traditional approach in my research.

When viewed from another vantage point, reflexivity enables respondents to learn who researchers are as they participate in their lives or actively interact with them in shaping their telling of stories about their lives. Douglas (1985) labels this a “creative search for mutual understanding.” Evocative auto ethnography or writing emotionally about our lives calls for interactive research that blurs the distinction between researcher and respondent. It connects the experiences of both in order to create a self-reflexive exchange through a series of narrative exchanges. Eventually, I came to rely on an explicitly autobiographical approach, to allow for the exploration of the accounts of students’ experiences and measure their reactions and feelings with other respondents as reflected in their narratives. The multi-voice approach soon replaced the use of more
traditional methodologies. Moreover, the serious examination of self made me infinitely more aware of my role as both subject and object thus allowing for a deeper understanding of myself and my respondents.

Luckily gaining access to data in a class room situation is not difficult. There is no need to establish credibility, or negotiate entry. In fact, administering the questionnaires, conducting interviews and assigning autobiographical narratives proved both engaging and interesting. Of course, how I navigated the interaction with my students was delicate for it determined whether or not they would be eager to cooperate in the project. For example, I feel fairly certain that their eagerness had to do with an awareness that I was both like them and different from them. The similarities in background and experiences fostered feelings of trust and bonding which made interaction natural, the rapport, easy. Thus my status as insider/outsider, I believe, had direct implications on the ways in which we were able to interact and on the information I was able to gather. Incidentally, student often confided that the issues raised in the study are practically impossible to discuss with “outsiders” who keep trying to forge links in a mindless chain of custom and tradition. Moreover, because they fear negative judgement by “outsiders,” they restrain from any self-disclosure. My “in-between” status, and my professional position, I believe, may well account for their lack of inhibition. Not being a part of their circle made it easier for them to trust me. I was neither a threat, nor a potential gossiper, nor did I intend to pass judgement. My “insider” insight enabled me to tap into their experiences by asking relevant and insightful questions without posing any danger. In more “traditional” ethnographic terms, it helped me get at their meaning making perspectives without having to overcome cumbersome obstacles. Students immediately felt comfortable and understood that, I too, am marginal. They also viewed themselves as potentially closer to me by virtue of their real or perceived distance from those in their immediate environment. In many ways, my students have “othered” the people in Lebanese society they perceive as being different from them in much the same way that they (the students) have been “othered”. They have rendered authority figures outsiders because they feel “smug” and “belong completely” to their society. I must confess that I too have, more often than not, found myself engaging in the same kind of “othering” towards those who have “othered” me.
As a researcher I tried as Reinharz (1994) has suggested – to “rethink the familiar” as an “insider”. This approach, I feel, gave me more awareness of the complexity and variations involved in how students coped with the demands of their situation and negotiated their options. It also allowed me to sketch some of the parallels and intersections between my life and that of my informants.

One problem I was faced with initially is what to do when students are not supposed to have a voice, or worse still, not allowed to use it. Like all communities, those in Lebanon define rules of exclusion, set boundaries and impose rigid rules and regulations. Consequently, this determines what can be done and what counts as legitimate behavior. Going against what is communally sanctioned automatically leads to exclusion or ridicule. In Lebanon individual expression, especially with regard to young people, is not encouraged especially when it questions or violates traditional values and beliefs. In most situations, their voices are quickly and conveniently suppressed. This is especially true in a traditional system of education in which spontaneous and creative expression is not encouraged. The individual is quickly coerced into what is seen as ‘good’ for the group. The ultimate aim being to pass the Baccalaureate by memorizing tons of material. In such a traditional classroom setting, silence and discipline are essential, and in order to achieve this, the individual is quickly subsumed within the group.

During the course of my study, I discovered that this system of education created in my students feelings of rebellion and alienation not only with regard to their education in Lebanon, but also in relation to the community at large. As they had all studied in a number of countries, they were familiar with different and more progressive educational systems which allowed for greater flexibility, individual exploration and expression. One recurring theme in their autobiographical narratives focused on how in Lebanon they learned to mute their voices and work silently in order not to be reprimanded in the classroom. Being candid and outspoken, they explained, worked against them. At first, this caused extreme confusion and bewilderment followed by resentment. Soon, however, they realized the need to conform by silencing their voices in order to succeed
academically. “Silence”, they argue, “is what is expected.” It is a sign of maturity, discipline and restraint and remains the only way to gain intellectual respectability and recognition in a traditional Lebanese classroom setting. The point here is that, as far as the dominant forces in society are concerned, there is merit seen in humility, especially since it shows the proper respect and deference to the teachers’ views. My awareness of how students restored to no voice at all in order to succeed academically in a traditional classroom context was, at first, a matter of concern. The whole intention in the study was to make excluded voices “hearable”, to reveal in vivid detail those whose presence has been stifled or ignored when and if they speak. Any enforced silence or the collective expression of what is culturally acceptable would render my project meaningless. In order to enlist the full cooperation of students, I had to reassure them, especially at the beginning of the project, that they would in no way be penalized or ridiculed for expressing and writing about their individual views, ideas and feelings. On the contrary, personal expression and writing was hugely encouraged. Soon, they too showed great enthusiasm and began to enjoy the more immediate kind of disclosure brought about by autobiographical accounts. Another advantage of exploring life histories in these narratives was the ability to present selections of students’ writing in which they interpret their own thoughts and actions freely, and in their own words. In order to achieve this, I had to be extremely careful about establishing an atmosphere of trust and cooperation early on in the study.

Perhaps I have ignored many taken-for-granted research conventions by writing in the first person and placing myself in my research text, but the parallels in life experiences between my students and myself tell the story of how, despite differences in age and experience, lives can be connected across the curve of time. “It is in revelation to the histories of our selves and our identities that we discover solidarity and liberation” (Tierney, 1993, p. 133).

- **Text Design and Creation**

In exploring new territory authors are forced to confront essential issues that have to do with text production and analysis. As a research/author I began to explore a relationship to the text which does not rely on traditional forms of writing. I needed a
way to position myself in the text so as to constantly move back and forth between the research and my personal narrative. In this way, my students and I could both explore our identities in a parallel fashion.

Lincoln (1997) cautions that this kind of experimentation is far from easy. One obvious difficulty is that the choices become too numerous. Innovations in textual forms are abundant and there is no limit to the ways in which we can tell our stories reflexively, no structural conventions and set formats to emulate. A research/narrator has the freedom to speak in several voices all of which represent the multiple selves that constitute texts. Moreover, the text must leave spaces for others, and not just the author to speak. Excluded voices that usually go unnoticed must become “hearable” and excluded experience highlighted. The aim is to welcome rather than conceal contradiction and tension (Richardson 1993). It becomes essential to keep a conversation going (Rorty, 1979), because the conversation will better allow us to understand ourselves and others as well as the positions from which we speak.

It is important to point out that the methodology employed throughout this study kept changing to accommodate the shifting demands of my research. As this is an experimental ethnology, my study quickly assumed a life of its own with unanticipated twists and turns often leading to new and unexpected directions which called for the application of entirely different approaches. To be perfectly honest, no single method was entirely satisfactory. Each one on its own falls short of yielding adequate results. Instead experimentation with one led to the application of a series of others, until the ultimate cumulative result proved significant and meaningful. In my ethnographic narrative I attempt to weave a detailed account of the findings and analysis as they occurred along with my personal insights. My reflexive account and positioning helped to fill in the gaps by revealing other ways in which the research is inevitably affected. Moreover, for the sake of clarity, I have taken the liberty of including the literature review in this chapter as it plays an integral part in the understanding of why certain methodologies were successively employed, while others were not.
Before I could begin to address many of the issues that fascinated me about my students, I needed to gather some preliminary data from which to start. I began by administering questionnaires to a group of thirty creative writing students. Once I had the questionnaire results, I conducted interactive interviews on five students selected from the same sample. I needed perspectives that prompted recall through the exploration of personal experiences. The interactive interviews told me how these students made sense of themselves, their lives and the lives of others by focusing more on the personal and descriptive, to provide a better understanding of how they view themselves, and the milieu they inhabit, of how writing is utilized to make sense of, and negotiate with their surroundings. Overall, the interviews allowed me to expand and probe deeper into the questionnaire findings thus providing greater insight and understanding.

At first, the primary concern of my study was to understand the lives of a particular group of students by isolating the factors and characteristic differences which distinguish and marginalize them as a group. I was intrigued as to why their creativity had not been deflected into other more sanctioned and acceptable channels condoned by their immediate environment. What factors, I wondered, had motivated them to write? As this preliminary inquiry will indicate, this group of creative writing students have chosen to react in a different ways to the post-war, post-modern and verbal/visual trends in Lebanese society. They turn to creative and critical narrative engagement to understand the surrounding complexities and grope for meaning in their immediate environment. Immense value is placed on expressive writing as opposed to what twenty-six out of thirty respondents refer to as “dead feelingless” modes of expression. Somewhere along the way, they developed a predisposition for creative expression - a desire to stimulate and strengthen the craft of imaginative writing, reading and thinking. As a group, they stand in stark contrast to many of their peers. In fact, a recent survey conducted on university students in Lebanon by *The Daily Star* (November 30, 2000), reveals a general lack of interest among the country’s youth when it comes to reading. Forty percent said they never read at all and twenty percent said they read a paper only once a week. When asked if they felt reading newspapers would become more important to them as they grew older, seventy percent of the students questioned said they doubted their reading habits would change. According to the article, leading experts in Lebanon
attribute this to the civil war. There seems to be confusion and uncertainly about the future. Students feel that life is short and, therefore, want to enjoy it as much as possible. Obviously reading does not fit into their scheme of having a good time.

• Three Data Methods: Questionnaires, Interactive Interviews, and Autobiographical Narratives

The Questionnaire

I administered the questionnaire in an attempt to discover, isolate and identify the personal, psychological, socio-cultural and economic factors or conditions that have predisposed this group of students to creative expression through the medium of writing (see appendix). Next, I hoped it would help explain and account for how and why these factors have been so enormously effective in changing the course of these students’ lives by making them unable to be passively receptive to the seductive pressures and pleasures of a post-war society. In brief, the questionnaire is an attempt to highlight some of the reasons that have induced this group of students to seek creative expression and determine the existence of any features or attributes they have in common. After formulating the questionnaire, I ran a pilot test on two students who were part of the intended test population but not part of the sample, to determine whether the questionnaire items presented the appropriate qualities of measurement and discriminability. The test exposed a number of failings. For example, both students failed to understand the instructions to an item, and one responded inappropriately to two questions. Upon further examination, I discovered that the wording was unclear. Thus the pilot test proved useful in detecting some of the problems which, at a later stage, might have caused difficulties.

My thirty subjects, all AUB students, were enrolled in my creative writing classes at the time of investigation. The semi-structured questionnaire was self-administered during class to ensure a high response rate, good rapport and accurate sampling. I provided necessary explanations, but not the interpretation to questions and students were asked not to write their names on the questionnaire to assure anonymity. The survey deployed a mixture of the open type of question and the closed one. Although the closed
questions are easier and quicker to answer and code, the disadvantage had to do with the loss of spontaneity and expressions so vital to the study.

- **Interactive Interviewing**

Interactive interviewing involves a self-conscious and reflexive process with no set rules or models to emulate. In fact, specifying procedures would defeat the purpose because reflexivity and spontaneity are essential in this type of interview. Emphasis is placed on the developing relationship between the interviewer and the participants making the success or failure of the interview situation entirely contingent on the rapport between them. Researchers and respondents must engage in a joint sense-making endeavor (Laslett and Rapport, 1975). “Double subjectivity” (Lewis and Meredith, 1988) is essential throughout interactive interviewing because the feelings and thoughts of the respondents and interviewer affect and play on each other in a reciprocal way. Dialogue instead of interrogation is the aim (Bristow and Esper, 1988). Because interviewers become narrators of respondents’ stories (Holstein and Gubrium, 1995), the gap between the two must be sealed through empathy, careful listening and respect (Stanley and Wise, 1983). Interviewers have the added responsibility of listening “around” and “beyond” words (DeVault, 1990), as the silences are often more revealing than spoken words.

Ellis (1997), along with other scholars, views interactive interviewing as a collaborative communication process that involves the sharing of personal and social experiences between respondents and researchers (Collins, 1986; DeVault, 1990; Edwards, 1993). For this reason, it is useful for interviewers to have personal experience with the topic. Moreover, the experiences and feelings of the researcher become equal in importance to those of the respondents. Interviewers often take these opportunities to write about their own feelings and reactions during interview sessions (Miller, 1996), and how their awareness has aided in the understanding of others. Ellis and Bochner (1996) have even managed to make their own feelings and emotional experiences the focus of the interview. This is possible in interactive interviewing because unlike traditional hierarchical interview situations, researchers are expected to heed their own interest. The notion of distance that forces interviewers to reveal little or nothing about themselves is eliminated (Bergen, 1993; Hertz, 1995).
The blurring of subject and researcher in interactive interviewing places the focus on the interview process or the inter-subjective process (Mishler, 1986) and the understandings that subsequently develop, especially since the research story needs to unfold in the light of the developing relationship. One of the main criticisms directed against traditional interviewing is the artificial separation between researchers and respondents. Interactive interviewing addresses this problem not only by closing the gap, but by introducing a flexible and on-going process (Bird, 1995) in order to achieve a meaningful connection between the two. On the whole, the process is more time consuming as it demands multiple sessions as well as shared activities outside the formal interview situation. In some cases, roles may overlap because all “participants are expected to probe both self and other” (Ellis, 1997, p. 122). Ellis believes this to be necessary because interactive interviewing reflects the way relationships develop in real life, and as such, the sessions are not brief or focused in a limited or artificial way. The natural developing relationship between interviewers and respondents is closer to real lived experiences.

On a more practical note, some academics have argued that the aim of interactive interviewing is to produce research that is practical by being significant to the lives of both the respondents and researchers on the personal and policy levels (Ellis and Bochner, 1996; Bergen, 1993). As interpretative scholars, they continue to question the use of academic data that serves no constructive purpose and is a direct result of traditional interviewing practices (Reinharz, 1992; Roberts, 1981).

The interactive interviews were employed in conjunction with the questionnaire to seek more in-depth and detailed information. I had no fixed questions, but after having tabulated and examined the results of the questionnaire, there were three areas I intended to explore.

- Background
- Circumstances
- Motivation
Interactive interviewing allowed me considerable latitude to touch upon a range of topics some of which deviated, but remained connected, to the areas mentioned above. The students interviewed also played a part in shaping the content and all, I believe, were exceptionally responsive, spontaneous and eager to converse. Candidly, they shared their stories with me. As the interviews proceeded, unexpected questions that had to do with lived experiences assumed significance. This allowed a drift into other dimensions that touched upon the lives and narrative engagement of my students as well as myself. By not exerting strict control I was able to create an easy and reciprocal rapport that allowed “the subject to tell his or her story personally and in his or her own words” (Bogdan and Biklen, 1992), and soon the interviews took on a life of their own.

Let me take a moment to explain how certain students came to be selected for the interviews and why it was important that they, rather than some of the other students, participate. Having by now taught a number of creative writing courses, I was able to select those who showed exceptional talent when it came to creative writing and expression. Though fully aware that I had “loaded the dice”, I needed respondents who could articulate and probe some of the underlying issues that had resulted from the questionnaires. There was also a need to generate additional feedback that would be useful in expanding my research in order to better understand why emotional narrative engagement and expression was so important to this particular group of students.

As I had come to know the students beforehand in a classroom setting, I was fully aware of which ones would be most at ease and able to engage in lively and productive conversation. To discuss my project and interactive interviewing as an interpretative practice for acquiring in-depth understanding of experiences (Ellis, 1997), I met with the five students I had singled out one afternoon. After explaining the process and purpose of interactive interviewing, I told them that our conversations would be recorded by me on paper in order to shape and gather as much descriptive material as possible in their own words.
Out of the interactive interviews emerged three predominant and recurring themes all of which converged on three related but separate issues: How to come to terms with the past, cope with the present, and grapple with an uncertain and disturbing future. In order to further develop and explore these three areas as well as widen my sample, I turned to autobiographical narratives written by a new group of creative writing students. Each of the respondents was required to craft an autobiographical narrative of approximately eight to ten pages. In order to do this they were asked to dip into their past to draw upon memory and record, in narrative form, their childhood experiences together with their present impressions and feelings. Next, by expanding on their experiences, they described and responded to their biographic present, by including their thoughts and feelings regarding their present situation. Finally, they had to imagine their future and whatever problems, difficulties, hopes and dreams they associate with it. Their writing was an ongoing process which was completed over a span of six to eight weeks. During that time we discussed the problems or concerns they encountered regarding style as well as content, and throughout the three steps, I stressed the use of synthesis to create some unity between past, present, and future stages of their lives (Cortazzi, 1993). Personal and imaginative forms of written expression were encouraged in their narrative creations.

Some of my students found difficulty translating feelings into words as their experiences involved shifting and complex perceptions. We discussed how autobiography is “a complex affair” (Cortazzi, 1993), because “experiences are reclaimed through reflection upon reflection” (p. 13). Bruner (1990) also explains the curious nature of the autobiographical narrative. “It is an account given by a narrator in the here and now about a protagonist bearing his name who existed in the there and then, the story terminating in the present when the protagonist fuses with the narrator” (p. 121). Autobiography is inherently problematic because it involves complex and multiple voices, “the self then, the self now recalling then, the self now interpreting the self then from the present self’s perspective, the self now thinking of possible future selves, a possible future self looking back to now to the present self seeking it as if in the past. In all this the role of interpretation is crucial” (Cortazzi, 1993, p. 13).
When multiple voices come into play, along with them comes the question of identity, or multiple identities. The role of the self assumes tremendous significance. This issue is further complicated by narratives being authored not only by those who write them but by the readers and interlocutors who influence the direction of the narrative (Bauman, 1986). In the case of this particular study the whole class, as well as myself, became interlocutors. Still, narrative writing is perhaps one of the best means “by which people organize their experiences in, knowledge about, and transactions with the social world” (Bruner, 1990, p. 35). Moreover, autobiographies can be used as successful strategies to encourage reflection for they allow individuals to “narrate their experience, reflect on it, and ultimately learn from it” (Cortazzi, 1993, p. 6). Autobiography “renders an interpretation of the episodes of a life and the reflection the author had to them” (Diamond, 1991, p. 93). For these reasons, despite the drawbacks of autobiographical narratives, they remained the best way of gathering the necessary information to continue my research.

The difficulties involved in narrative and narrative-based research did not escape my students. They brought a puzzling mixture of anticipation, apprehension and intense energy to the research exercise. Quick to voice concerns about the self in research, they revealed a mature awareness regarding the inevitable complexities of the reflective element and discussed different ways of bringing multiple voices and identities into their narratives. Their interest led to endless questions about how the research would be carried out as well as curiosity concerning my biography and the biographies of their peers. One very interesting query they posed had to do with whether or not my role as teacher/researcher would enhance or obstruct the study. Teachers as well as students, they asserted, come with baggage or presuppositions that could easily influence the research findings. On a different issue, students harbored conflicting views concerning the use of narrative writing, arguing that the imposition of genre expectations might, in some instances, provide an added advantage to certain students, which in turn, might color the research results. One of my early surprises was to discover that the twists and turns brought about by shifting circumstances, unusual happenings, revelations and encounters, as well as the reflexive role of my students and myself remained, in large part, unforeseeable thus adding to the intensity of our involvement with the project. Together
we embarked on a joint and, as yet, unknown journey. In chapter six I explore students’ autobiographical narratives and analyze the themes that foreground their texts. This chapter is also interspersed with personal sketches that spontaneously took shape during the course of this research project. I have taken the liberty to include these vignettes, as they became a natural part of the analytic process I was so involved in. The crafting of my own narrative story from experiences invoked by students’ texts, using their data to theorize and abstract from instigated an on-going conversation with myself as well as with my students. To do this I had to constantly move backward and forward in time and space as I shifted from inter-active introspection to self-introspection and back again.

- **Data Collection and Research Tools:** Content Analysis, Narrative Analysis and Journal Writing
  - **Content Analysis**
    Initially content analysis seemed like the logical method to employ at this point. Consequently, I began to quantitatively examine, determine and extract recurring thematic patterns found in students’ autobiographical narratives, and to overcome the problem of whether the analysis should be limited to manifest or latent content, I decided to use both whenever possible. In this way, a given unit of content would receive the same attention by the application of both methods.

    The categories researchers use in a content analysis can be determined inductively, deductively, or by some combination of both. (Strauss, 1987). An inductive approach involves researchers immersing themselves in the documents in order to “identify the dimensions or themes that seem meaningful to the producers of each message” (Abrahamson, 1983 p. 286). The deductive approach, on the other hand, calls on researchers to use some categorical scheme suggested by a theoretical perspective, with the documents providing a theme for assessing the hypothesis.

    In my particular research situation, the relationship between a theoretical perspective and certain messages involved both inductive and deductive approaches. In order to accurately present the perceptions of my students through their narratives, I realized that induction should be applied. Yet certain insights and general questions that
had taken shape from my previous research involving questionnaires and interactive interviews administered to my creative writing students, could not be ignored. So I drew on earlier findings to propose tentative ideas that might assist in creating various deductions. In fact, my earlier research seemed to underlie both types of reasoning giving rise to an interplay between induction, deduction and experience. Initially, I started by applying quantitative content analysis to the autobiographical narratives I had collected, and was surprised to discover from my readings that standard categories or measures do not exist. Even seasoned researchers who might have been inclined to adopt categories developed by others have made the startling observation that they were “not defined precisely enough to permit replication” (Holsti, 1968, p. 115). In fact, the most interesting and significant content-analysis studies have formulated categories designed and developed specifically for the data under investigation.

The absence of standard categories allowed me the flexibility to develop a content analysis strategy best suited to the particular objectives of the study. The level to sample and the units of analysis to count fell naturally into the idea of theme. Of all the different elements in the written texts, theme seemed to hold the most significance in students’ narratives. Using theme as a content unit, I lifted every respondent’s dominant themes verbatim from their autobiographical narratives, to achieve a content analysis of these themes as items. But reading and sifting through the narratives in order to single out major themes was only the beginning. Judgements had to also be made based on the frequency of recurring themes. By noting the number of times in which a given theme or idea appeared in the text, I was able to count and categorize the recurring patterns. If similar themes were present in the narratives, this was evidence that they were of significance. As a result of this procedure, some themes were not classified at all, others were grouped together into general categories and a few were treated separately. The themes were also examined in terms of conceptional clusters which formed around recurring patterns of ideas. Here, once again, every theme and cluster was separated, examined, and placed into a suitable category. Any striking or common features concerning language, or structure were noted. In this way, I was able to identify the meaning perspectives of my participants.
After a close and detailed examination of the content elements that emerged, I had to develop a number of thematic categories into which the thematic items could be appropriately placed. Although the narratives were carefully read word by word and line by line to determine the dominant and recurring themes, once uncovered these concepts and themes remained tentative. This seemed necessary because it left room for new themes to emerge as the work continued. As mentioned before, due to the results of my previous research, I was not limited to induction alone. Although I examined the texts with an open mind, deductive reasoning also helped to provide fruitful categories into which to slot various units of content, and soon the categorizing seemed to systematically fall into place making me confident that they were “grounded in the data from which they emerged” (Denzin, 1978; Glaser and Strauss, 1967). When the six distinct thematic categories or theoretical classes were finally identified, I noticed that for each theme, consistent, similar, sometimes even identical words and terms were used by students to refer to feelings and conditions.

A Review of the Literature on Content Analysis

Content analysis is defined by Holsti (1968), as “any technique for making inferences by systematically and objectively identifying special characteristics of messages” (p. 608). Generally speaking, it appears to be the way in which researchers examine artifacts of social communication. Any item that can be made into text becomes amenable to content analysis. However, explicit rules known as “criteria of selection”, must be formally established before the actual data analysis can take place (Berg, 1998, p. 224). In order for a kind of reliability of the measures to be achieved, and a validation of eventual findings, the criteria of selection used in any given content analysis must be sufficiently exhaustive to account for each variation of message content. Furthermore, it must be applied rigidly and consistently so that other researchers examining the same message would obtain the same or comparable results (Selltiz et al., 1967). Accordingly, the categories that result from developing these criteria should reveal the important aspects of the messages and regain, as much as possible, the same wording found in the statements: arbitrary or superficial applications of useless or irrelevant categories should obviously not be included. As Holsti (1968) explains, “the inclusion or exclusion of content is done according to consistently applied criteria of selection; this requirement
eliminates analysis in which only material supporting the investigator’s hypothesis are examined” (p. 598).

The users of content analysis have continued the long debate as to whether it should be quantitative or qualitative. Although content can be analyzed qualitatively for themes and recurring patterns of meaning, content analysis historically has been, “objective, systematic, and quantitative”(Berelson, 1952).

Manning and Cullum-Swan (1994), define its historical use as a “quantitatively oriented technique by which standarized measurements are applied to metrically define units and these are used to characterize and compare documents” (p. 464). In this form of content analysis it would seem that the units of measurement focus on communication especially the variety and frequency of messages. So convinced is Silverman (1993), that content analysis should be “a quantitative method” that he dismisses it entirely from his discussion of qualitative data analysis. Selltitz et al., (1967), however, insist that heavy quantitative content analysis results in a somewhat arbitrary limitation in the field at the expense of excluding all accounts of communications not in the form of numbers and that definitions, symbols, detailed explanations, etc. may even lose meaning if reduced to a numeric form (p. 336). It would seem that quantification stresses “the procedures of analysis”, instead of the character of the data available, whereas in its adoption for use in qualitative studies, the communication of meaning is the focus. Here analysis is inductive. “Although categories and variables initially guide the study, others are allowed and expected to emerge” (Altheide, 1987, p. 68). Altheide views the process of quantitative content analysis as a search for insights in which situations, settings, styles, images, meaning and nuances” are of major concern. The process itself involves the simultaneous coding of raw data and the construction of categories that capture relevant characteristics of the document’s content.

Other scholars such as Smith (1975) advocate a blend of both qualitative and quantitative analysis. According to him, the two approaches when combined work best because “qualitative analysis deals with the forms and antecedent-consequent patterns of form, while quantitative analysis deals with duration and frequency of form” (p. 218).
Like Smith, Berg (1998), argues that qualitative content analysis is an important means of examining material after quantitative analysis has been applied. Counts of textual elements merely provide a means for identifying, organizing, indexing, and retrieving data. However, analysis of the data once organized according to certain content elements should involve the literal words being analyzed in the text, being analyzed including the manner in which these words have been arranged. This view has been posited by a number of scholars including Glassner and Loughlin (1987). To them, content analysis provides a method for obtaining access to the words of the text or transcribed accounts given by the subjects. In this way, the investigator is able to learn about how the subjects or authors of textual materials view their social worlds. Seen from this angle, content analysis is no longer reductionistic or positivistic in approach. Instead, it allows for the examination of words and themes in the text to better understand the perspectives of the producers of these words.

For my study, this made classification somewhat easier as the categories were readily identifiable by the language used. Despite the emerging results, I continued to follow three of the four guidelines put forward by Strauss (1987) in which he proposes a number of important steps. The ones I found most useful involved having the researcher ask the data a specific and consistent set of questions, analyzing the data minutely, and frequently making a theoretical observation or note. I was able to stop the process rather early as the patterns very quickly became repetitious. Consistently each text began to yield similar comments, descriptions and situations that fit into recurring thematic patterns. It now became obvious that students wrote about similar issues that fell into a set number of specific and recurring categories.

The Limitations of Content Analysis

At this particular stage in my research content analysis seemed the most appropriate method to employ in conducting an analytical study of the autobiographical narrative text my students had written. That is until I came across a relatively recent procedure, that of narrative analysis, as distinguished from the procedure of content analysis. In narrative analysis, the investigator usually starts with a set of principles and attempts to exhaust the meaning of the text using specified rules and principles, all the
while maintaining a qualitative textual approach (Boje, 1991; Heise, 1992; Cortazzi, 1993; Silverman, 1993; Manning and Cullum-Swan, 1994). In contrast to this more textual approach, content analysis focused more on counts and textual elements, and as such, seemed to take on a reductionistic approach which was adequate initially in the quantitative analysis of the students’ texts, but insufficient when it came time to examine the autobiographies qualitatively.

**Narrative Analysis**

I chose to analyze autobiographical narratives in this study because as a number of scholars have suggested, it is through narrative that the self is given content. The self “is delineated and embodied, primarily in narrative constructions” (Kerby, 1991, p.1). The investigation into narrative would seem to be the privileged medium for understanding human experience. It is in and through various forms of narrative emplotment that our lives attain meaning. “Acts of self-narration are not only descriptive of the self, but fundamental to the emergence of reality of the self” (p. 4). Ricoeur (1974), has argued that experience flows over into narration and it is not narrative structures that are imposed on experience. Accordingly, narratives are justified by the need for the untold stories of our lives to be told. Ricoeur’s three volumes entitled *Time and Narrative* are concerned with articulating the important and often overlooked role that emplotment plays in our experience of temporality. In the light of this, content analysis proved useful in the exercise of isolating themes and classifying them in separate categories. By contrast, it was a restricting and inadequate method when it came time for a detailed analysis and understanding of the various themes. Narrative analysis, on the other hand, seemed to offer a more meaningful approach. Cortazzi (1993) describes narrative analysis as “opening a window on the mind”, or “opening a window” on the culture of a specific group. Narrative is also seen as a field in which a number of disciplines converge (p.2). All this provides for interesting and endless research possibilities, “the potential for educational researchers to use knowledge, draw on the insights and apply the models and findings already obtained and developed elsewhere is enormous” (pp. 2-3).
As explained earlier, content analysis initially proved useful in that it allowed for the discovery and grouping together of common themes, but the severe limitations soon rendered the research endeavor too impersonal and abstract. My objective was to explore narratives from the standpoint of the emotional demands of life rather than standard scientific practices, to interpret the meaning of the lives of my students as well as my own by capturing the intricate nature of their lived experience as revealed in their autobiographical narratives. By initiating the inquiry from a biographical perspective, I intended to explore the emotional and cognitive details of lived experience (Ellis, 1991). Content analysis fell short of providing the essential tools for measuring “emotional narratives” written from a highly subjective perspective. I was losing touch with students’ personal, evocative stories and this was certainly not the way I had intended to conduct my research and writing. Now with the application of narrative analysis I could focus on the active thinking and interpretation of the thoughts, feelings and experiences of my students as expressed in the themes taken from their autobiographical narratives. There is also an attempt at self-examination weaved into what evolved into an introspective narrative which, in many ways, demands a conversation with myself. Finally, all this is used as data to theorize and abstract from in order to gain an emotional perspective that describes, interprets and embodies lived experience.

• *Journal Writing*

As my research progressed, I was drawn more and more into an explicitly autobiographical approach, until finally, in an attempt to express and resolve complex feelings concerning my research topic, I took the decision to include my personal narrative in my study. Apart from the obvious therapeutic value, meshing my topic with my life gave a personal face and immense significance to my work. In my narrative, I reveal bits and pieces of my own story that run parallel to the stories of my students. In order to do this, I kept a journal in which I recorded day to day experiences. When necessary, I dipped into recollections or episodes from my past to better understand and clarify issues that my students were grappling with. While writing, my mood vacillated between enthusiasm and despair. Often I questioned my ability to merge the two strands together, yet the research findings alone proved inadequate and limiting. When combined, however, with personal writing, the experience instantly assumed new
meaning. Overall, it presented a compassionate and sensitive way of being involved in the production and interpretation of the research texts of my students.

Constructing a format that made my students’ personal writing, as well as my own, an integral part of the analytic work of the research text continued to be challenging. In one sense, this relatively new personal-reflexive writing is a direct result of postmodernist thought and any endeavor to apply it to research creates experimental models that focus on shifting and multiple perspectives within the interactionist research tradition with close examination on the meanings that have to do with particular experiences and settings. Although strategies of this sort have been successfully applied by a number of prominent scholars such as Reinharz (1979), Zola (1982), Stacey (1990), Paget (1993), and Ellis (1993), traditionally, as Devault (1997) explains, research texts have maintained a separation between storytelling or narrative and the parts of the text that contain significant analysis. If, by some off-chance the researcher appears as a character, his or her presence is usually confined to the introductory chapter or to a methodological index. In this way, the researcher remains insignificant and marginal to the substantive analysis and is viewed more as an aside or framing device. An account of what took place during the research is sometimes published separately and usually long after the research has come out (Van Maanen, 1988; Stacey, 1991). One example of this is Whyte’s (1993) appendix to Street Corner Society, which was added years later. In it Whyte uses an autobiographical approach to discuss his background and provide a description of his personal experiences while carrying out his research. Here, distance and elapsed time, seem to make acceptable a research story (DeVault, 1997), further justifying the traditional claim that “personal” elements and experiences are insignificant to the actual research story, and as such, should be published separately and at a later date.

It is interesting to note that although personal writing in published texts has traditionally been limited and confined, researchers record fragments of “autobiographical” writing in research notes, fieldwork logs, chronicles, memos, journals, etc. Unfortunately, the bulk of this writing remains confined to a subordinate part of the text. From a traditionally positivist point of view, a personal dimension is seen as analysis that weakens claims to “truth”. Yet a number of scholars have insisted that
acknowledging the producer of any knowledge claim allows a fuller and more complex evaluation of its merits (Collins, 1986; Stanley, 1993). Combining “scientific” with “personal” material is not a retreat from interpreting a wider social world. On the contrary, it enriches the interpretation by providing a deeper perspective. Kreiger (1985), views personal experience as a source of insight in analysis. Ellis (1991) calls for the use of one’s own emotional experience as a legitimate object of research to be described, examined and theorized. Narratives produced by consulting one’s experiences and/or by examining other narratives eventually become data to theorize from, to describe and interpret lived emotional experience.

Finally comes the claim that personal - reflexive material in a research text is a sign of “weakness” or “vulnerability”. Stanley and Wise (1983), refute this notion insisting that reflexivity challenges the fictions of “hygienic research” Ellis and Jill-Mann-Healy (1997) have also questioned the impact of social sciences that cannot explore emotions. Indeed if we cannot connect our work to our lives, we loose much of the significance and meaning. The criticisms of traditional modes of research, according to Ellis (1997), have succeeded in eliminating the rigid disciplinary boundaries that separate social science and literature allowing for narrative modes of scholarship that focus more on personal research (Bochner, 1994), and the advantages in post-modern representation are immense. Findings no longer have to be reported in an abstract manner by an omniscient narrator in the third person voice (Ellis, 1997). The researcher is free to expose actions and feelings, and explore vulnerabilities by dropping the voice of authority. Viewed from another perspective, however, the elimination of “hygienic research” gives rise to another problem, at least from a practical standpoint: How to actually implement these new modes successfully when there are no set models to emulate.

From the very start of this project I was torn between remaining distant by simply recording my “objective observations” or becoming more involved in the narrative lives of my students. Gradually I realized that remaining invisible in a research story that parallels one’s emotional experiences would be sheer foolishness. My life and background had set me apart from mainstream society, and now I was studying a group of
students who, despite the gap in age and experience, had amazingly similar experiences and reactions to mine. We constructed seemingly identical worlds from related contexts. Consequently it made perfect sense to connect my work and life to my research and writing.

After experimenting with a number of different ways to fit my voice into the text, I finally settled on journal writing as it seemed like an adequate method of translating ethnography into a story. Writing in the first person, and recording my feelings, observations and reactions on a day-to-day basis proved therapeutic. Moreover, I was able to eliminate the separation between myself and my students and participate totally in the emotional process by recording stories and describing episodes. Although the events in my journal are recorded linearly, my story is not told chronologically because I attempt to achieve a narrative unity which like life, “is lived through the subject’s eye, and that eye, like a camera’s is always reflective, non-linear, subjective, filled with flashbacks, after-images, dream sequences, faces merging into one another, masks dropping and new masks being put on” (Denzin, 1997, p. 27). Because writing about lived experiences is complex, especially as memory is often selective and blurred, my narrative is constructed on multiple layers of reflection. The layered approach keeps the text in flux by shifting forward, backward and sideways through time experiences. It puts forth the intertwining perceptions that inevitably come into play when one writes about lived experiences. Throughout my journal I attempt to give the past not a survival, but a new life which will assume significance in my research findings. I practice what Ellis (1997) refers to as “emotional recall” (p. 130). By not presenting my journal entries chronologically, I can examine feelings and experiences only when they are of relevance to my research findings, all the time moving back and forth between my students’ stories and mine.

In this way, I am able to explore the patterns and themes that arise from their narratives while exploring the specificity of my situation. My ability to empathize, I believe, proved a useful technique in eliminating any distance students might have felt. The combination of dialogue, empathy and journal writing also served to clarify a number of important issues. Instead of hindering my research, emotions personal interactions and
ethnographic work played a significant role in my understanding and analysis (Ellis, 1991). In fact, this strategy helped to conceptualize a “standpoint” from which to begin my exploration. A “standpoint” achieved through what feminist scholars call an “ethic of caring” in ethnographic encounters. Similar to Joseph’s (1988) experience as an Arab American researcher in Lebanon, I felt that my bi-cultural experience enabled me to merge and separate my insider/outsider relationship. Gradually I began to trust my cultural and personal biography as a significant source of knowledge (Collins, 1986). The “outsider within” status was transformed into a “creative marginality” which broadened the conceptualization of experiences and allowed me to “rethink the familiar” (Reinharz, 1994), while viewing it from a different standpoint. There is no doubt that I was helped by a relaxed classroom setting. Students were eager to speak out and as they trusted the listeners, they spoke with ease. This in turn broadened the interactive and interpersonal methodological strategy.

Auto-ethnography allowed me to fuse ethnography with autobiography. It became an attempt to connect the similarities in “the gaze outward” with “the gaze inward” (Neuman, 1996). The “gaze inward” or the autobiographical approach is an attempt to recreate a story, but it “ultimately receives a vantage point of interpreting culture” (p. 173). Auto-ethnography placed me in the role of a research narrator and as such I could move my gaze inward and outward, backward and forward (Connelly and Clandinin 1990). Moving back and forth allows for the inner workings of the self to be explored in reciprocal relationship with the other. In this way, the telling of my story progresses hand-in-hand with the stories of my students. By “re-framing the narrative voice” (Ellis, 1997), and placing it parallel to my research narrative, spaces opened up for my students as well as myself and together we narrate our lives. Moreover, intertwining the professional with the personal was one more way of exploring a different form or frame - another attempt to “be in the professional/personal nexus that shape our lives, and in the texts we seek to present and re-present” (Tierney and Lincoln, 1997).

Situating myself in a different way during the research experience affords the opportunity, through textual strategy, not only to discover data but also to create (Ellis, 1997). At the expense of sounding sentimental, I would like to point out that linking my
life to my work is a way to "write from the heart" (p. 135), and in doing so the silenced voices of my students, as well as the silenced parts of myself, speak with more strength and insight. In this way "the oppressive structures that create the conditions for silencing" (Tierney, 1993, p. 4), are challenged, and ultimately reserved.
Chapter Three

Post-War Lebanon

Ideally, civil society is a setting of settings: All are included, none is preferred.


Historically speaking, every community has felt forced to accept change, to at least come to terms with other communities. The question is, when do communities become frozen? When do they say that they will not change anymore? I think that happens when they feel besieged, threatened, when no space is left for them to grow.

Homi K. Bhabha & Bhikhu Parekh *Identities on Parade* (1990)

- Home Coming

Before continuing with my research narrative, I would like to conceptualize the post-war society that opened up a parallel world into which, one by one, my students and I returned. In many ways, we all embarked on our inward journey by thinking and writing about place, or the memory of place. Our concerns and emotional engagement had to do with diaspora, exile, remembrance, and marginality. The issues of place and displacement foreground our thoughts and discourse because as returnees they colored our immediate experiences and daily interactions. We were re-entering a country, our country, where those who had never left during the war seemed to have a fixed home and place with set boundaries which they guarded fiercely; whereas we were at home everywhere, but not quite.

- A Post-War Society

Much of what I know about Lebanon’s fragile political, cultural and social history, I learned from my husband. As a social scientist who has dedicated his career to trying to make sense out of the fabric that constitutes this immensely complex, small country, Samir has persisted, throughout our years together, to patiently explain and share his ideas concerning the complicated forces at play. Even during the bleak war years when
Lebanon, in his words, was reduced to nothing more than an “ugly metaphor” to the rest of the world, “beleaguered by every possible form of brutality and collective terror known to human history: from the cruelties of factional and religious bigotry to the massive devastation wrought by private militias and state – sponsored armies,” (Khalaf, 2001, in press) he refused to give up hope. Despite an “endless carnage of innocent victims and the immeasurable toll of human suffering,” Samir continued to believe that a civil society would someday be restored. It is only now, after our return to post-war Lebanon, that I have witnessed his hopes diminish.

In his forthcoming book *Civil and Uncivil Violence* (2001, in press), Samir gives a detailed account of post-war Lebanon based on a number of empirical studies he conducted during and after the war. I would like to take a moment to relate some of his findings and very briefly touch upon a few of the major socio-cultural and economic trends that characterize Lebanon today as this is the society that my students and I, returning from diaspora, found ourselves grappling with.

Apart from the horrendous physical damage to life and property resulting from almost two decades of protracted war (statistics show that approximately 170,000 people died, twice as many were wounded or disabled, while nearly two-thirds of the population were displaced from their homes or communities), the heavy psychic toll succeeded in eroding whatever cultural and social diversity had once existed in Lebanon. Samir has argued that pluralism was wiped out as the Lebanese population, in desperate need of security, found shelter in their families and communities, thus initiating a return to “retribalization”.

Rather than being a source of enrichment, variety and cultural diversity, the modicum of pluralism the country once enjoyed is now generating large residues of paranoia, hostility and differential bonding. The pervasive “geography of fear”, and the predisposition of threatened and displaced groups to relocate in cloistered and homogenous communities, only serves to accentuate distance from and indifference to the “other”. (Samir Khalaf, 2001).
• Retribalization: The Bubble Syndrome

Regrettfully, post-war Lebanon is a place that no longer boasts of diversity, hybridity and openness. Reawakened communal solidarities have created a heightened awareness, even hostility towards individuals or groups perceived as being different. The war brought a renewed sense of retribalization by forcing people to seek shelter in small pockets of belonging, bubbles where they could profess to enjoy a “pure” life in conformity and harmony with the values and traditions of their respective communities. Based on his research, Samir has singled out three aspects of “retribalization”, all of which assumed essential functions both during and after the war. First the family’s prominence increased as its role expanded to include economic, social and recreational needs. The destruction of state and other secular agencies and institutions turned the family into a necessary and safe haven. Second, as circulation became increasingly dangerous and restricted during the war years, people retreated into their territorial communities. This confinement to restricted areas generated bonding within communities. In turn, the heightened territorial identities served only to create distance and suspicion between communities. In-group/out-group sentiments became more pronounced transforming once open, mixed, and hybrid communities into homogenous and suspicious spaces that became closed to outsiders. Prior to the war people had crossed boundaries, and wandered into spaces other than their own to conduct business and recreational activities. During the war, which lasted approximately from 1975 to 1992, the majority of Lebanese never ventured beyond their communities. Retribalization also became evident in the re-emergence of religious and confessional loyalties. It is interesting to note that the results of a 1982-3 empirical study Samir conducted revealed that “a surprisingly large portion of what is presumably a literate, cosmopolitan and sophisticated sample of professionals, university and college teachers, intellectual and journalists displayed strong confessional biases, distance from and intolerance towards other groups” (Khalaf 2001, in press).

• The Desire to Forget

Another disturbing aspect of post-war Lebanon that Samir has identified and explored in some detail, is “a pervasive mood of collective amnesia.” Understandably, in order to cope with the horrors of war, the Lebanese became deadened and numbed. This,
experts say, is a necessary survival mechanism that enables people to inflict cruelty on the “other”, while remaining morally indifferent. Now, years later, there is a collective and overwhelming desire to forget that such atrocities even occurred. Elain Scarry writes that experiencing intense pain is “language destroying”. “Self and voice”, she explains, “are lost, or nearly lost through the intense pain” (Scarry, 1985, p. 35). Richard Rorty agrees. “Victims of cruelty,” he writes, “people who are suffering do not have much in the way of language.” Furthermore, “the job of putting their situation into language is going to have to be done by somebody else” (Rorty, 1989).

Most Lebanese, it would seem, are unwilling or unable to give voice to the atrocities as well as the consequences of the war. Unfortunately, as the results of my study will show, neither are they willing to allow others to do so. If my creative writing students are to be believed, their attempts to come to terms with the past are either ridiculed or viewed with suspicion, even anger.

- Post-War Kitsch

Shortly after the war another trend, this time socio-economic in nature, invaded, the country. Only it differed from the others in that it stemmed from post-modernity and globalism. Mass media, popular arts, entertainment and consumerism were eagerly embraced, especially by the young, with a kitschy vulgarization of the traditional. Examples of this are rampant and hardly warrant documentation. In fact, it is usually the first thing that visitors to the country comment on. Clearly, there is a desperate need among the Lebanese to forget, to kill time and what better way to do it than to indulge in the gimmicky trappings of kitschy consumerism that promise a painless, mindless, even comfortable escape from reality. What distinguishes the students who took part in my study is their need to understand and write about a violent past, a difficult present and a precarious future. Through emotional narrative engagement they struggle to come to terms with the past in order to assign meaning to the present and plan for a worthwhile future. From their perspective, they find difficulty comprehending why their texts and talk concerning what they perceive to be immensely relevant issues, are viewed as a dangerous betrayal by those who try so desperately to forget.
• Some Closing Impressions

This is the country that my returnee creative writing students found themselves living and studying in. By any measure, it was certainly not what they had anticipated. Actually, it was a rude awakening when weighed against the various liberal environments they have grown so accustomed to. Students were utterly disheartened to be witnessing the actual reverse of the historical evolution that occurs in most societies, that which normally involves progression from a relatively “closed” to more “open” system. The sharpened traditional loyalties, heightened family and communal solidarities, cloistered spaces and closed attitudes quickly dispelled any illusions they might have earlier harbored concerning their country. On the other hand, it is only natural that residents of what have become such tightly knit and homogeneous communities display suspicious, even hostile attitudes towards this group of hybrid, multicultural returnees who had, “run away” during many of the war years.

Equally troubling to my students is the attitude of collective amnesia they encounter. Understandably, those who remained throughout the war do not wish to remember or give voice to the atrocities and pain they had either witnessed, inflicted, or both. There is a concerted effort to mute or silence any reminder of a troubled or violent past. Added to this is an unhealthy preoccupation with a hedonistic and materialistic life style, an attempt to dull or erase any trace of memory on meaningful expression. Sadly out of the desperate attempt to forget, there has grown increasing hostility to those who wish to remember, especially if they did not directly experience the war on a continuous basis. The rational being that only those who were present are privileged to speak, and if they decide not to do so, it is certainly not the prerogative of “others” to speak for them.

In sum, the traditional solidarities in post-war Lebanon have been stripped of their tolerance, becoming instead, sources of paranoia and hostility seemingly incapable of accepting more open and expansive cultural identities and life styles. The point I wish to advance in my thesis is that I truly believe my creative writing students can play a significant role in reawakening diversity and erasing, at least to some extent, the distrust, fear and exclusion that they have been victims of in their own country. For a variety of reasons, they have the capability and desire to restore multiplicity and tolerance, to help in
altering the perception of the “other” in order to restore real openness and civility to a society desperately in need of creative alternatives. Perhaps Richard Senate best articulates this sentiment:

As one goes to the edge of oneself, he sees, talks and thinks about what is outside ... By turning outward, he is aroused by the presence of strangers and arouses them (Senate, 1990, p. 149).

Only in this way can “indifference” be eliminated and replaced instead by the open acceptance of “difference”.
Chapter Four

Profile of Students: The Questionnaire

For the sake of clarity I would like to briefly explain the time element involved in the data collection of the study.

- The questionnaires were administered to a group of thirty creative writing students in January 1998.
- During the spring of 1998, I conducted interactive interviews with five students who were part of the questionnaire sample.
- In 1999, at the beginning of the fall semester, a new group of thirty creative writing students were asked to engage in autobiographical narratives. This brought my composite total sample to sixty respondents.

The Questionnaire

As mentioned earlier, the population selected to take the questionnaire consisted of thirty creative writing students (two sections) all of whom were enrolled in my classes at the time of investigation. My intention was to better understand the lives of this particular group of individuals by isolating the factors and characteristic differences which distinguish, isolate and marginalize them as a group. Moreover, I was immensely interested in discovering what factors had motivated them to write, to turn to emotional narrative engagement as a means of creative expression.

Socio-Economic Profile

- Age of Respondents

Since the sample is drawn from University students in the same academic setting, their profile is undoubtedly going to display certain common expected features. For example half the sample are the same age, between 17 and 18. The remainder range between 20 and 24.
### Table 1
**Age of Respondents**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Age</th>
<th>Number</th>
<th>Percent</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>17-18</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>10</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>18-19</td>
<td>12</td>
<td>40</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>19-20</td>
<td>7</td>
<td>23.3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>20-21</td>
<td>7</td>
<td>23.3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>23-24</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>3.3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total</td>
<td>30</td>
<td>100</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

### Table 2
**Academic Major**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Discipline</th>
<th>Number</th>
<th>Percent</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Biology</td>
<td>7</td>
<td>23.3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Business</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>6.6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Computer Science</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>6.6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Education</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>3.3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>English</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>13.3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Nutrition</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>3.3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Political Science</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>16.6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Philosophy</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>3.3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Pre-Med</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>6.6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Psychology</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>3.3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Majorless</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>10</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total</td>
<td>30</td>
<td>100</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
• **Academic Major**

It is often assumed, that the majority of the people who write, with few exceptions, are English majors. The survey proves this assumption incorrect. To begin with, of the 30 respondents only 4 fell into that category. The remaining come from diverse disciplines.

• **Academic Class**

Creative writing has become a popular elective among freshmen students, especially as they constitute the largest number of returnees to the University and are, for obvious reasons, the most fluent in English. Students educated in Lebanon automatically enter university at the Sophomore level because the high school exams required by the Lebanese government exempts them from the first year at university.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Level</th>
<th>Number</th>
<th>Percent</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Freshman</td>
<td>13</td>
<td>43.3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sophomore</td>
<td>7</td>
<td>23.3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Junior</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>16.6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Senior</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>16.6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Total</strong></td>
<td><strong>30</strong></td>
<td><strong>100</strong></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

• **Nationality**

Not surprisingly, given the changes in the composition of students in post-war Lebanon, the majority is predominantly Lebanese. During the pre-war period, the University attracted a large proportion of foreign students, but now, according to AUB statistics, the non Lebanese are drawn mostly from other Arab countries or happen to be cross-cultural, Lebanese-Americans, etc. This is, of course, to be expected given the continuous instability and political tension in the region.
Table 4
Nationality of Respondents

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Nationality</th>
<th>Number</th>
<th>Percent</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Lebanese</td>
<td>20</td>
<td>66.6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Jordanian</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>6.6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>American</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>6.6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Lebanese &amp; American</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>6.6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Syrian</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>3.3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Lebanese &amp; German</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>3.3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Lebanese &amp; Canadian</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>3.3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Lebanese &amp; Australian</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>3.3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Total</strong></td>
<td>30</td>
<td><strong>100</strong></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

- Residential Mobility
  
  High mobility seems to be an important factor shared by the respondents. In fact over the past eight years none have remained in one country. This can certainly be attributed to the fact that they were growing up during the war years, a time when many Lebanese sought shelter in other countries. Of the thirty respondents, 22 have moved three times, 6 have moved four times, and 2 have moved five times.

Table 5
Mobility in Last Eight Years

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Students</th>
<th>Number of Moves</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>22</td>
<td>3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>6</td>
<td>4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2</td>
<td>5</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
II. Educational Background

Tables 6 and 7 reveal that these students have been exposed to diverse educational backgrounds in different settings which have, no doubt, reinforced their hybridity, openness and cosmopolitan outlook.

**Table 6**

**Respondents’ Educational Background**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Students</th>
<th>Number of Elementary Schools Attended</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>16</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>9</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5</td>
<td>3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Total</strong></td>
<td><strong>30</strong></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

**Table 7**

**Parent’s Educational Level**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Father</th>
<th>Percent</th>
<th>Mother</th>
<th>Percent</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>No Formal Schooling</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>3.3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Elementary</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

60
• Parents

The majority of the respondents' parents hold a university degree. Mostly, the fathers are highly trained professionals, while the mothers, with only a few exceptions, are homemakers. It might be worth pointing out that this is common in a culture that values tradition and therefore expects women to fulfill their duty by staying home and looking after the children. Of the fathers all except for one, who is listed as unemployed, are professionals: businessmen, doctors, engineers, bankers, merchants, financial consultants, lawyers, ambassadors, computer consultants, etc. Two of the mothers work in banks, one works as a translator, another is a nurse, one owns a French bakery and one is a doctor. All the rest are homemakers, four of whom are involved in voluntary associations, charity work and fundraising organizations.

• Language Skills

Of the 30 respondents 19 listed English as their native language; while 11 said that Arabic was their first language. I would like to add here that this question created a great deal of confusion because many of the respondents started out by speaking both languages simultaneously. Often it depended on which parent they happened to be speaking to.

Table 8
Language Proficiency

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Excellent</th>
<th>Moderate</th>
<th>Deficient</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Arabic</td>
<td>15</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>English</td>
<td>18</td>
<td>---</td>
<td>12</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>French</td>
<td>12</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>12</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
As expected, although the respondents are mostly trilingual they are, on the whole, more proficient in English than in French or Arabic. Perhaps this has to do with the fact that English is fast becoming the most widely used global language. It is also the language of instruction used in the international schools they have attended. Oddly enough, however, more than one third of the sample perceive or define themselves as deficient in the speaking, reading and writing of all three languages. Initially this may appear rather surprising unless, of course, viewed from within a post-war context in which a number of factors deserve to be examined.

To begin with, none of the respondents remained in Lebanon for the duration of the war. Some left and returned only recently, while the vast majority shuffled back and forth, never staying in one country for a long period of time. One need not exaggerate the difficulties of such a situation especially as it occurred during the most vulnerable years of the respondents’ lives. While in Lebanon, they were confronted with the most obvious effect of the war - the devastating toll it took on the system of education. Schools were destroyed, occupied or disrupted, qualified teachers left the country, and fierce fighting
prevented normal and regular attendance. The quality of life, let alone education, drastically deteriorated, and as the war escalated, the problem was further compounded.

For the respondents, their visits to Lebanon had to be balanced and juggled with long periods spent abroad. Along with high mobility, comes an entirely new and different set of problems. Chief among them is the obstruction of proper and continuous educational development in so far as any kind of systematic pattern of learning is concerned. People caught in these transitional situations, for obvious reasons, find it difficult to develop and maintain meaningful or permanent ties. The transient and unsettling circumstances render the continuous process of learning and acceptance into a society exceedingly difficult. It is these factors, I believe, that explain why one third of the respondents consider themselves deficient in all three languages, and why a few are taking the course hoping to improve their writing skills. Another important factor that may account for why they consider themselves deficient in the languages they have mastered is due, I believe, to the high standards they set for themselves. Because they tend to have high expectations, they put tremendous pressure on themselves, harboring feelings of worthlessness and mediocrity even while producing excellent work. Perhaps this explains why they see themselves as deficient when, in fact, many of them are exceedingly creative and accomplished writers.

**Interests: Recreational Activities and Hobbies**

All the respondents were involved in numerous and wide-ranging activities and hobbies.

- *What They Do for Fun*

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Table 9</th>
<th>Favourite Hobbies</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>Hobbies</strong></td>
<td><strong>Number</strong></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Music</td>
<td>8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Acting</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sports</td>
<td>10</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Art</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Movies</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Cooking 1 3.3
Reading 3 10
Travel 1 3.3
Dancing 1 1

Total 30 99.6

This table reveals that students are actively engaged in wide ranging activities, especially music, sports, and reading.

- Reference Groups: Most Admired Figures

  In exploring predispositions to creative expression, it is obviously important to identify the individuals the respondents admire as well as those they seek in times of personal crisis. When asked to name three people they most admire, locally, regionally and globally, the respondents were at a loss concerning the first two. In fact, the majority named their mothers and fathers or close family members. This was not the case when it came to global figures. One possible explanation may be the cosmopolitan attitudes students share. In the light of this, their identification with global figures is understandable. Another reason could hinge on their distance from, and disenchantment with, local sources of inspiration. It is a sort of index of a group that wants to reject a culture they neither understand nor wish to be a part of. Edward Said, Khalil Gibran and Hanan Ashrawi could easily have been placed in the regional category. That respondents chose to place them in the global one instead, is very telling.

- Most Admired Global Figures

  Toni Morrison
  Mother Theresa
  The Pope
  Bill Gates
  Nelson Mandella
  Hanan Ashrawi
  Khalil Gibran
  Edward Said
  Jesus Christ
Ghandi
Martin Luther King
Madonna
Hillary Clinton
Tony Blair

IV. Looking Back: Life Events and Influences

When asked to single out one incident or event that left a lasting impression on them or changed their life significantly, eleven respondents said it was the death of a close relative or friend, five singled out high mobility, four remarked that it was discovering their ability to express themselves in writing, three mentioned an accident or serious injury, and three referred to emotional problems.

- Creative Encounters and Childhood Influences

Table 10

Is there any person in your childhood who has had a lasting influence on you?

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Person</th>
<th>Number</th>
<th>Percent</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Parents</td>
<td>13</td>
<td>43</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>No Influence</td>
<td>10</td>
<td>33</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Other</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>13</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Close Relative</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>10</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

The results here are significant in that 13 of the respondents named their parents as having had significant influence on them during their childhood years. Yet surprisingly, none would consult them in the event of an emotional or personal problem.

- Mentors

When respondents were asked if there was or is any writer in their families half replied negatively, whereas the other half mentioned a close relative.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>No</th>
<th>15</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Close Relative</td>
<td>15</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Given the respondents’ predisposition to writing, it is of course, significant that exactly half had a writer in their family. In retrospect, the logical question to have asked next would have been whether or not the respondents were influenced in any conscious way by the presence of such a person. Later, when another sample of students were asked to address this issue in their autobiographical narratives. Yasmine was particularly moving in what she had to say:

Although writing is something I am very passionate about, the reason why I want to seriously pursue it is rather personal. I had a great-uncle who was an historian and he wrote screen plays for several films. I felt a special bond towards him. He always encouraged me in my writing, buying me books to help. It is my dream to publish a piece of my writing and dedicate it to him (Yasmine).

• Where They Turn in Times of Need

Table 11

When you have a problem whom do you consult?

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Problem</th>
<th>Close Friends</th>
<th>Family</th>
<th>Counselor</th>
<th>Professors</th>
<th>None</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Emotional</td>
<td>27</td>
<td>14</td>
<td></td>
<td>1</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>(personal)</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Financial</td>
<td>9</td>
<td>26</td>
<td></td>
<td>3</td>
<td>14</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Academic</td>
<td>12</td>
<td>20</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>14</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

These young people have acquired a great deal of autonomy. Their exposure to other cultures has served to relax the rigid kin and communal ties that have characterized post-war Lebanon.

When asked from whom they would seek advice if they have an emotional or personal problem, 27 of the respondents said they would turn to close friends, whereas only 14 said they would consult family members. Thus parents and other family members are not placed at the same level of importance as friends. Yet when it comes to financial
and academic matters, this trend is reversed. On financial issues 26 of the respondents would seek advice from family members and only 9 would consult friends. With regard to academic problems 20 of the respondents would turn to family members, while only 12 would seek help from close friends.

Bearing in mind that given their socio-economic level, tuition fees are covered by their families, it is natural that the family be consulted with regard to financial and academic problems. Furthermore, in a traditional culture like Lebanon where family is still the basic unit in society, it is considered shameful and highly inappropriate to ask for financial assistance from anyone other than a close family member. Unfortunately for these young people, as we will see in the interviews and autobiographical narratives, there are strings attached to this financial backing. Frequently parents select the area of specialization they wish their son or daughter to pursue, and more often that not, it happens to be a profession such as Medicine, Engineering, Law, Business, etc. This in turn creates considerable anxiety and resistance among this group of student who wish to major in fields of their own choosing. The degree of autonomy acquired by their hybridity and openness seems to confirm their new independence in some areas, but not in others. Although the respondents have liberated themselves, to some degree, from their close knit family ties, the relaxation of other constraints are not as apparent. Only three out of thirty respondents said they would seek help from a counselor and only concerning academic matters. Later on in this study, after conducting interviews and analyzing students’ autobiographical narratives I came to understand why students refused help from counsellors. Now that they are living in a traditional society that imposes specific codes of behavior, students fear that as outsiders they will be ridiculed or forced to conform.

Next comes the revelation that less than half of the respondents would solicit help from a professor and only in conjunction with academic matters. Judging by the answers to another question, “How does this course differ from other courses you have taken or are taking now?” There seems to be a considerable amount of disrespect, and criticism towards professors who continue to use outdated teaching methods, boring material, and who discourage student participation in class.
V. On Books and Reading

- *Initiation Into Reading*

Time and time again our classroom discussions have focused on the joys of reading and being read to, and on the memorable moments that opened up new worlds of reality, fiction and fantasy. Students were eager to talk about what it felt like to be a child again, to be innocent and carefree, to delight in the enriching experience of reading or listening to a good story. The respondents seem to have been read to at a very early age. 25 out of 30 were read to during childhood. The majority was initiated into reading by their mothers, although a high percentage of fathers participated in the activity, followed by a sprinkling of aunts, grandparents, etc.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Who Read</th>
<th>Number</th>
<th>Percent</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Mother</td>
<td>23</td>
<td>76.6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Father</td>
<td>11</td>
<td>36.6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Brother/Sister</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>16.6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Baby Sister</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>3.3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Others</td>
<td>12</td>
<td>40</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

The magic of reading and being read to is a topic that incites a great deal of interest in class. The similarities between students’ childhood experiences, observations and recollection are, I believe, of significance. Nostalgically they describe how they came to love words and explore new worlds through the wonder of books. One student explained that any room in her house, at any time of day or night, could be used to read in. Another told of her disappointment upon discovering that books had been written by people, she had assumed them to be works of nature. Three or four respondents told of how their parents had carefully selected books for them to read, and all expressed gratitude towards their parents for initiating them into reading at a very early age.
In general, Lebanese culture does not assign any value or importance to reading and, with very few exceptions, children are usually not read to. Worth noting is the observation that one rarely sees a child being read to either at home or in any public space. Although an airport would seem an ideal place for a child to read or be read to during the endless hours of waiting, this is not the case. At the airport in Beirut, it is consistently ‘foreigners’ who are seen reading to their children. One possible explanation for this may simply be cultural. The manner of raising children is entirely different from Western approaches. Emphasis is placed on verbal skills and social activities and the idea of being all alone reading a book is viewed somewhat suspiciously. Setting aside a quiet time for reading tends to invite sympathy towards the poor loner who presumably has nothing better, or more social to do.

- **Reading Intensity and Preference**

On the whole, the respondents appear to be avid readers, with a preference for good literature, especially novels.

*What They Read*

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Books</th>
<th>Periodicals</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><em>Great Expectations</em></td>
<td><em>Time</em></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><em>Macbeth</em></td>
<td><em>Newsweek</em></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><em>The Little Prince</em></td>
<td><em>National Geographic</em></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><em>Jane Eyre</em></td>
<td><em>Readers’ Digest</em></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><em>The Alchemist</em></td>
<td><em>The Economist</em></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><em>Sophie’s World</em></td>
<td><em>A few fashion magazines such as</em></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><em>Lord of the Flies</em></td>
<td><em>Vogue</em> or <em>Cosmopolitan</em> was mentioned*</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><em>Death in Venice</em></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><em>Catcher in the Rye</em></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><em>The Great Gatsby</em></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><em>The Princess Bride</em></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Sidney Sheldon books are popular as are Jane Austin novels.
After examining their reading preferences, it is evident that all, except for one of the respondents, read foreign literature and periodicals, unless, of course, Khalil’ Gibran can be considered a local writer by virtue of having been born in Lebanon.

- **Any Place but Here**

Initially, I was puzzled by the response to this question. It was not until later, when I examined the results of the interactive interviews and autobiographical narratives, that I was able to attribute their preference for foreign literature to the fact that although most of the respondents live in Lebanon, they dream of being elsewhere. As returnees they feel out of place in their own country. Their cosmopolitan background makes them more international in their outlook.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Once or Twice a day</th>
<th>Once or Twice a week</th>
<th>Once or Twice a month</th>
<th>Once or Twice every three Months</th>
<th>Yearly</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Magazines</td>
<td>8</td>
<td>13</td>
<td>8</td>
<td>1</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>News Papers</td>
<td>10</td>
<td>12</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>4</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

- **What they Read**

At least half of the respondents prefer reading short stories and novels. A second group appears interested in biographies, poetry and best sellers, magazines and newspapers.

| Best Sellers | 1 | 7 | 11 | 12 |

70
When asked how often they write, the group ranged in the intensity of their answers, beginning with those who said they write all the time, every day and quite often (13 respondents), to once or twice a week (17 respondents) with only one respondent who wrote once a month. Others gave more subjective reasons for how often they write such as, “When I’m inspired,” (four respondents) or “Whenever I’m alone, sad or in the mood” (five respondents). Judging by the results, almost half the respondents write whenever possible.

Table 14

Why They Write

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Reasons</th>
<th>Number</th>
<th>Percent</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Expressive Outlet</td>
<td>25</td>
<td>83</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Emotive and Cathartic</td>
<td>14</td>
<td>46</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Self-Improvement</td>
<td>12</td>
<td>40</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Self Validation</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>13</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Inner Search</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>10</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

The reasons they give for writing revealed a whole array of emotions that converged on a meaningful set of justifications. As many as twenty-five of the thirty respondents said that writing offers them an expressive outlet in which to develop their creativity and explore issues that are of concern to them. Overall, they appear to be a group of young people trapped in a post-war and post-modern environment who are not
just seeking the mindless “good life” with its guarantee of instant gratification. Instead, they have launched an on-going search for more meaningful modes of self-expression and self-realization. They strive to cope and come to terms with the uncertainties and ambiguities of their milieu by writing about it.

Next, cathartic reasons were cited with fourteen out of thirty revealing that they write to “feel better” and “function intelligently”, followed by the notion of self-improvement cited by twelve out of thirty. The underlying rational for the cathartic reasons are, of course, closely related to their need to have an expressive outlet in order to “reveal feelings I cannot talk about”, and to “express how strange I feel about returning to Lebanon”. Presumably these students find themselves in difficult and unsettling situations. Thus arises the need to explore the difficulties, in an attempt to seek respite from that which disturbs them.

Accordingly, almost an equal number of respondents, twelve to be exact, say they write “to organize my thoughts”, to “receive constructive feedback”, and “develop an essential skill for the future.” The propensity for hard work and the desire to improve and refine one’s writing abilities as an essential tool for the future seems to be an attribute almost half the respondents have in common.

Four of the respondents cite an inner search as their motivation for writing, while three mention self-validation. “To be in contact with my inner world,” and “to explore my limits,” were among the justifications given for the former; while in response to the latter attitudes directly related to identify and well-being were cited soliciting responses such as: “to understand myself,” and “because I must find my identity” or “writing means a lot to me,” and “I want to move people through my writing.” Here, I believe, the honesty of their responses is very revealing. There is a pressing need to express their feelings, search for answers and struggle with identity, a desire to reshape, redefine and reinvent their lives. Moreover, it can be inferred from their remarks that they are mostly dedicated writers who view their craft as an important and on-going commitment for the future. It is perhaps of significance to mention here that all the students I interviewed at a later date are exceptional writers who cite an inner search, self-validation and the need to
express how they feel, as well as a desire to instigate change as the motivations behind their writing. Such unflagging focus and determination is one of the many attributes these students share.

- **Creative Encounters**

In general, the sentiments and justifications respondents use to explain why creative writing differs from other courses they have taken or are taking now at A.U.B. can be grouped under the following categories.

**Table 15**

**What Makes Creative Writing Different?**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Reason</th>
<th>Number</th>
<th>Percent</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Interesting</td>
<td>22</td>
<td>73.3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Interactive</td>
<td>21</td>
<td>70</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Creative</td>
<td>15</td>
<td>50</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Unusual and Fun</td>
<td>14</td>
<td>46.6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Pedagogical</td>
<td>10</td>
<td>33</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Twenty-two of the respondents said that they are taking creative writing because it is interesting. Among the reasons mentioned were, “we discuss and share interesting ideas,” and “I’m allowed to explore new and interesting techniques and writing styles.” Twenty-one students singled out the course as offering an interactive approach that emphasises “collective group effort and participation,” where students and their writing “are the main focus.” Fifteen of the respondents described the course as creative because “it gives us the freedom to explore and experiment,” and “it sets no limits or boundaries when it comes to sharing ideas,” and “it is highly imaginative in approach,” thus allowing students to “learn about ourselves and others,” and “openly express the way we feel.”
Other respondents, fourteen in all, referred to the course as “unusual and fun.” They mentioned that it was “unlike any other course” and that “because it is so enjoyable, I don’t have to drag myself to class.” “A friend of mine advised me to go for it since it is one of the few courses where you put your imagination and creativity to work.” Better still, “creative writing is more fulfilling and rewarding than any other course I have taken. All learning should be like this” or “As a senior at AUB I’ve gone through three years of very dry and extremely boring classes. I’m here because this is a fun and creative course. It’s by far the most exciting class on my white card.”

Finally ten respondents cited pedagogical reasons for taking the course. Many of the remarks had to do with the need to “learn how to give and receive constructive criticism,” “to learn different writing techniques and genres” as well as the necessity of “writing and rewriting in order to improve,” and “to get in touch with my writing abilities.”

What was curious about the pattern of responses to this question had to do more with what the respondents revealed about other courses than about creative writing. Together they voiced an acute awareness that there is something amiss in courses that don’t tap or utilize students’ intellectual and creative abilities. In highlighting the positive aspects of creative writing by referring to interactive approaches and techniques, they were also suggesting that these methods might serve as a model to improve or change existing classroom situations.

Of importance here, is students’ desire to be expressive participants in class and thus play a more active role in their education. By voicing disappointment concerning outdated teaching methods that rarely allow them the opportunity to voice their ideas and opinions openly, students display a critical awareness of themselves and their educational needs. A few months later when students were asked to write autobiographical narratives, twenty two out of thirty remarked that their exposure to professors who continue to read their outdated notes in class and expect students to regurgitate set information during exams, simply served to confirm their worst fears about attending university in Lebanon.
• Some Observations

The questionnaire sample from thirty creative writing students produced some interesting and thought provoking results. Clearly as a group, these students showed common defining elements. By almost any indicator of health, welfare, or educational attainment their situation is unusually favorable. They come from solid, highly educated middle or upper-class family backgrounds that have been extremely supportive of their children. All have attended a number of good schools and are fluent in more than one language, the average being three. Another common pattern is their high mobility. From an early age and probably due to the civil war in Lebanon, respondents tended to move their place of abode rather frequently. While constant relocation offered an enrichment of experiences, transforming these young people into sophisticated hybrids, it was not devoid of difficulties. Very often they found themselves uprooted and implanted in unfamiliar places where social integration was difficult. Living in transit became a way of life as did feelings of isolation, aloneness and marginality. Perhaps this explains why all thirty respondents have turned to writing to give voice to their lived experiences, to express the difficulties involved in living between worlds, of existing “between” society rather than “within” society.

The questionnaire findings stood in stark contrast to what scholars and the media had been bemoaning about the youth in Lebanon today. In general their views are best summarized by a powerful article, previously quoted, based on research conducted by Baghdadi and De Freige.

Today the youth no longer walk secretly in dim, dark streets. They no longer send passionate messages nor keep intimate diaries. They do not often dream. They only get involved in practical matters; they reject melancholy reveries. The war has diminished their ardor a little and maybe their imagination


Obviously the students in my sample did not fit into this category. Although my research was still in the preliminary stages, the key factors and patterns that had taken shape showed common defining elements that distinguished them from the Lebanese youth that Baghdadi and De Freige along with other intellectuals and writers described. My respondents were mostly, if not entirely, “cosmopolitans”. Normally this is a term of self-
affirmation, yet there was something post-modernly ironic and paradoxical here. Beneath the self-confidence and sophistication, I was soon to realize, lurked feelings of unease and tension that hinge on their state of being outsiders, of feeling “everywhere and nowhere” at home. As the study progressed, this experience was expressed in the autobiographical narratives of all thirty students:

Because I did not adhere to traditional ways of life I was treated differently. The disapproval I received from neighbors and relatives created in me feelings of isolation and I began to feel like I lived “outside” Lebanese society. People grew suspicious of me but I was not “pure Lebanese so they could not exercise the usual means of social control. (Hind)

The stressful demands present in a country struggling to recover from the throes of an ugly war, the retribalization, collective amnesia and kitschy commercialism had not succeeded in thwarting my respondents from their commitment to and belief in creative expression through the medium of writing. Together they constitute a core of individuals with similar characteristics who bring their own meaning perspectives. Furthermore, their distinguishing features, for one reason or another, appear to be the motivating factors behind their creative expression.

Having reached this conclusion from the questionnaire results, naturally increased my desire to learn more. The predisposition these students have for writing and the need to express themselves is exceedingly complex and demands examination on many different levels. Uncovering their profile and common traits along with some of the socio-economic, cultural, personal and situational factors associated with their motivation and creative productivity, though essential initially, now seemed insufficient. The questionnaire findings provided a useful but limited starting point. I now needed to explore, in infinitely more detail, the issues of significance in the lives of these students, as well as why and how emotional narrative engagement addresses their immediate concerns.
Chapter Five

Interactive Interviewing: Five Stories

• The Interviews

I now turned to interactive interviewing to seek more in-depth and detailed information. Although I had no fixed questions, the results of the questionnaire highlighted four areas that I wished to explore more extensively.

- Background
- Circumstances
- Motivation
- Output

I planned to take notes during the interviews in order to accurately record the conversations that took place. The notes, along with my journal entries, would provide the necessary material for my narrative account of the interview sessions. The five students selected to take part in the interactive interviews (see methodology chapter) had been part of the questionnaire sample as they were all enrolled in my creative writing classes at the time. We met in my office after class one late Wednesday afternoon. I explained the project and briefly discussed what it would involve before turning to the actual scheduling of our interview sessions. As it turned out, the three women students could only meet on Thursdays, whereas the men students were free on Fridays. We spent a few minutes joking about segregation in the Middle East, and agreed to meet the following week before scrambling off in different directions.

• Preliminary Meeting

The following week all three girls appeared in my office at three o’clock sharp. Charlotte, a Political Science student, is the most striking. Tall and dark, with long-straight hair, she has an open and magnetic personality. In contrast, Jinan and Dana are of medium height. Both have curly brown hair and are quiet in different ways. Jinan, who is majoring in agriculture, is sweet and softly spoken. There is an innocent curiosity in her large hazel eyes, that very often light up and dance with enthusiasm. Dana, on the other hand, is angry and suspicious by nature. There is something unsettling in her
piercing gaze. She is fiercely determined, to live life according to her own rules and convictions.

Spring had arrived early. Outside my office window the campus is ablaze with brilliant flowers. Luckily no time is wasted in getting started as we are all in a congenial and relaxed mood. Initially the interview took an unexpected turn when I, instead of my students, became the object of interest. I found myself explaining my interest regarding the project and how as my research developed, I had been drawn to an explicitly autobiographical approach. How evocative auto-ethnography or writing emotionally about our lives had captivated my imagination and exerted a powerful effect on me. Soon we were on to the topic of our “inbetween” status and marginal existence. Jinan said she “always feels as if she falls through the cracks.” “It’s like being pushed to the margins on a page and never being allowed to be part of the real text,” explained Charlotte.

When the conversation turned, once again to my background, I explained how during my AUB days, in the early 1970s, the social and political climate had made “being different” slightly easier, at least among a group of students who formed a subculture and rejected the status quo. Naturally we dressed and even looked alike thanks to our bell-bottomed jeans, mini skirts and boots. Giggles filled the room when I mentioned my long, straight hair. Yet despite our closely-knit group at AUB, there was suspicion and resentment directed against us by the more conservative elements in society even though we were far from being “real hippies” in our life styles and actions. Still, we were different in a culture that demands uniformity.

In no time, similar episodes and experiences were rekindled from the lives of my students. They shared their feelings of belonging everywhere and nowhere, of how they are only able to bond with creative writing students in and out of class. My mind began to move back and forth between their stories and mine, connecting what is happening to them to what happened to me, thinking about how their experiences have been similar or different from mine, and projecting into what might happen in the future. Moving back and forth between their narratives and mine helped me fill in the gaps, compare experiences, and formulate new questions. Then suddenly, in their enthusiasm, all three
students began excitedly talking at once. Delighted at the encouraging response, but conscious of my teaching commitments that began in fifteen minutes, I quickly concluded our fascinating exchanges. We agreed to meet the following week at 5:00 p.m.

To demonstrate their eagerness, all three students arrived in my office way ahead of our scheduled appointment. The emotional and time-consuming demands of interactive interviewing did not bother them in the least. In fact, the candid face-to-face exchanges seemed to create an unusual energy which is difficult to describe. There was also a therapeutic dimension in that the exchange of experiences allowed them to better connect with each other, as well as to delve deeper into the meaning of their lives and actions.

It was a challenge to listen and participate in the stories and impressionistic fragments of acutely observed moments as related by my three students, all the while attempting to decipher threads that connect their experiences together. Interestingly enough, common themes began to lace the accounts they related. All of them continue to experience highly mobile lives, shuffling back and forth between Lebanon and at least one other country, though their journeys from one place to another are viewed differently. Jinan perceives her high mobility as a passage “from a world of suffering to one of stress.” Jinan, whose mother is German, describes Lebanon as “welcoming and warm,” but “intrusive and chaotic.” There is the constant feeling that the country is on the verge of some great catastrophe and that people are always searching for outside help.” Germany, on the other hand, “is too orderly and clean, the people cold and snobbish.” She paints the picture of a highly sterile and aloof society, one in which the individual is isolated, lonely and confronted with daily stress both at work and at home.

Charlotte, on the other hand, was born in Canada to Lebanese parents who moved back when she was sixteen. While in Canada she had been active and popular, but once back in Lebanon, she experienced “culture shock” and became seriously depressed, gained weight and lost interest in her education. Now, in her senior year at AUB, she is an active and outspoken student leader. Still, she feels “marginal” and “uncomfortable”, unable to identify with the values and norms of her native country.
Dana who has traveled back and forth between Lebanon, Saudi Arabia and the US since the age of three, has a Lebanese father and a Turkish/Syrian mother. She describes herself as “quiet and weird”, a person who “keeps things bottled up.” Dana has never made more than one or two friends in each of the countries she has lived in. In fact, she dislikes talking. Taking pride in her marginality, she dresses like “a grandmother”, because it makes her feel comfortable and enables her to make a statement against “the slaves of fashion” at AUB and in Lebanon. She has difficulty with the formalities that her peers adhere to, explaining that they are pros at pretending to be what they are not. Yet she admits that her experiences have been character building and that the attraction to her roots, like some magical force, always pull her back to Lebanon.

•  

Jinan’s Story

Jinan explained how her German mother taught her how to keep a dairy at a very young age. She told her it was her secret friend and that she could write anything in her dairy. So Jinan began to record incidents, disturbing or happy thoughts, ideas and feelings. “All my interest and experiences were recorded with the date and time,” she explained, “even if they were just jottings and notes.” The freshest and most moving accounts came when Jinan actually described her adored grandmother who took an interest in everything she did. “My grandmother and I loved each other unconditionally. My childhood recollections of her are very precious.” Unlike her Lebanese grandmother whose main interest is to feed her, “snoop into her daily affairs and tell her what to do,” she went on walking, biking and museum trips with her German grandmother. They engaged in long and fascinating discussions about almost everything. She never passed judgement on Jinan or “hemmed her in.” Often her grandmother would read stories to her long into the night. But it is her mother who has had the most influence on her. She taught her the value of recording her impressions and ideas in a completely open and honest fashion. Soon Jinan began to feel more comfortable with writing than with spoken words. She likes to think “long and hard” before saying anything, so writing is best suited to her personality, it flows more easily than speech, and she can string her thoughts together coherently. Writing “offers continuity to my choppy life.” It adds a new and
interesting dimension by putting her in control. Time and time again she can return to re-examine and re-live what she has recorded. Perhaps one of the most significant points she made was that “writing allows her to spend time alone with herself and her imagination.” Since childhood she has never been a follower. She treasures her independence and respects the few friends she has because they share her values.

- **Charlotte’s Story**

Charlotte’s father was expelled from university at a young age but went on to become a self-made businessman in Canada. His creative energies and determination brought him great financial rewards, but after his teenage son was brutally kidnapped, he quickly relocated the family to the safety of his village in North Lebanon. Charlotte explained that although her parents were not highly educated, their home was full of books and they instilled the love of learning in their two children. Her father, who is definitely “a maverick of sorts”, adored reading Khalil Gibran out loud to his guests. Unconventional, argumentative, and “quirky,” he transformed the basement of their home into a place were he could distil wine, bought a tractor to plow and plant his own fields, but mostly, he took great pride in the stories Charlotte wrote. Never did he fail to delight in her academic achievements, continuously providing positive reinforcement and insisting that one day she will write like Gibran. Charlotte credits her father with a curious and experimental mind, and with teaching his children to be expressive, engage in dialogue and writing, and indulge in a good argument. She realizes that she comes from an unusual family with “plentiful peculiarities”. “We had a most extraordinary and crazy childhood,” she exclaims with a laugh. Charlotte talks about the writer’s magic, of how exciting it is to give shape to ideas. Her eyes light up when she tells of the two awards she won in Canada for a story published in her high school journal.

Forceful, disciplined and free-thinking, she explains that on her return to Lebanon she wrote to escape the pain of being thrown into a society she neither accepted or understood. At first, she wrote for herself, but soon she began to write out of anger, to challenge what she views as “a superficial and confining society.” This is a country that has allowed itself to become like every other place. “It disregards its cultural heritage and values ugly shopping centers and fast-food joints instead.” She wants to challenge the
values in Lebanon, to prove them wrong, to create a sense of place for herself, even if only in her writing. Charlotte talks about the importance of asserting herself seriously as a woman writer because she feels that women are not taken seriously in Lebanese society. At first, her writing expressed pain and suffering as she struggled to change the situation. Finally, “I wised up and learned to accept the way things are.” Consequently her writing has taken a turn to the satirical, to poking fun at the way people live and act. Charlotte thinks that writing has made her a much stronger person and has miraculously lifted her depression. There is a great deal of tension involved in Charlotte’s writing, yet it helps to channel her vulnerabilities and keep her sane. Better still, it keeps her from falling into the trap of “an easy and comfortable life,” that is enjoyed by “the mindless students” she comes into contact with at AUB.

Her boyfriend is the person she feels closest to. Like her, he is multi-cultural, a Lebanese who grew up in Saudi Arabia and went to school in the USA. She admires his writing. He is so “amazingly creative” that he gives her a complex. Their mutual love of writing and creative expression has brought them closer over the past year, especially since they deem the activity a necessary exercise in that it provides periods of escape from their surroundings.

• Dana’s Story

Dana never speaks much to people. Critical and aloof, she disliked “the gift of the gab” and writes in order “not to keep things bottled up.” Her grandfather was considered an outcast by the family because he loved poetry. In later years, when he went deaf, he didn’t realize that he was screaming when he read poetry out loud. Her family thought him “nutty”, but Dana loved and respected him enormously because he was “uninhibited, unafraid of doing crazy, unusual things.” “When I was growing up, I felt an uncanny closeness to my grandfather, and I’ve only recently realized why. We were both mavericks in our own family. I’m sure that’s why I identified with him so easily.”

Dana writes two or three times a week because it allows her to say so much more than she can communicate in a conversation.” Besides, speaking gets her into trouble as
she has a tendency to be too blunt and critical. Being unable to express her feelings properly, she prefers to remain silent and withdraw from those around her.

Her parents are concerned about her image and future. They want her either to become a Graphic Designer or obtain a degree in Business, like her sister. They think she is wasting her intelligence on useless activities such as writing. So far, she has resisted their demands by remaining in the English Department despite the mounting pressure on her to conform. Dana’s writing is interesting and unconventional, highly post-modern in structure and content. Usually there is no plot, no story line, no character development and the theme is elusive and confusing. Expertly she weaves observations and impressions onto the page defying traditional structures and constraints.

Of all the interviewees, Dana is the most prickly and defiant. Fiercely independent and assertive, intense and driven, she is incapable of “letting go” or modifying either her expectations or the high demands she makes on herself. Like Charlotte and Jinan, Dana also intends to pursue a career in writing, though she is not exactly sure how. The writing of all three interviewees arises more from the need to be creative and expressive. To do what they enjoy most. To create a space in which they can function independently and imaginatively.

• Preliminary Meeting

It was on a late Friday afternoon that Ziad and Karim came to my office for our scheduled interview. As I greeted them I noticed that the faculty office doors lining the grey-colored corridor were all shut. It was not yet suppertime, but some skirmishes in south Lebanon had unexpectedly escalated sending people scurrying home for fear of serious trouble reaching Beirut. The streets were empty and still. Tension was mounting. Spring was creeping over the University grounds; sea and sky alike were a dazzling blue, but though easily visible from my office window, the breathtaking scene went unnoticed, completely overshadowed by the disturbing political climate. Fear as usual, had spread quickly so that our conversation naturally began with exchanges of the latest bits of information and rumours. While we spoke, Ziad and Karim pulled two chairs up against
the floor-to-ceiling wall of books. I moved a pile of uncorrected narratives to one side of my small, wooden desk and sat facing them.

There was a sinking feeling in my stomach—a sensation I had grown accustomed to during the dark days of the Lebanese war. Morbid thoughts were filling my head. Bravely, I tried to reassure my two worried-looking interviewees that everything would soon be back to normal. At least for the moment, my office seemed to fold us in with light and warmth against the ugly political climate. Ziad is an Engineering student who aspires to becoming a poet. Mostly he writes about feelings of “isolation” and “pain” associated with the loss of identity and belonging. There is an existential angst that characterizes his work. Highly intelligent, articulate, and fluent in four languages, Ziad takes pride in boasting of “mixed parentage”-his father is Lebanese, and his mother though Italian, had a Greek mother. Ziad is softly spoken, cultured and of medium height, but there is an unmistakable intensity in his dark flashing eyes that gaze out from behind small round spectacles.

Karim is a Medical student who loves literature and music. As a child, his mother read to him “at all hours of the day and night.” She herself is a free-lance journalist who spends much of her time with “a circle of close literary friends.” Karim, unlike Ziad, is on the heavy side. His head is shaved and he dresses in loose baggy clothes that make him look rather awkward and odd. Unusually poised and relaxed for a young man of twenty one he speaks in a clear, deep voice, balancing his sentences in a manner that commands attention. Once during our interview he confessed rather sheepishly to his love of Agatha Christie Mysteries.

- **Ziad’s Story**

Ziad explained that his background is rich but complicated. He grew up with many languages and no borders. “I belong everywhere, but not quite.” When a person belongs everywhere and nowhere there is the feeling of “being slightly foreign in every country. So I operate on a gut level. I trust my instincts and have developed a chameleon-like ability to adapt reasonably to every place.” Ziad has never lived in any one place for very long. His father, who is an engineer, spends most of his time in Kuwait and other
Gulf States. His half Italian, half Greek mother is “a maverick” who is nomadic in her life style. She has difficulty staying in any one place for very long, “besides, she could never stand the way women were treated in the Gulf, so my childhood years were spent shuffling back and forth between Lebanon, Italy, Greece and the Gulf.”

Ziad told us that his father is a skilled storyteller who fed him with tales about the wonders of Lebanon. “As we returned only for short visits, especially during the war, I grew up believing that Lebanon is a magical place because my father made it seem like a perfect place. I don’t think he was consciously lying. His perceptions are genuine because he really believes that Lebanon is a wonderful country.” Ziad attributes his father’s attitude to nostalgia. “When you can’t return to your homeland because of war,” he explains, “everything about it is remembered in glowing terms - the climate, topography, people, food, etc.” His father, according to Ziad, eventually reached a point where he could no longer distinguish fact from fiction. After all, his heart remained in Lebanon, and Ziad, being a poet, is sympathetic to his father’s romantic views.

Karim who had, up until this point, been listening intently, joined in the conversation with a story of his own. He told of a Lebanese man, a family friend, who had fled Lebanon with his pet canary during the fierce fighting that ripped apart the country in 1986. While exiled in New York, his bird died, at which point the man placed it in his freezer for five years waiting till the time he could return the bird to his Lebanese Mountain village for burial. “Because exile brings with it such intense grief, people become irrational in their feelings and actions,” Karim sadly concluded.

“To make a long story short,” continued Ziad, “my mother finally decided to move to Beirut and take me with her. Because my father had attended Engineering school at AUB, naturally his dream was for me to follow in his footsteps. How could I argue? He was growing old and his perceptions of the country were frozen in the past, he was in a time warp. How could I, his only son, disappoint him?”

Needless to say, Ziad was disillusioned upon discovering the discrepancies between his father’s glowing narratives and the realities present in Lebanon today. “At
first, my struggle to “fit in” and become part of this society ended in disaster. I felt frozen and stuffed into a tight mold with no space to breathe.” Finally Ziad gave up the struggle and became “a quiet rebel”. People in Lebanon “never say what’s really on their minds. Instead they hide behind tradition and customs. To make matters worse, they are immediately threatened by anyone who questions the dynamics of Lebanese society. I was constantly insulted for expressing my views,” remarked Ziad looking rather puzzled. He had been silenced for daring to be different, and was not allowed “to have a voice anywhere.” Realizing that his identity was being crushed, he decided to turn to writing to create his own space, his own world. Lately he has been writing scathing attacks on the establishment and social system in Lebanon which he hopes to publish in a journal he is putting together with like-minded friends. He argues that there are no local social practices here that foster dialogue and the understanding of differences, so he has turned to his writing in the hope of creating an awareness of diversity and possibly bringing about change.

• Karim’s Story

Throughout our discussion Karim kept nodding his head in agreement. “I also write whenever possible,” he admitted. “Actually I wake up at four in the morning to write.” Karim said that his dream was to be a different kind of doctor, a doctor who offers his services to Lebanese in remote villages where proper medical care is unheard of. He thinks it appalling that under-privileged people in Lebanon are not entitled to health benefits and is working on a series of articles he plans to publish in a local paper that has expressed interest in his ideas. Karim spent his early years traveling back and forth between Lebanon and Australia. His parents insisted he attends AUB but he feels “totally different from other medical students.” These feelings have been the focus of “some intense and heated exchanges.” Most of his classmates are highly competitive and have no particular interests or hobbies. Because their primary concern is to make “pots of money”, they approach medicine as they would a “business proposition”. When Karim attempts to share his dream of offering medical care to people who cannot afford fancy hospitals and expensive treatments, his peers think he is joking. The worst part, according to Karim, is that he has become a target. “People don’t bother to discover who I really am on the inside, instead they ridicule the way I dress. I am constantly told that it
is shameful for a medical student not to be “properly dressed”, that people cannot respect a person who is not smart in appearance.” Karim feels there are too many constraints imposed by “a closed and traditional society,” but questioning these constraints leads to “instant suspicion and distrust.”

At the end of the day, Karim finds “relief and freedom” in his writing. It’s a way of “chilling out” and “being whoever I choose to be. It’s a perfect way to live outside the grip and constraints of an irrational society.” Karim is keeping a journal that he hopes to publish some day. Meanwhile he continues to focus on his medical studies finding “escape and freedom” in his writing.

I glanced out the window. Lights sprinkled and blinked along the Mediterranean coastline. They climbed the steep mountain slopes like spiders and fanned out along the wide ridges. It had been a long and trying day. There was a faint chill in the air. We had been chatting away for three hours. Karim had to rush back to the hospital. Ziad would return to his room to complete a poem he was struggling with. “It’s about growing old and tired,” he explained, “not physically but spiritually and mentally.”

I thanked them for being so generous with their time and open about their feelings and experiences. They expressed interest in having another session. “Rarely can we be so candid,” Ziad smiled. It suddenly occurred to me that I had never really seen him smile before. He was always so serious. Before parting, we all expressed hope that the political tension would soon ease. Luckily I would have ample time over the weekend to collect my thoughts and sift through the pages of notes I had so diligently recorded.

- **Some Reflections**

Now that the interviews were over, I needed to take stock of what had transpired, to ponder the questions raised. Ellis (1997) writes that interactive interviewing is time-consuming and emotionally demanding. Fortunately, I was aided by having already established good rapport with my students in the classroom, and by our common experiences regarding the topics under investigation. As a result, the concerns and ideas we shared meshed so well with my life experiences that they gave my work a personal
face. Students brought an unmistakable intensity and energy to the interviews, eagerly exchanging their views and ideas with interest and compassion. This in turn, led to a level of “intersubjectivity” that facilitated a truly collaborative and reflexive atmosphere. It was enormously reassuring that trust had developed early, allowing for an atmosphere in which views could be presented openly and candidly. The genuine interest in each other’s ideas, as we moved through the interviews provided a protective cocoon which sheltered us from any outbursts of disapproval, creating instead an atmosphere of trust and understanding.

People have different comfort levels when it comes to personal disclosure, and as I re-read my notes trying to recapture the mood and flavor of our conversations, it seemed to me that of all the interviews, Dana was the most distant. Her witty answers and sharp, probing questions failed to disguise an attitude of aloofness and caution. Thinking back, I realize that she alone had been rather aggressive but in a strangely quiet way.

I would also like to point out that our continuing conversations throughout the interview process became a kind of humane group therapy. There is a therapeutic value involved in discussing the pressing concerns and problems of respondents’ lives. Students reassure one another that they are not different out of eccentricity or weakness, but out of strength, and that together they will find another way. Research, according to Ellis (1997) has a therapeutic dimension that can make a difference in people’s lives. Finally, exploratory research proved natural and fun. We identified with each other instantly and our conversations took sudden and unexpected turns opening up interesting avenues for reflexive exchange that actually raised as many questions as were answered.

One of the striking similarities between my five interviews is that they all come from enormously supportive families who have played an important role in encouraging creative expression and instilling a love of reading and writing. Jihan was introduced into the joy of recording her impressions in a diary by her grandmother who also read stories to her. Dana had a poet grandfather as a mentor, and Charlotte’s father adores her writing, truly believing that she will become another Khalil Gibran. Ziad’s father is a skillfull storyteller and Karim’s mother is a journalist who is part of a highly literary
circle. Given their backgrounds, it should come as to no surprise that all five interviews are talented writers.

The predominant and recurring themes that took shape during the interviews basically converged on three related, yet separate issues: How to come to terms with the past, cope with the present, and grapple with a highly disturbing and uncertain future in a country they do not feel they belong to. For the sake of clarity I have grouped these three themes under the following headings:

- Backward Glances
- Living in the Shadows: Writing From the Margins
- Looking Ahead

- Backward Glances

All five interviewees are quick to reject the nostalgic interpretations of Lebanon fed to them by their parents during their forced exile abroad. The discrepancies between their views and the romantic views of their parents is a source of friction and misunderstanding that, as yet, remains unresolved. If ever such a beautiful and perfect Lebanon did exist, it has disappeared forever and my interviewees cannot believe in something they have never known. Nor can they rely on memories to fuel their imagination. Their hybridity allows them to be at home in many cultures, but none have a strong sense of belonging to any one place.

- Living in the Shadows: Writing From the Margins

The existing social and cultural conditions in post-war Lebanon have produced set modes of behavior which are evidently not in accordance with the values and ideals prized by my five interviewees. As a result, they share with each other feelings of estrangement, isolation, marginality and alienation. Given their high mobility and multicultural experiences these feelings are not novel to them. Throughout their lives they have found themselves in different places, struggling with shifting and conflicting ways of life. This stressful state of flux demands creative and skillful experimentation if any form of readjustment is to occur. Now as it turns out, all five students are labelled as “returnees” and as such, they are perceived differently by a society which has attempted to
silence them by pushing them into the margins and not taking them seriously. Together they express a profound ambivalence, or a kind of “suspended inbetweenness”, with its varieties, problems, solutions, pains and pleasures. During the interviews I came to realize that many different levels of being different, of belonging and not belonging and of othering those we fail to understand or identify with exist. Yet to these students this is a healthy type of resistance, a way for them to say that they are here too. Their texts open up spaces which provide the fluidity necessary to transcend fixed identities, escape the strictures of national and cultural boundaries, and explore their innermost hopes and dreams. Karim finds “relief and freedom” in his writing. He sees it as “a way of being whoever I choose to be,” and a way “to live outside the constraints of an irrational and confining society.” Ziad writes to “foster dialogue.” He would like people to understand differences and celebrate diversity. Their estrangement is valuable. It seeks to unsettle and oppose that which is not plural, diverse or dynamic. Central to all this, of course, is the danger of going off track by becoming exclusionary themselves.

- **Looking Ahead**

My five interviewees for obvious political, social and economic reasons view the future of Lebanon as exceedingly problematic and bleak. As cosmopolitan border crossers their perspectives are more expansive, more open, more forward looking and flexible. They are impressively independent individuals, sceptical of uniformity and critical in their judgement. A certain confidence and strength is derived from being in touch with their feelings, from relying on their own ideas and perceptions. Closely connected to this is their enormous respect for language, a single-minded devotion to writing, a persistent commitment despite the numerous distractions and lack of reinforcement in their environment. Writing is expressive and cathartic, but more importantly, a vehicle for fostering change in a society not accepting of open attitudes and life styles. Although they occasionally reveal scepticism about the ultimate value of their narrative engagement, it remains one of the major creative activities in their lives, and their belief in the power of their texts and in their conviction that whatever adversity they encounter can be met with the energy of writing, is truly impressive. Throughout the interviews I kept wondering how many of these students would continue their struggle to make a difference in a society that has been neither understanding nor accepting of them?
Closing Impressions: Retreatists, Rebels and Innovators

Overall, my five interviewees are retreatists in that they have accepted the fact that their experiences set them apart from others. Quiet and soft-spoken, Jinan diligently records her daily impressions in a diary. She prefers writing to verbal expression as it allows her time to think, flows more easily and offers continuity to her “choppy life”, putting her in control and allowing her to re-examine and re-live past experiences. Ziad drowns his angst in his poetry which allows him to come to terms with the difficulty of not quite fitting in anywhere. Yet they are also rebels in that they exhibit an internalized license to challenge the conventional, to experiment, stretch their limits and take risks. As non-conformists they seek to be provocative in what they say and do. Dana dresses like “a grandmother” to prove that she is different. Her writing is unusual in that it is post-modern cutting across and incorporating a number of styles and provocative topics, defying traditional techniques in both structure and content. Karim shaves his head and dresses in baggy clothes. He enjoys making a statement and defies any kind of definition. His writing is revolutionary in that it calls for change among his colleagues as well as the Lebanese medical system in general. It challenges existing conditions and attitudes. The five interviewees are constantly stretching and testing their limits by “voicing the margins” and struggling around difference on the professional, social and cultural stage they create through narrative engagement. All are innovators, highly creative and original in their writing, ideas and life styles. They remain able to cope with high degrees of change and imbalance by engaging in complicated processes of experimentation. Each has discovered a unique voice and style in their texts. Voices that sensitively and intelligently explore and question the forces that seek to silence them.

Interactive interviewing allowed for the exploration of the questionnaire findings in more depth and detail. It confirmed experiences of marginality and multiplicity and the need to channel creative energy into texts and talk that transcends the confines imposed on these students, placing them instead in liberating spaces where diversity and openness...
become key. The experiences of my students, including their need for emotional textual engagement, now tied us together in ways I had not initially anticipated.

I took a decision to ask a new group of thirty students to write autobiographical narratives. I needed to explore my present findings further and this particular genre seemed the best way of gathering relevant information and more insight into their lives as well as mine. In this way, I could proceed with the research while satisfying my own personal quest. Autobiography, "renders an interpretation of the episodes of a life and the reflection the author had on them" (Diamond, 1991, p. 93).
Chapter Six

Autobiographical Narratives

I could not live in any of the worlds offered to me... I believe one writes because one has to create a world in which one can live... I had to create a world of my own... in which I could breath, reign, and recreate myself when destroyed by living.

Anaïs Nin, *In Favor of the Sensitive Man*

- Emotional Narrative Engagement

Historically, marginal and dislocated groups of people have been forced to experiment with alternative venues of expression. This, of course, is hardly surprising given that they exist in the “inbetween” places and spaces of whatever society they happen to find themselves in. Life for them is significantly more complex because they belong to more than one world. None of their identities can exist alone; each influences and mingles with the other. As outsiders living on the fringes of society, they must learn to negotiate with the various tensions and contradictions implicit in their biographies. The students who populate my creative writing classes use their writing to offer digressions from the narratives of their country. They are boundary and border crossers who challenge fixed ideas, explore territory, and travel in worlds that only they can create.

In this chapter I explore the autobiographical narratives of thirty creative writing students in an attempt to understand how they have managed to forge a unique identity through their unfaltering commitment to emotional narrative engagement. Despite the disturbing trends of a post-war society, they use writing to reap their own terrain, to create imagined places and spaces within which their ideas and talents can be unleashed. Moreover emotional engagement, as reflected in their texts, activates an important dynamic which as I will later argue, serves to empower students. The very act of creating and controlling imagined spaces within which they can manoeuvre and grow, provides energy and presence which translates into a certain kind of freedom. It would be a misconception to assume that such a dynamic is easily set into motion. The very intensity of their inner conflicts and the tensions they experience, renders the exercise complex,
even painful. Furthermore, the constant struggle between their narratives and those of mainstream Lebanese society remain ongoing and relentless.

- **The Narrative Study of Students’ Lives: Six Themes**

  A careful reading and application of content analysis to the thirty autobiographical narratives of my students revealed a remarkable lack of diversity in their background and experiences. Similar thematic patterns and frequency of themes, characterized every text, with only one or two exceptions. Diversity existed only to the extent that language and style differed. Consistently the shape and shaping of their ideas fell neatly into six distinct but related areas. For the sake of clarity, I have arranged the response patterns into six thematic categories according to the order in which they assumed priority in students’ texts. The titles used are extracted from ideas I have come across in my various readings. All seemed evocative and appropriate when it came to labelling the six categories. They are as follows:

  - The Exile: Alienation and Marginality
  - The Traveler and the Places Inbetween
  - Backward Glances: The Failure of Nostalgic and Romantic Perspectives
  - The Flâneur: Writing From the Margins
  - Fragmented Personalities and Multiple Identities
  - The Inner Circle

  I would just like to point out that all these categories are related to the central theme of self, identity and personhood. Moreover, the thematic divisions, as I see them, remain arbitrary, containing a great deal of overlapping material. None are mutually exclusive. It is perhaps relevant to say here that students were allowed the freedom to write about any significant episode in their lives. Mostly the writing took place outside the class room. All their work was placed in a portfolio so that I could view the progress they were making. Often they shared and discussed their narratives and ideas in class in order to receive feedback. The completed texts were evaluated at the end of the semester along with their other assignments.
The Exile: Alienation and Marginality.

I guess I’ll end up being where I’ve always felt the most comfortable and it’s at that point in a large circle where everyone is in the circle and I’m on the circumference watching, and rarely joining the inner circle, just watching (Ussama).

This excerpt voices the recurring theme of exile and alienation that, with infinite variations, characterizes all the respondents’ narratives. In this instance, the student feels excluded from the circle of light, from an “inner circle” of acceptance, belonging and assimilation, existing instead on the margin. Yet, ironically, this is the only condition in which the majority of the respondents (27 out of 30) feel comfortable. As Ussama’s narrative progresses he, like many of his peers, asserts that the daily life of assimilation is dull and uninspiring when compared to the life of a marginal person. Edward Said has eloquently expressed the very same sentiment:

When I was younger, I longed to be accepted by those around me, and their were times when I wanted to be just like them. Now I think their lives are stale and boring and I feel privileged to be watching from a distance ..... With so many dissonances in my life I have learned actually to prefer being not quite right and out of place.

According to Thomas Pavel (1998), the notion of exile can be cloudy. Metaphorically taken, exile may stand for a number of things. “In particular the pervasive feeling human beings often experience that they do not entirely belong to the sublunar world.” (p. 26). To most people, exile is a more general notion of human mobility across geographic and political space, and with it, comes the idea of forced displacement. In recent times, Pavel argues, it has taken the form of individual mobility, as opposed to collective migration and diaspora. Still most exiles never sever the psychological connection with their point of origin. They seem to retain faith in the possibility of homecoming.

Judging by their narratives, creative writing students have experienced a peculiar kind of exile. High mobility has undoubtedly been a determining factor in their lives. In fact, the questionnaires I administered revealed that none have remained in one country over the past eight years. Of the thirty respondents, twenty-two have moved three times, six have moved four times, and two have moved five times. Likewise my interviewees
were all highly mobile having travelled and lived in numerous countries both prior to and during the war years. This is not unusual considering that they were growing up during the war years in Lebanon. Thus from an early age they became accustomed to changing their place of abode rather frequently. While high mobility offers an enrichment of experiences as well as a relatively high level of sophistication, given their young age, exposure to multi-cultural situations has not come without painful consequences. All the respondents voice similar concerns about being uprooted and implanted in unfamiliar places which render social integration close to impossible. Consequently they struggle with feelings of isolation, aloneness, and marginality. In the following two quotes Joumana and Tarek describe the shifts and relocations they have been subjected to:

Coming back to Lebanon was difficult. I had trouble adjusting to the Lebanese mentality and way of life. Society here has become materialistic, opportunistic and egoistic. Even though I am Lebanese, I have spent many years in Canada and all the things Lebanese people do put me off. In Canada I had difficulty too. But Lebanon is my home. I should not feel like this here (Joumana).

When I came to Lebanon from France I didn’t know a word of Arabic even though I am Lebanese. I had been an exile in France and now I am an exile in my own country. I guess that’s why I developed a talent for writing. I wrote to express my feelings of not belonging anywhere. No matter where I went, I felt alienated, and it seemed like I could only express my feelings and emotions on paper (Tarek).

Edward Said (1994) explains that feelings of exile are “strangely compelling to think about, but terrible to experience” (p. 137). He is, of course, writing about forced exile, the exile of a people that cannot return to their occupied homeland. Yet in many ways, the exile of my students is equally disturbing. Having returned to their country of origin, they do not feel at home in it. Like real exiles, they struggle with feelings of estrangement, with a kind of “melancholy tension.” Just like the wondering Jew in literature who is seen as an emblematic figure of displacement embodying modern restlessness and uprootedness, students become “universal strangers” (Bauman, 1988, p. 89). Similar to Bauman’s description the exile under discussion here faces much more than a situation of physical, bodily mobility. Bauman (2000) explains that their distinguishing mark is the refusal to be integrated resulting from a resolute determination to remain “non-socialized” and the need to conjure up a place all their own. In the
process of doing this, students, whether intentionally or not, break the rules. For to create, as Bauman argues, “always means breaking a rule; following a rule is more routine, more of the same – not an act of creation” (p. 207).

Moreover, because exiles do not know enough about the rules in their country of origin, they see no need to observe them. Naturally this does not endear them their fellow compatriots who consider rule – breaking to be offensive behavior and as such, it is quickly recorded against them. Consequently, as returnees to Lebanon, students are given a status which enhances feelings of isolation, disapproval, even rejection. Aida who has lived in Lebanon for the past two years writes:

I am considered an outsider here even though I am Lebanese. I feel stripped of my name and identity. People around me make me feel inadequate and inferior. I am made to feel invisible by being completely ignored or told that my opinions are irrelevant and not worth listening to (Aida).

Returnees to the country frequently experience feelings of rejection. Perceived as “outsiders”, they are suspect and confined to the “newcomer” status in their own society. The “insiders” are those individuals who, according to my students, have resided in Lebanon on a continuous basis. Accordingly, they are allotted high degrees of “prestige” and “get away with murder” as they can “do no wrong”. Although I am not aware of any empirical work conducted on this subject, it remains very “true” and “real” to my students who feel that this is a conscious ploy used to discriminate against them for having left Lebanon during the war. Six of my students went beyond this to argue that it was a way of eliminating any serious competition from returnees who may have superior skills and, therefore, are viewed as a threat by those who remained.

It intrigued me that despite their young age, students were so acutely aware of the power differences within the Lebanese community. Having lived a nontraditional life places them in an entirely separate category because they are not perceived as “legitimate” members of the community. This naturally creates feelings of distance and hostility, but also offers unusually unique insights and fresh ways of seeing. Understood in this way, feelings of exile, though painful, create a morally valuable condition. Students feel they are being unnecessarily silenced or ostracised as a way of social control. Some even
silence themselves for fear of the humiliation or anger that might be directed against them by the connected “insiders”.

For these students home is tantamount to being “homeless”. According to Giroux (1994) “home becomes a form of “homelessness” a shifting site of identity, resistance and opposition that enables conditions of self and social transformation” (p. 143). “Homelessness” means constant crossing over into terrains of otherness, it means being poised between numerous cultures and the ability to assume new positions. Exile is then more deeply a condition of the mind, one that can be shared by all who resist the comfort of parochial loyalties, even when they live in the country of their birth. For Said (2001), exile has come to mean a critical distance from all cultural identities, a restless opposition to all orthodoxies. Being “culturally stateless”, according to Bauman (2000), means having “more than one homeland, building a home of one’s own on the crossroads between cultures” (p. 208).

Estrangement resulting from physical and geographical dislocation unites the respondents. For them, shuffling back and forth between two or more worlds is a way of life. Consequently, they struggle for ways in which to bridge the gap, to develop coping strategies in order to function properly. Individually, and as a group, they share a heightened awareness that no matter what country they happen to be in, they remain in a permanent state of exile. Moreover, these feelings are significantly more acute when they return to Lebanon, their country of origin. Even university experiences generate feelings of marginality and dislocation which set them apart from their peers. As Hanan explains:

The theme of my writing is usually my disappointment with Lebanon. I feel like an exile in my own country. But my real disappointment has been with The American University of Beirut. The attitude of students at AUB is frustrating. Most of them just want a degree and have no interest in learning. At AUB I feel out of place just as I do in the Lebanese community. This is a place without a soul (Hanan).

Fadi, a Philosophy student, shares Hanan’s views:
At AUB I feel there is something missing. Students here are too materialistic and most of the time they try hard to emulate a culture that is not their own. They are fake “wannabes.” I have stopped trying to overlook this fact in order to get along with people. I’m glad I’m different, that I don’t conform or give in. Instead, I stick to my beliefs and opinions. Unfortunately, most of the time I’m alone: I feel like an exile in my own society. I don’t really belong at AUB or even in this country. In the States people were natural and interesting, but I never felt I belonged there either. I hate AUB students. It’s hard to find someone interesting or different at this university. Most of them are snobs with expensive clothes and cellular phones. Anyway, I’m glad I don’t feel I belong here. I’m also glad I enjoy my own company and that I really don’t mind being alone. I enjoy writing stories and I think that any book is better than the company of the people around me. Don’t get me wrong, I’m not a looser, but in this society I have become an anti-social exile (Fadi).

Feelings of alienation, marginality and exile force these students to search for a different kind of home. They create it, reimagine it, and present it in their writings by creating and exploring new ways of thinking about it. Writing becomes a journey in which they examine their estrangement and their pain in an attempt to transcend homelessness. “When exiles return ‘back home’ they may discover that there is nothing homey back there and that one feels more at home in the comfortable exile retreat that one has learned to inhabit. It is the experience of returning to the country of birth that might become defamiliarizing” (Boym, 1998, p. 260). For these students, their writing has clearly become their “comfortable exile retreat” - a place all their own.

None of the respondents have illusions regarding their country of origin. Nor do they harbour any idealistic notions concerning other countries they have lived in. Their inability to belong fully to any society or country is a condition they have grown accustomed to. In fact, their need for separateness is often expressed with pride. They perceive themselves as being different from others, especially in their self-awareness. Realizing that their lot is a lonely one, they are acutely aware that to be creative is to be different from those who are not; and so it means to be cut off, even alienated from others. In the following extract Huda explains how she transformed her pain into a positive force.

From a very young age I loved books. We have an amazing library at home. When we returned to Lebanon from Canada, I had the shock of
my life. Teachers overwhelmed us with subjects to memorize. Both
students and teachers ridiculed my attempts at creative writing. I faced
tremendous difficulties with my schoolmates. Finally, I learned to
ignore my surroundings by escaping into my writing. This is how I
recreated my own world (Huda).

Like many others in class, Huda uses writing to exclude the real world and create
an imagined one. I have a long-standing fascination with writers like my students whose
profiles are to be found in their peculiar displacement. As outsiders in every culture they
have lived in, their writings bear witness to the feelings and reflections about distance and
the cultural rifts they have found so painful. In a country like Lebanon, where society is
not particularly accepting of the idea of the individual, they remain detached eccentrics
who belong nowhere. Their writings reflect feelings of loss and longing, of forced exile
which results from being cut off from whatever community or country they happen to be
in. Bauman (2000) believes that the answer is to be at home in many homes, but to be in
each inside and outside at the same time, “a trick that sedentary people are unlikely to
learn. Learning the trick is the chance of the exile: technically an exile – one that is in but
not of the place.” (207).

One interesting idea that took shape in connection with the theme of alienation
was that the constant shifts and relocations respondents experienced made them feel
“invisible” and “voiceless”. In the light of this, their writing enacts a dynamic which,
once put into motion, carves out a special space. Within this created space, students enter
an imaginary realm of their own making where they achieve presence and voice. Overall,
this is a ingenious coping strategy.

Because I have never lived in one place for very long I feel like an
exile everywhere. From a very young age, I noticed that people ignore
what I say and pretend that I’m not around because they don’t consider
me a real part of their society. Maybe this is why I turned to writing. I
write to be heard, to express my opinions and feelings without the fear
of being ignored (Nadia).

Nadia’s observation reminded me of what Ziad had said during our interview. He
had been silenced for daring to be different, and was not allowed “to have a voice
anywhere.” Realizing, however, that his identity was being crushed, he took up writing to
create his own space and voice.
Boym (1998) argues that the stories of internal and external misfits and mixed bloods offer digressions and detours from the mythical biography of a nation. If this is so, the narratives of creative writing students embody the potential to contribute imaginative and non-traditional approaches and ways of viewing Lebanese society.

- **Wednesday, November 11, 1999, AUB Campus**

This afternoon we had an interesting discussion in class. Ali said he was having difficulty finding adequate language to describe everything that goes on in his head in his autobiographical narrative. For some reason he sensed that whatever wording he used fell short of conveying the intensity of his feelings. One of the things that disturbs him the most, for example, is that he feels like a complete stranger in his own country. “Life in Canada,” he explained, “had proceeded normally without any major upheavals. It was not my country so it was normal not to fit in. I was not at all bothered by being an outsider.” Now, however, his returnee status sets him apart from mainstream Lebanese society. He feels that he is being viewed with suspicion and as he does not particularly adhere to social convention, he is perceived as being “different from the rest,” especially by an extended family that he cannot identify with, and that prides itself in maintaining “solidarity” or “a unified front”. If Ali is “absorbed in a book” or “engrossed in writing,” they become immediately agitated, fearing it might contain damaging or inappropriate ideas that he might use to “disgrace the family.” With time, Ali has become a “tempting target” to even well-meaning family members as they fear he will make them vulnerable to social criticism within the community.

Curiously, as the discussion developed, students resorted to the use of military terms to conjure up a silent struggle. They talked about “winning” or “losing” the “battle” against suspicious and distrustful social moralists who increasingly “enforce” correct and incorrect ways of behavior, who are completely convinced they have all the answers. Consequently they “interrogate” and “inforce” their ways and values. Each one of them avows to speak for the family by calling on the “reinforcement” of moral judgements to preserve the respectability of the family name. I had, by now, become so fascinated by the animated discussion, that I began to write down what students were saying.
Sana: If only they could get beyond the debunking and listen to what we have to say.

Tariq: You must be joking. They don’t give a fig for our views and feelings. Besides, I find them insulting. Usually they say: “where were you during the war?”

Sana: Exactly, I’m made to feel guilty for spending time in Europe during the war.
It’s as if they aim to punish us for not being in the kind of danger they were in.

Najwa: My extended family is on a mission to reform me. They say I’m too quiet, deeply complicated and all knotted up inside.

A mixture of amused and nervous chuckles of agreement went round the room at this astonishingly frank dialogue. I listened fascinated as they expressed sentiments that had disturbed me for so long and that I had been unwilling to translate into words or writing. Together they voice the experience of multiplicity, its torments and confusions, its liberations and possibilities. To listen to them is to understand what it means to be an exile, to feel out of place in one’s own country. Remembering my role as an instructor, I summarized their concerns suggesting that extended family members seem to be fixated on looking outward instead of inward which would allow for self-examination and tolerance. Instead, they narrow the focus to exclude rather than include human diversity, thus preventing people from living together in mutual respect and recognition. Generally such behavior seems to stem from the fear of nasty gossip, what people might say, or how they might ostracise a particular family if one of its members appears to be different or strange. I was reminded of a quote by Bauman (2000) that I had jotted down in my journal only last week. It had to do with exiles returning to their country of origin, “going into exile,” he writes, “has been recorded as their original sin, in the light of which all that the sinners may later do may be taken down and used as evidence of their rule-breaking.” (p, 207).
I introduced the paradigm used by Thomas Friedman in his new book, *The Lexus and the Olive Tree*. We discussed how the Lexus represents the burgeoning global markets and computer technologies, rapid change, modernization, prosperity and new lifestyles. Olive trees, on the other hand, represent everything that roots or anchors us, identifies us to a family, a community, a tribe a nation, a religion or most of all, a place called home. “We fight so intensely at times over our olive trees because, at their best, they provide the feelings of self-esteem and belonging that are as essential for human survival as food” (Friedman, 2000, p. 31). We talked about how, at least on the surface, Lebanon appears to be a modern country, open to globalism and change, yet for decades families and communities have built forces against the pressures of change fiercely resisting and rejecting any attempt to alter the secret weapon of tradition.

I thought about how when I was growing up my family looked disapprovingly upon my quiet manner and need to be alone, viewing my choices as a negative, even threatening commentary on their life style. Never did they waste an opportunity to scold me for my sensitivity, for my love of books and silence. To them, any time spent reading or simply reflecting was precious time wasted and withdrawn from the gregariousness of family life. So as my life progressed, I felt utterly alone, devoid of the sustaining kin who normally express interest and participate in one’s private life. There were times, over the years, when I longed to be like everybody else. When I attempted to abandon myself in order to become another person, the person my family wished me to be. Deep down, however, something continued to rebel in me. On the one hand, it would have been easier to conform to their expectations, to participate in their superficial, empty life, to conform to values I disagreed with. On the other hand, I could not stop being myself. We were different people despite our blood ties, and as such, we should respect each other’s need to be different. But this was not to be. The distance between us grew even greater until finally I ruled out all possibility of mutual understanding. They could not comprehend that I was unlike them, that duty to family must be balanced by the obligation to develop one’s own talents and put them to creative use, by the need to remain true to myself.
Now it does not seem important or even desirable to be “right” and in place (right at home for instance). Better to wander out of place, and not ever to feel too much at home anywhere.


When I announced my intention to get married, the combination of unlikely events that had brought me and Samir together from different backgrounds, different professional situations (student/teacher), and from different generations, served only to heighten their disapproval. Strangely enough, what gave me the courage to make a leap of faith in the marriage was precisely what made my family view it as highly improbable. With this stressful situation, I was ushered into married life, not realizing, of course, that I would be left alone to navigate once again, but this time in a new, extended family. Prior to my marriage, I never took in how stacked the odds were against an in-law who did not quite fit the traditional mold. I was a hybrid, a misfit, a maverick who combined various cultures and backgrounds, who did not adhere to the accepted unquestioned ways that provided structure in a conservative, extended family. Luckily Samir had the foresight to arrange for a sabbatical leave immediately after our marriage. It felt right to be planning life with this man seventeen years my senior and indeed our extended honeymoon at Harvard, where he was a visiting professor and I a graduate student, proved delightful. With time, buoyed by my convictions, my husband, and friends, I gathered the strength to continue on my own terms. Often under accumulating pressure, I embraced the wisdom of silence when it came to my relatives. It was a defense mechanism I had, by now, mastered well, and gradually there developed a kind of friendly tolerance that has proved a lasting and feasible arrangement for all concerned. As I write this I am reminded of how my students also feel confined to a certain status because they do not conform to the accepted mold. Any deviation from what is expected places them in a category which is highly suspect.

Closest to me throughout the years was my grandmother, who despite her sheltered background, lack of education and the disparity in our ages, remained forward looking and refreshingly open when it came to diversity. She alone respected my differences, and realizing that I could not draw sustenance from the extended family, began to take an interest in my inner life, asking about the books I was reading, or what
my hopes and plans were for the future. Throughout my life, I remain grateful for the role my grandmother played. Her interest and encouragement imbued in me a quiet strength that has often come to my rescue. I thought of how during our interview, Jihan had lovingly recollected her grandmother who had taught her to keep a diary and engaged in “long and fascinating discussions about almost everything.” Dana had also singled out how attached she was to her poet grandfather. When I mentioned my relationship to my grandmother one day in class, I was surprised to see that many of my students had also felt close to an older relative who had taken an interest in their lives. In fact, six students eagerly shared detailed stories about the impact these relationships had on them.

The buzz of conversation brought me back to reality. Our classroom was a hive of lively discussion with students all wanting to express their points of view. Rarely had I witnessed such a level of involvement and intellectual excitement among this particular group of students. Yet today, troubled and questioning, they were alive to ideas concerning identity and belonging in ways that reflected an unusually high degree of concern and intensity.

Nabil: We represent a silent invasion, but in reality we are the wake-up call that needs to be heeded before it’s too late.

I pointed out how because of their hybridity, they could easily be perceived as a threat, or “the merciless uproots” to the olive trees that locate and anchor, because they are rootless, and out of place. The wrestling match or tug of war occurs because they have lived between cultures. Consequently, their fate is both a gift and a loss. A loss because they must learn to cope with the torments and confusions of multiplicity; and a gift, because of the liberations and possibilities, the different ways of seeing that it offers. To listen to my students is to marvel at their struggle to create an identity, to find a voice, no matter how imperfect against the forces that seek to silence them. Writing class presents a new way of encouraging their process of thinking and writing. It focuses on questions of immense value in their lives. Class bonding offers liberation because, as a group they can collectively concentrate on constructive rather than destructive outlets. Their common concerns and language can lead to discovering a third way, a way that
transcends the gulf and bridges the gap between them and the olive trees. Courageous views and experimentation suggest that the third way or space might indeed be the future, not a quaint return to the past, but something entirely new and different. In their zesty world there’s some humor, some poignancy, but more importantly, a burning desire to make a difference, to instigate meaningful change. Bauman (2000) believes that exiles like my students, “bring to all the countries involved gifts they badly need without knowing it, such gifts that they could hardly expect to receive from other sources” (p. 208).

Thoughts of my heroines cluttered my mind. As early as 1830 they had struggled to find a different way, to create a voice they could call their own. They too had challenged the olive trees in their courageous choices thus paving the path to a third way by embracing fresh and bold alternatives. Writing their stories had been therapy for me. In some mysterious way I was able to bond with these woman who had lived decades ago. Successfully they had distanced themselves from stifling conventions opting for new ways of expression. Emotional identification with my characters led to deeper insight into my own world. By writing historical fiction I created a third space into which I could collect and focus my scattered and disturbing thoughts and concentrate them on issues of immense value in my life. Although my characters had taken me on a journey to the past, I was soon to realize that instead of being traditional they were richly imaginative, future oriented and antitradition. Like me and my students, they were out of place, exiles in their respective societies. They too lived and wrote from the margins, using their sensitivity and imagination to constantly redefine and reinvent themselves. Together they express a profound ambivalence, a “suspended inbetweenness”, with its varieties, solutions, pains and pleasures. There were no barriers to limit their dreams. Instead they merged identities, escaped strictures, crossed borders and boundaries, defied nationalities and created an imaginary place they could call home. My creative writing students were struggling to accomplish the same thing.

I made a mental note to myself. My characters would prove interesting material for our next seminar. It would be of importance to discuss the possibility of a win-win situation to challenge the win-lose mindset assumed by students in class. Experience has
taught me that when and if change occurs, it is likely to do so gradually, often in magical and unexpected ways. One thing is certain, it will be slow to arrive in this deceptively complex and demanding society. It will take time for students to understand the ways of this fortress culture correctly. As their sense of people and place grows, the visual and verbal cues will be better absorbed and only then can there be any constructive movement forward. At first, I too, had been an impatient student.

II. The Traveller and the Places Inbetween

Edward Said (1991) has suggested that “We must always view the academy as a place to voyage in, owning none of it but home everywhere in it” (pp. 17-18). He puts forth two images for inhabiting the academic cultural space provided by school and university. In one conception of academic space, the academic professional is “king and potentate.” Here the king sits observing with “detachment and mastery.” He reigns and holds sway. His legitimacy is that within his domain, he can describe and explain with authority. The other model, according to Said, is considerably more mobile, more playful, although no less serious. “The image of a traveller depends not on power, but on motion, and a willingness to go into different worlds, different idioms, and understand a variety of disguises, masks and rhetorics” (p.18). It is essential, that travellers suspend the claim of customary routine in order to live in new rhythms and rituals.

None of the thirty respondents in this study are potentates guarding one place and defending its frontiers. All are travellers who cross over, traverse territory, who easily and readily abandon fixed ideas and positions. They are content leaving authority and dogma to the potentates whom they readily identify in their narrative texts. Similar to Said’s traveller, they have more pressing matters to concentrate on. There is neither time nor patience for self-adulation and uncritical self-appreciation. Like so many others, these students belong to more than one world. They are a mixture of nationalities and this allows them an unusual and multiple perspective. Although they assume numerous identities, none of these identities is exclusive; each infringes on the other. To identify with only one as Said has suggested, would mean the loss of, and distance from, the others. Such a situation to the traveller is detrimental.
At this point I would like to briefly draw attention to the difficulties involved in being a young and uncertain traveller as opposed to a smug potentiate. All the autobiographical narratives without exception, touched upon the subject of emotional and psychological pain. These students struggle against immeasurable uncertainties and difficulties. Given their young age, when they dare to question, or challenge existing views, they are immediately met with hostility, or at best forced to withdraw their position. One student wrote that because she is outspoken and critical, her elderly neighbours once remarked that she is “diabolical.” Another explained that her more conservative relatives and acquaintances regard her as “a great danger” to society. The strictures and certainties imposed by the potentates who exercise a considerable amount of influence in Lebanese society, must constantly and with great difficulty be resisted, or so it is perceived by the respondents, if one is to believe the views that constitute their texts. Within this context, writing seems to carve out inbetween spaces for these students - spaces of social liberation.

Another common idea among the respondents which fits neatly into this thematic cluster, is based on the notion of motion, on a willingness and need to go to different worlds. Like Said’s traveller who crosses over, they too need to traverse territory by not staying in one place for very long. This enables them to abandon fixed positions, especially those of the mind. The following excerpts are taken from three narrative texts that focus on this theme:

I guess you can say my life is rather complicated. The first thing that complicates but also makes it more interesting, is the fact that I am part of many very different cultures. My mother is American with German Irish ancestors; while my father is Lebanese. I was born in Michigan, where my parents meet in college, but I only lived in the USA for four years because my father was offered a job in Saudi Arabia. My dad, like most Lebanese who left Lebanon, always told us that one day we would return. He would take the whole family to Lebanon for the summer vacation, even during the war, and I guess that’s why I used to hate Lebanon so much. I was afraid, and mostly confined to our flat with nothing to do. All our relatives were critical of our way of life. We would also travel to the states for the other half of the summer. There I also felt out of place especially because all our friends thought we were crazy to keep returning to war-torn Beirut (Rabih).
My mom and dad helped me experience many worlds and cultures. We travelled to places where we had no family ties such as Holland, Germany, London, Africa, Dubai, Bahrain, France, Jordan, India, Australia, China and the Philippines. Because we lived in Saudi Arabia, I met and befriended people from many cultures. I think this has given me an open mind. I can easily look past a person's national identity. But this has also created confusion and uncertainty in my life because I don't feel I belong anywhere. I find that no matter where I go I am not the same as other people. My values and beliefs are different and I rebel against people, especially when they try to make me conform to their values and ideas. This is not an entirely negative factor. I like not being like everyone else. I have been given a life rich with experiences, but also one of pain and hardship. Yet I need to keep moving, to keep going to different places, to expand my horizons (Leila).

I was born in Lebanon to an Armenian family. At the age of two and a half we moved to California where we lived for thirteen years. Most of the time I felt strange in America. At fifteen I returned to Lebanon and had a difficult time adjusting. Even though I have many relatives and am surrounded by a strong Armenian Community, I still feel I don't belong. I don't think or feel the way they do. People in Lebanon have fixed and conservative ideas about how a person should live, so mostly I have a need to be alone. To withdraw and reflect in silence (Hagop).

And finally, Fadi explains that travelling makes him who he is:

Having lived in London for almost a decade, I returned to Lebanon, my home country, to find that things were not what I had expected them to be. Our life style was very simple in England when compared with how people live in Lebanon. There was less chaos, less fuss, less trouble. The students at AUB are not what I am used to. People here love power, money and social standing. They are very dogmatic and closed in their views. Yet I refuse to give up my open mindedness to suit the views of others. I love to travel in order to remain open to different ideas and ways of life. It makes me who I am (Fadi).

All these student writers view themselves as being in a state of flux, in motion, in ceaseless movement. Their lives have been characterized by unsettling and often painful displacements and departures from countries, cities, homes, languages and communities, and as such, their texts display a fragmentary, transitory sense of self, society and social relations. This theme brought to mind similar experiences that have characterized and influenced my life.
We left Beirut in the fall of 1984 with the horror of the Lebanese war still fresh in our minds, for what we thought would be a year's research leave. While it was difficult to leave family and friends behind, the senseless battles that raged on in the country only strengthened our resolve to distance our two boys (George was nine and Ramzi two) from the savage cruelties and dangers of a country that had disintegrated into nothing more than an ugly metaphor, a battleground for irrational forces and warring factions. No longer could we ignore the stone-cold reality. So many of our friends and acquaintances had become innocent victims of random violence. Ten years of barely eking out an existence, of adhering to the numbing routine of survival was beginning to take its toll on us. Recently the situation had turned particularly gruelling. On October of 1983 a suicide driver with 12,000 pounds of dynamite blew up the Marine headquarters near the Beirut airport killing 241 American serviceman. The explosion rocked the city like a devastating earthquake sending shock waves throughout the country. New Year's eve brought a dreaded phone call confirming the savage murder and mutilation of our summer neighbors (all three were over eighty five) in the mountain village of Aley. The days that followed continued to usher in immeasurable sorrow. Our close friend David Dodge, then Acting President of the University, was kidnapped on campus and remained in captivity for over a year. Still, his plight was more fortunate than another close friend, Malcolm Kerr, who shortly after becoming President, was brutally assassinated one morning as he entered his campus office.

Towards the end of April, my father was shot by a snipper while crossing the Green Line* and he remained in critical condition for days after undergoing complicated surgery to remove bullet fragments from his arm and chest. Miraculously he survived, but never fully regained the use of his right hand. A few months later, another close friend and colleague was fatally gunned down at a flying check-point in roughly the same area. The danger began to edge closer, when one chilly Sunday afternoon on our way home, a shell exploded just a few feet away from our car. Despite the shrapnel that rained down on us, we escaped unscathed, though very much shaken. That summer, a dozen
bullets hit the wall just above the children’s heads as they played lego on the carpet. Just days later we were gripped with another kind of fear. Once again, random shelling began to pound the city with astounding ferocity. Taking shelter in our small corridor, we huddled together praying that the shells thundering overhead would by some miracle land elsewhere. But that year the dark forces were relentless. Bursts of machine-gun fire and several explosions shook our apartment shattering windows and spraying glass everywhere. Across the street a building hit by an in-coming shell burned to the ground. George, our older boy, watched in horror, choking back his tears. Immediately afterwards, he took to his bed where he lay speechless and motionless for forty eight hours. That following winter it was Ramzi’s turn to be gripped with fear. Unable to distinguish between thunder and shelling, whenever the flashes and booms fiercely rocked our apartment, he took shelter under our dining room table, demanding to knew if it was “thunder without water again.” Even when we moved to Princeton, Ramzi, for the first nine months, spent the entire school day under his desk whenever there was a thunderstorm. In fact, throughout his pre-school days, most of his activities took place either under his desk or in the corridor.

Nothing recently had helped to dispel my gloom and fear. For ten years we had been witnesses to every atrocity imaginable - random shelling, street fighting, car bombs, sniping, kidnapping, torture, murder and massacres. Human suffering had reached immeasurable heights, the brutality was unfathomable, and still, the violence continued to escalate. It was ongoing and relentless, with no end in sight. In the darkness of 1984, I was suddenly overwhelmed with despair. The war had brought so much fear and sadness to our lives that I was convinced we could never discard it and resume a normal existence. Of course we could continue the struggle for survival desperately praying for the ability and strength to endure, but in reality it was becoming sheer insanity to take any more chances with the children. On August 30, 1984 we left Beirut.

* The Green Line was a fictitious divide that constituted no-man’s land between predominantly Muslim West Beirut and Christian East Beirut

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Princeton

My life in Princeton, New Jersey was far from easy. Although I juggled various jobs including an interesting research/writing position at the Princeton Development Office, substitute teaching at a fancy private school, and consulting work for the Educational Testing Services, my career became contingent to the needs of family life, a husband, and my children. As our forced exile continued there was little to dispel my initial impressions of Princeton which were shaped by imitations of ancient, ivy smothered buildings that dotted the supposedly idyllic campus. Added to this was the boring tranquility of a perfect picture-book town that rolled up the sidewalks by 9:00 p.m. For my husband, who immersed himself in his teaching and research, it was ideal, and to my great relief, the children thrived. Princeton provided a clean and wholesome environment as well as excellent schooling. For me, it set into motion a series of conflicting emotions. Once again, I felt out of place and marginalized. Besides, Princeton seemed like a social wilderness. My daily routine was long, repetitive, exhausting and totally unrelieved by any of the urban distractions and amusements I was so used to. This was a milieu I could never belong to or identify with. Neither, of course, had I completely fit into Lebanese society, but for some reason I could not dispel the idea of returning. Besides, before the country was ravaged by protracted violence, Beirut at least, had been a vibrant and thriving cosmopolitan city.

Re-entry

Over the past eleven years, I had returned to Beirut many times in my memory. When in February 1995 I finally did return, the surreal atmosphere in the country only served to heighten my anxieties about this new stage in our life. Upon arrival I realized I had invented another Lebanon, a Lebanon I am not entirely sure ever existed. Perhaps it was not Lebanon but remembering Lebanon that had sustained me. In no time I was overwhelmed by the swift-moving visual images of a city I no longer recognized. Sprawling new developments resulting from the unzoned building boom, and the arrival of fast food outlets and kitschy entertainment spots had, to my horror, infested the cornish that rings what used to be a beautiful unspoiled sea front. Blank-faced concrete monstrosities and quarries now bite into the hillsides surrounding the city, evidence of
residents having flocked out in droves to escape the new and multiplying city populations. While in Princeton, I didn’t understand exactly how painful re-entry into this entirely strange place would be. Clearly I was naïve to have thought the country could have been otherwise. The brutal war of nearly two decades had left 170,000 people dead, twice as many wounded or disabled, with nearly two-thirds of the population dislocated or uprooted from their homes and communities, let alone the psychological and emotional damage inflicted. The downtown area, where the fiercest fighting had occurred in the beginning of the war, was now being rebuilt. Despite this, there remained large pockets of destroyed buildings gutted with gaping holes that looked exactly like huge hunks of swiss cheese. On the political front, the country was more fragmented, more deeply divided and volatile than ever before. Below the surface lurked unimaginable hostility that stemmed from the fact that none of the major issues had been adequately addressed. Re-entry was proving to be more painful than I had anticipated. Almost immediately we were out-of-touch strangers in a strange land.

Upon our return, two themes in particular seemed to materialize. The first centered on our academic life. For months I had looked forward to the prospect of seriously teaching again. Unfortunately I was soon overwhelmed by my responsibilities which hardly left time for anything else. A teaching load of twelve hours a week, let alone attending endless meeting, holding office hours, serving on committees and grading heaps of papers left me anxiously wondering, as I lay awake at night from sheer exhaustion, how I would ever manage to get through the following day. To make matters worse, the next spring I was encumbered with more than my share of administrative tasks some more rewarding than others. Meetings turned into highly charged happenings as I pushed for drastic changes in the courses I had been asked to coordinate. Introducing the first creative writing course, on the other hand, was a thrill. It proved to be refreshingly direct and of immediate relevance to the lives of many of my students.

We had no way of knowing when we returned to AUB how riddled it was with internal strife. After Malcolm Kerr’s assassination his predecessors were barred from residing in Lebanon. Consequently the University was run by remote control from its New York office becoming, at best, nothing more than a holding operation. Taking
advantage of this situation, insecure groups within AUB, academics and administrators alike, jockeyed for control, each trying to implement competing agendas. Added to this, was the practice of greeting returning faculty members with suspicion, resentment, at times even hostility. Authority was corrupt, irrational, and vindictive, hardly an atmosphere conducive to productive and rewarding work let alone healthy professional development.

Trouble flared up immediately. Samir’s life was quickly made miserable by the divisive campaigns of insecure faculty and administrators. Returning to the University with handsome funds to develop a Research Center did not endear him to colleagues who had remained behind during the war years. I watched silently with a mixture of admiration and dread as he led a one-man campaign of opposition to whatever he thought would not serve the interests of the University well. Never did he consider the damaging personal consequences of a good fight provided he was convinced of the principles involved. Soon he was bombarded with the exchange of masses of angry memoranda. Criticism was often directed at our having left AUB during part of the war years, only to return with fancy ideas, new and “naïve” ways for implementing change, views that were useless and detrimental to those who had “not abandoned the University.” While I sympathized with the insecurity of colleagues, their arguments did not alter the existing reality. There was urgent need for change in a University that had not moved forward during the war years. Ostensibly, however, the situation served only to further disturb and complicate our lives. In fact, Samir at one point was forced to defend himself in court against one particularly nasty colleague who fabricated all kinds of false allegations against him.

Happily, the second theme provided a much needed respite from our campus troubles. Upon our return to Lebanon we were greeted by the gracious hospitality and warmth of old friends. Our renewed encounters were immensely enticing. Once again we stepped into a highly cultured world of civilized living which mixed people of diverse interests and backgrounds in politics, journalism, publishing, medicine, business, law and education. The elegant gatherings and fascinating conversation were reminiscent of days gone by. Many of our dearest friends, people of unusual intellect, style, grace and charm
were shaped by the old values and traditions of an earlier Lebanon. For Samir and I and their beautiful homes have remained havens, and the settings for engaging conversations and exquisite meals. They are truly unusual and accomplished individuals who display an inexhaustible zest for life, and an ironic view of the absurdities that characterize this desperate little country. Their warmth and friendship continues to enrich and add meaning to our lives.

The business of once again settling down in Lebanon and drawing spiritual and psychic nourishment became increasingly more difficult when Ramzi, now fourteen, announced that he had no intention of remaining in a “had-been” society inhabited by “losers” and “wannabes”. Ever since the age of nine, Ramzi had developed a career on and off-Broadway. As a dedicated performer who was totally absorbed in musical theater, Lebanon was hardly the place for him. Beirut, unlike New York, would never be able to capture his dreams and allow them to happen. George had remained in the United States to complete his education at Swarthmore. I had to admit that despite my distaste for Princeton, it had offered us a new way of viewing our world and our lives. Friends there had shown exceptional warmth and generosity. Besides it was challenging, especially for our boys, to grow up in a society where everything seemed possible and where striving for one’s best achievement was admired and encouraged.

Our desire to return to Lebanon had been deep but we seemed unable to draw strength from it. It hadn’t always nourished us well, and I now had a strange feeling of entering a world that is at once threatening and seductive. Desperately I searched for the charms of the city. Its flavor and culture are exceedingly diverse and complex due to the mixture of civilizations, but now its enchantments seemed to exist only in my imagination and memory. Slowly I learned to isolate myself, to withdraw amidst all the ensuing confusion and focus my energies on work and writing. This seemed like a perfectly sensible way to live a reasonably sane life. It was, nevertheless, a sad reminder of the war years when we learned that numbing ourselves to the grotesque realities and horrifying scenes was essential for survival. Often I was overcome with exhaustion by the daunting challenge of finding meaning in a realm where memory and imagination had traded places with reality. Nothing I had anticipated had quite prepared me for my new circumstances.
I was neither here nor there, but on the outside glancing in, in a corner looking on, to borrow an expression from one of my students’ narrative texts. I tried to think about the years I’d spent longing to return. I seemed to be homesick for a place I had learned to recreate. Like other exiles, I was forced to reinvent my homeland in my mind. On the one hand, I was seething with inner rage at what had happened to Lebanon; while on another level I began, out of desperation, to seek pleasure in the simpler joys of life. It was now sheer delight to take brisk walks on the cornish with Samir in the twilight. With time, I learned to block out the ugly, visual images and focus instead on the flaming sun sinking into the glittering sea; to watch the golden glow of the fishing boats set against the shimmering lights from the surrounding mountain villages.

The task before me though daunting was clear, provided I could sustain the energy and determination to see it through. I needed, to reverse my situation and view problems in terms of the creative possibilities they present. The issue of self became central everytime the choices and rhythms of my life changed and now returning to Lebanon necessitated redefinition. Understanding my shifting self must be turned into a resource, an opportunity for a kind of empowerment. Groping in unexplored territory is frightening yet there is a need to imagine a meaningful present and future in a society like Lebanon that has never failed at being a place to which travellers can return.

**III Backward Glances: The Failure of Nostalgic and Romantic Perspectives**

Central to the notion of self, is the involvement with geographical perception. Place, real or imagined, is essential to identity: Friedman (1989) writes about “the lost generation of Lebanese.” For these young people Lebanon is “just a picture on an old calendar in the attic or a faded postcard in the drawer” (p. 229).

During class discussions and in their texts, students are quick to reject the romantic stories and old world images of their parents. The nostalgic interpretations of Lebanon fed to them during their stay abroad are dismissed as wishful imaginings of involuntary exiles whose emotional themes ignore the tragic realities of a country torn apart by factional strife. Parents are viewed as tortured souls clutching onto a vanished past. Returning to Lebanon serves only to intensify and heighten the discrepancies
between the views of students and their parents. Realizing that unlike their parents they cannot escape into the comfort of a familiar past, real or imagined, students are thrown into a hostile environment where they are face to face with the geography of fear. Faysal is disturbed by his surroundings.

When we returned to Lebanon a few years ago I was shocked by what I saw. My parents had told me stories about how beautiful and perfect the country is. They talked endlessly about Lebanese hospitality and kindness. To me, Lebanon is ugly because the Lebanese have destroyed it. There is no effort to preserve nature or to be environmentally aware. There is pollution everywhere and people seem incredibly destructive. Most of the time I am horrified by the ugliness of my surroundings angry that my parents conveyed false impressions to me (Faysal).

Nesrine shares Faysal’s disappointment:

On the surface there is a part of me that accepts the need of my parents to construct a beautiful past. But deep down I cannot accept their perfect views of Lebanon. They don’t see how hideous it has become. Anyway, my ideas are completely at odds with those of my parents, so this subject is one we try to avoid so I spend a lot of time writing about it instead (Nesrine)

This theme surfaced over and over again not only in students’ texts, but also during classroom discussions. Parents, it seems, painted glowing descriptions of Lebanon during their involuntary exile. They instilled fantasies in their children based on nostalgic longings. “Now that we have returned from Canada,” Louay writes, “I am struggling to dismiss the glowing stories my mother told about Lebanon and I am angry because I don’t believe she told me the truth.”

One evening, as I sat on my balcony, I thought about how students resented the nostalgic stories of the past as told by their parents. I remembered how during our interviews Ziad had attributed his father’s attitude to a sense of nostalgia that become magnified by his forced exile during the war. Ziad was sensitive enough to comprehend his father’s pain, yet disappointed to find Lebanon far from the “magical” country his father had made it out to be. My gaze settled on a string of tiny fishing boats as they fanned out to dot the shimmering water with their lights. Overhead a perfectly round
moon hung low in the sky like a large silver coin. Just for a moment it crossed my mind how unreal and absolutely enchanting nature in Lebanon can be. This was certainly the stuff that magical places are made of. Is it not, after all, necessary on occasion to escape the ugly contradictions of one’s society in order to carry on with the taxing routine of daily life? I was suddenly reminded of an episode that took place during the summer of 1992 when, taking advantage of one of the numerous cease-fires, we returned to Lebanon for a brief visit after an absence of eight years.

Prior to our visit, Ramzi, our younger son, was captivated by the breathtaking posters of Lebanon’s beautiful landscapes that adorned the walls of the Lebanese Consulate in New York where we went to renew our passports. Blessed with a rich and playful imagination, Ramzi soon began to conjure up a fantasy world around his country’s natural and historic sites. On our first morning back in Lebanon, Ramzi awoke to the crowing roosters and the enticing fragrance of Jasmine. Elated by the novel sounds and smells of his mysterious native city, he quickly convinced his father to venture out on an early morning stroll. Samir still remembers the sparkle in Ramzi’s eyes as he boisterously explored the small patch of garden surrounding the apartment building. But as he skipped adventurously ahead of his father, wandering into the city’s devastated public spaces, Ramzi became immediately paralyzed with fear. The ugly vestiges of war and destruction, the crumbling buildings with gaping Swiss-cheese holes, the chaos, noise and dirt transformed his feelings of excitement into fear. In no time at all, he held on tightly to his father’s hand. The realization that Beirut is far from an idyllic secret garden came as a sudden and rude awakening.

Ramzi, however, was quick to devise his own survival strategies. To begin with, he refused to leave our flat after this unpleasant experience. In order to regain control of his environment, he needed to remain in doors. Our living room was quickly converted into a make-believe stage through the ingenious use of broken furniture, old books, torn and tattered curtains, even the remains of an old chandelier. All day long Ramzi performed on his stage, mostly without an audience, to the tapes of his favorite Broadway Musicals that he had tucked safely away in his backpack before leaving Princeton. In this
way, he succeeded in sheltering himself from the menacing world outside. The fear and disappointment he had experienced upon seeing Lebanon was barred from entering his magically created world. Unable to co-exist in an ugly landscape, and a threatening milieu, Ramzi opted to create more imaginative surroundings just as the students in my study seek alternative venues in their texts. Karim, during the course of our interview explained it all very simply. At the end of the day he finds “relief and freedom” in his writing. For him, it’s the perfect “way to live outside the grip and constraints of an irrational society.”

IV. The Flâneur: Writing From the Margins

Peter McLaren (1997) believes that “both the world of academic science and that of everyday life need the agency required of the self-reflective flâneur” (p. 143). Like the flâneur, numerous themes in the respondents’ narratives reflect an attempt to retain some form of detachment by setting a pace that is out of step with what is happening around them. They live in the “in-between” spaces and places. Both inside and outside the University, they create and dwell in their own world. According to McLaren, the flâneur carefully and scrupulously observes the sights and sounds of metropolitan life before calling the world’s bluff to civilized existence. The flâneur is, “a situated observer who is transcendentally removed from the messy web of social relations that shapes both themselves as observers and those whom they choose to observe” (p.149). The flâneur aims to be aimless, to shun any idée fixe. He or she must negotiate the everyday scene of post-modern hybridity to create some semblance of meaning in social relations. In brief, flâneurs reimagine and recreate their world.

A close reading of all thirty texts, reveals themes in which students view themselves as post-modern flâneurs. Many describe the crafting of coherent narratives as a struggle to understand their lives by fusing together the disparate strands of their everyday existence. Writing is seen as an attempt to uncover the deep experiences that give meaning and structure to who they are. Like the post-modern flâneur, they negotiate special and temporal narratives, in private, public, and hybridized spheres. Historically the flâneur has been a strolling sightseer, a conceptual detective. It is the flâneur who is
both the consumer and producer of narrative texts. In this sense he is able to remain both detached and active at the same time (Frisby, 1994, pp. 82-83).

Wael Writes:

Being born in Lagos made me aware of class differences in society. Unlike others who grew up in Nigeria, my father taught us to be extremely open. Throughout my 16 years in Nigeria, I was able to have friends from all classes and nationalities without identifying with any one group. This was easy for me to do because my parents never forced any religious or nationalistic beliefs on us. When I came to Lebanon I was disappointed to see conflicting religious beliefs and political allegiances. As a Lebanese Syrian Druze who has lived in Lagos, I am a total outcast in this society. My long hair has landed me in jail twice. People think I’m satanic or a drug addict. Luckily I have always been a deep thinker and observer of those around me. So I write stories about what I see. When I am not writing, I read. In fact, I am an avid reader. Much of my time is spent alone. Often I prowl the streets to observe everything around me. I don’t like to be seen or noticed. I wish I could be invisible (Wael).

A number of writers have remarked that the flâneur seeks the aim of his wonderings, the reason for his gaze which usually has narrative intentionality. It is a motivated way of seeing that seeks new narratives. It comes, finally, to one image for inhabiting space, that of strangeness. The determination to remain outside any confining physical space along with the ability to combine “intimacy with the critical look of any outsider, involvement with detachment,” is the distinguishing mark of the writer’s exile (Bauman, 2000, p. 207). This explains why my students perceive themselves as strangers in the crowd who are in, but not of the place. Writing, in this instance, becomes a way of controlling the strangeness of the situation.

The students in this study are aware of their flânerie. In no way do they allow their lives to be controlled by the larger all consuming narratives around them that necessarily demand more fixed and structured identities. Expertly they survey their surroundings with detached mastery. Moreover, they understand the ways in which their identity is being constructed through the activity of writing which can effectively silence, at least for them, the disruptive factors in society. Many students, like the one quoted here, express this idea in insightful and moving prose:
My life has been characterized by continuous mobility and continuous illness. I have had every disease imaginable: malaria, yellow fever, typhus, etc. This caused serious problems for me in school especially since I was constantly being sent to other countries for treatment. As I thought I would soon die, I detached myself from my surrounds and began to write poetry. Because I was different and observed things in unusual ways, people grew suspicious of me. I became very frustrated until I realized that I could use my strangeness to create a unique and special identity in my writing. By reinventing myself I could also escape the rules and regulations, the confining views of those around me. I could escape from situations at will returning to reality only when I was strong enough to face my surroundings (Habib).

According to McLaren (1995), the question of identity is a nagging one for the post-modern flâneur whose situation is further exacerbated by constant border-crossings. Consequently, he suggests that people develop a hybrid, multilingual and multicultural consciousness in order to cultivate and maintain a liberating perspective. The respondents in this study weave their narrative themes, seek and explore ways of achieving identity, not only as detached observers, but also through the kind of social and cultural hybridity that McLaren is calling for. Here autobiography allows students the opportunity to inquire and reflect into the “architecture of the self” (Pinar, 1997), but the benefit lies far beyond critical self-reflection. Social and cultural experience is transformed and externalized from a distance. Intense awareness is achieved, placing the student flâneur in a position of complete control.

- On Becoming a Flâneuse

For as long as I can remember my father struggled with a private and silent war that engaged conflicting loyalties and passions because it pitted his village roots against life in the United States where he completed his higher education. As he grew older, the inevitable difficulty of moving from one culture to another became increasingly more demanding. The notion of a society governed primarily by the principal of speed and uniformity, by the idea of disposable human relationships greatly troubled him. For all its problems, life in his Lebanese mountain-village appeared, at least to him, altogether more inviting, and above all humane. It presented a set rhythm derived from continuity, tradition, sociability, and a secure sense of belonging to a place where the rules are entirely clear. In spite of this dilemma, he somehow managed to hold his diverse worlds
in uneasy balance during the span of his lifetime, finding temporary relief in an arrangement that divided the year equally between Lebanon and the United States. Eventually his life settled into a reasonable pattern from which, in the final years of his life, he could not break free chiefly because my mother neither tolerated nor accepted village life. Nevertheless she endured the summer months in Lebanon with a sort of uncaring indifference until Thanksgiving, which to her, marked the long awaited departure to life in a “civilized” country, to a place she called home. Although my father managed to disguise the tension behind his quick humor and a smile that lit up his light blue eyes setting his face aglow, in the years preceding his death, he found it increasingly difficult to delude himself. Unable to remain immune to the pressures heaped upon him, and desperately longing to remain in his village, the darker and more complex consequences of his dilemma began to weigh slowly and heavily on his well being.

All this I perhaps should have foreseen, especially in the summer of 2000 when his physical condition weakened considerably. In reality, I sensed his pain but remained powerless to alter the exiting circumstances primarily because the slightest hint of interference on my part aroused undue hostility from my mother. The dates were engraved in stone. No change was acceptable. November meant departure to North America. Telling my father goodbye that foggy autumn morning as he left the village for the last time had been exceedingly heartwrenching. Severe back pain made his walk uneven. Worse still, I knew he was gripped with feelings of helplessness, by thoughts that he might never return.

Aboard the plane scattered fragments come to me. My imagination begins to panic, to dash from one image to another. The plane climbs steeply. The city lights grow fainter and I am deep in the silence of the night. I feel a kind of desperation induced by more than jet lag. Awake out of necessity, yet almost catatonic with fatigue after twenty-six hours of travelling, my suspension between one state and another is reminiscent of my father’s precarious situation. Only last week his voice had sounded calm and determined over the phone. In his usual high spirits, he joked about feeling imprisoned in the United States. I was not to worry, however, for this year he intended to return by the end of February at the latest. Naturally I was immediately sworn to secrecy as my mother would
most definitely attempt to thwart his plans. Now he lay in a coma. The tests were conclusive. He was brain-dead in some sterile, grey hospital so far away from his real home, from where he longed to be.

From the corner of my eye I glimpsed a tiny, extremely old woman who sat clutching a rather large object in her lap wrapped in an exquisite piece of cloth. She was tissue-thin and leaf-like. Age had put deep wrinkles on both sides of her face, and a mass of snowy hair was tightly pulled back and twisted into a perfectly round bun. She remained frozen throughout the flight, spoke not a word and stared straight ahead. I watched as the flight attendant inquired if she would like dinner. When no answer came, he paused impatiently for a moment to check his exasperation. Then very rudely he reached out and snapped down her tray onto which he aggressively tossed an evening meal which, of course, she neither took notice of nor touched. I was irritable at what I perceived to be typical American insensitivity and pushiness. Could he not see the anxieties that paralyzed this little Hispanic whiff of a woman? All alone, on probably her first flight ever, she was surrounded by the rules of a culture entirely unknown to her, let alone the fear of flying. My imagination flitted between the verbal and visual messages of different worlds. I wondered why the need for constant justification and understanding nibbled at the edge of my every moment.

I thought of my father, of how he had longed to remain in his village. Then it occurred to me how enabling it would be to settle into the role of a detached observer, to view life with bemused emotional distance. Such new territory needs mental adjustment to allow for the absorption of sights and sounds devoid of emotional involvement, for the registering of visual impressions and sensations from a safe distance. The detached observation of intercultural social relations in private, public and hybrid spheres would certainly open up a new zone of freedom. Understanding multiple attitudes develops a hybrid, multilingual and multicultural consciousness that gives rise to a liberating perspective (McLaren, 1997). A hybrid, multilingual and multicultural consciousness, a surplus of vision, a reflexivity with respect to global and local contexts and concerns is essential, but for now, I desperately needed to concentrate on the idea of detachment, on becoming a flâneuse.
That bitter, cold January night I knew it would be wrong to lay my father to rest in an American cemetery. He must be brought back for burial in his mountain village. I watched the sunset dim. Too sad and strung out to sleep, I suspended any further thoughts and put my mind on hold.

V. Fragmented Personalities and Multiple Identities

To understand a life is to trace its development upon a narrative thread, a thread that unites otherwise disparate or unheeded happenings into the significance of a developing directionality, a destiny. The self is generated and is given unity in and through its own narratives, in its own recounting and hence understanding of itself. The self is essentially a being of reflexivity, coming to itself in its own narrational acts (Kerby, 1991, pp. 40-41).

There are striking similarities in the recurring thematic patterns of fragmentation among all thirty respondents. In both structure and content students display a disjointed, embattled, unfinished and confused quality in their writing. A state of inbetweenness and suspension, of not knowing in which direction to move, or act is repeatedly invoked. This disturbing predicament is recognized, expressed and analyzed by the students themselves with genuine seriousness and concern. Narrative fragmentation may well signify an inability, or even a refusal on their part to create a totalizing picture. The incomplete and often confusing nature of their work and ideas, as reflected in their writing, clearly parallels the fabric of their lives. “It is the loss of a living connection,” writes Eva Hoffman (1989), “I don’t see what I’ve seen, don’t comprehend what’s in front of me” (p. 101).

According to Kerby (1991) most narratives generally seek closure or totality by framing the story within a beginning, middle, end structure. Closure when seen from this perspective is not only a literary device, but a fundamental way in which events are understood. Failing this structure of closure, Kerby argues, narrative falls short of providing a meaningful or logical development in our lives. What is striking about
students’ autobiographical narratives is that only three of the respondents managed to achieve real closure. It would seem that the ever-changing patterns of their lives run in contradiction to imposing final conclusions.

Nochlin (1996), suggests that “dislocation can facilitate personal transformation which may take the form of ‘rewriting’ the self” (p.38). For students who have repeatedly been geographically displaced, let alone culturally marginalized, fragmented lives, shifting and negotiating identities are realities they cannot ignore. In the light of this, it is little wonder that they constantly attempt to “rewrite” their fragmented selves in an effort to achieve a kind of completeness.

It has been posited by a number of scholars that if narrative is related directly to the self and self-identity, the importance of narrative in our daily lives is of major significance. Narration becomes essential in providing both structure and a degree of understanding to the ongoing content of our lives. Persons acquire meaning through the story of their past and by extension to their future. Thus a narrative or story like framework offers continuity and coherence. In this case, when students write fragmented narratives they do so to reflect the nature and confusion that characterizes their lives. The self, most scholars agree, appears to be inseparable from the narrative or life story it constructs for itself. “From the story a sense of self is generated” (Kerby, 1991, p.6). Ricoeur (1974) insists that we bring our history along with us. Consequently, new experiences “tend to flow into this story of our lives” (p.45). The mere fact of incorporating the new within such a frame is already enough to generate an identity.

Throughout students’ autobiographical texts, the past is fragmented and disjointed, the present is difficult and painful to cope with and understand, while the future remains uncertain and threatening. Clearly, it is confusing and practically impossible for these students to express their identity in a continuous manner. Shifting circumstances resulting from a catastrophic event, in this case the civil war in Lebanon, disrupted and unsettled their lives. The thread of their self-identity has been systematically severed by events beyond their control. Although their narratives are unavoidably selective in as much as they exclude certain phenomena and dwell on others,
the end results remain similar in that they fail to generate unity and closure. Whatever stylistic differences they may have, their identity is of the utmost concern because it is not reinforced by the regularities in their day-to-day experiences. Their interrupted past experiences fused with a shifting and disjointed present give rise to constant interruptions. Thus it comes as no surprise that the sense of self generated from their texts is highly fragmented. Their identity can never be fixed. Instead, it remains multiple and shifting.

Taylor (1985) believes that people understand their life as an unfolding story in which narrative offers a coherent answer to the persistent question of identity. If this is true, it would explain why the respondents need to write in order to comprehend or possibly cope with multiple identities. By trying to contain or restructure their multiple and fragmented selves they may have in mind the possibility of attaining an active refiguration, or just better knowledge of themselves and their world. As Chadia explains:

Sometimes I think I have multiple personalities, and at other times I console myself that it is natural to have all these differences in one personality. However, I believe that I have probably worn so many masks that I forget who I am in reality. Sometimes I feel as if my life is a game I play with myself and others but mostly I want to collect all the little pieces of my life and put the puzzle back together again. But, I know this can never be. (Chadia)

Maha touches upon the same theme:

My personality is diverse and heterogeneous I have had to act differently depending on the country and situation I am in. I encompass a spectrum of personalities because my life has been interrupted so many times that I have not experienced continuity. My existence is choppy and disconnected. (Maha)

Reflecting on his life, Munir writes:

Individuals develop a certain character or personality as they grow up. Many factors such as culture, life style, religious beliefs, parental guidance, friends, and experiences shape personality. When these constantly change so does one’s personality. I have been forced to adapt to may different places, people, and situations so my personality has not developed in a linear fashion. I have a special mask for every occasion. Rarely do I take it off and relax my face. (Munir)
Twenty-four out of thirty respondents wrote that they are unable to experience forgetfulness of self. This may explain why self-scrutiny and self-understanding occupy center stage in their narratives. Kerby (1991), asserts that questions of identity and self-examination usually arise in “crisis situations and at certain turning points in our routine behavior” (p. 6). Given the unsettling consequences of a brutal war, coupled with the disturbing socio-cultural realities present in a post-war culture, it should come as no surprise that creative and expressive students are consumed by the issue of multiple and shifting identities.

It is important, to note that although preoccupied with this theme, students harbor no illusions of achieving a continuous, fixed, or unchanged identity. Their narratives focus on the shifting events and experiences of their lives primarily to organize them into meaningful sequences, to give form to their choppy, interrupted, and disjointed existence. They are faced with a complex dilemma. On the one hand, they remain aware and disturbed by their inability to alter their situation, yet despite all the difficulties involved, they continue to praise restlessness. When seen in this light, writing becomes a coping mechanism as well as a search for comfort and reassurance. If as Kerby argues, self-understanding and self-identity are dependent in certain important respects upon the coherence and continuity of one’s personal narrative, clearly students are struggling with an important issue. While aware that understanding is facilitated by a lucid presentation and development of material, and that a stable identity implies certain continuity over time, nevertheless, they are plagued by a striking lack of continuity in their young lives, and the knowledge that they will never completely achieve it. Worse still, they remain uncertain as to whether or not having a fixed and stable identity would work for them. From this perspective, writing becomes a valuable tool as it offers ways in which their fragmented selves can be brought together, labelled, approved of, defined and controlled in relationship to others, and to a society they neither understand or like. Their notion of self, as revealed in their narratives, comes to depend not on continuity, but on interruption, on a willingness to enter different worlds often using a variety of disguises and masks to facilitate the task. Writing becomes an attempt to cope with shifting rhythms and discordant, often painful, experiences which center around the theme of
fragmentation. Luckily, they remain aware that fragmentation has enabling factors so they do not perceive it to be entirely negative.

MacIntyre (1984) writes that the story of life is always embedded in the story of communities from which people derive their identity. “What I am, therefore, is in key part what I inherit, a specific past that is present to some degree in my present” (p.221). Herein lies a difficult paradox. Students recognize that they are part and parcel of the Lebanese community in which they live. Yet while their milieu significantly contributes to the material from which they derive their narratives, the values and expectations put forth by the community, in the form of external narratives, are viewed with resentment because they do not mesh with the respondents’ moral starting point. For obvious reasons, these external narratives are seen as a confinement, a deprivation that student writers are quick to identify and contest in their own narratives. On the one hand, students are aware of the importance of the past, of family community, and country. They know that the external narratives put forth by their community provide definition and identity. On the other hand, they are offended by the way in which these narratives undeniably set up expectations and constraints, by the way in which they foster fixed identity, dependency and blind conformity through national, cultural, and religious images that play so powerful a role in Lebanese society. They also understand that Lebanese society views them as a threat to the social order because they defy the given norms. They challenge the established ties of loyalties like family, kinship and traditions through what Ussama Makdessi calls “the fantasies of the possible”, and these new strategies of identification upset the stability of the social order.

What follows centers around the dilemma of how much these students should borrow from external narratives. Hence ensues a struggle to negotiate their own narrative identities with the external narrative of family, community and country. Respondents are sensitive enough to know that they cannot entirely ignore or shed the expectations and constraints so deeply embedded in the existing Lebanese narratives. Clearly, in a bizarre
way, these external narratives have contributed to the material from which much of their personal narratives, as well as their lives, are derived.

Baffled and uncertain as to which external narratives, if any, to draw meaning from and incorporate into their work, students acquire a double or even multiple perspective in which a single overmastering identity becomes a confinement, or a deprivation. A frequently expressed notion is that they are made up of numerous identities interacting, sometimes harmoniously, sometimes antithetically. Through no fault of their own, their lives have been richly complicated. Intricate issues are at play here. If there is any possibility of bridging the gap between society and themselves it has to be through creative interaction as the cognitive dissonance between their narratives and those present in their social milieux is an inevitable, continuous and ongoing source of conflict. It comes, finally, to a point where they must not only contest, but attempt to understand and negotiate with the various tensions and contradictions implicit in their own biographies as well as the ones that exist externally.

• Juggling Identities

The late-afternoon drizzle casts a silver-grey light on our classroom. Students have been frantically crafting their personal narratives for the past few weeks, and understandably, we speak of little else. Each is deeply engaged in the dramas and fantasies of who and what they are. All have fallen under the spell of writing. Today, however, there is tension, a consuming compulsion to share the frustrations and painful interruptions necessary to assemble the pieces together over and over again. We discuss how choices, no matter how difficult, are essential to creative living. How being open to alternatives of belief and custom, to imaginative ways of being makes it infinitely harder to shape selective memory.

The situation is further complicated by the nature of our work together. Interactive seminars make collective input inevitable. Consequently, students’ ideas and
choices are continually shaped and reshaped by their peers as well as by my suggestions and experiences. “Our approach is flexible and guided by ongoing interaction. All participants are expected to probe both self and other” (Ellis, 1997, p. 122). The continuing conversation is a form of insightful and humane group therapy for me. As we discuss how they should combine the materials of their lives in order to envision something new, I began to write a story about my grandparents. In attempting to breathe life into their memory, it occurs to me that only fragments of the moments we spent together can be highlighted. What I select remains incomplete, arbitrary, nothing more than fanciful sketches resembling a dream. Despite my attempt to remain faithful to who and what my grandparents were, I suddenly realize that memory offers a frail grip on the past. Hence details recollected or imagined can easily be added or taken away to drastically alter the episodes described. Attempting to construct my grandparent’s identity, to breathe life into shared moments is proving to be exceedingly complex, and yet I have asked my students to engage in an examination of their own lives, to construct their own identities.

We play a game in which students have to describe the various identities they have assumed over the past two years. Contrary to my expectations they come up with serious and moving sketches that give shape to shifting identities that are the direct result of diaspora and exile from the self. All have belonged to many worlds and juggle numerous identities most of which are in conflict with each other. Their numerous identities influence and interact with each other making them feel at home everywhere, but not quite, preventing them from completely belonging to one place. Sharing their private and compelling multiple identities seems, at least temporarily, to quell a strong emotional need. It offers respite from the fever of dilemma, acting as a medicine for their restless minds. The opportunity to perform imaginatively by acting out their many selves on center stage, rather than in the shadows, allows students to view their identities as normal, not aberrant. They start to realize that being different comes from strength rather than weakness.

As I enter my darkened office closing the door quietly behind me, all kinds of multiple identities crowd my mind. I have returned to Lebanon under different
circumstances. The country has changed and I am not the same. Coping necessitates the creation of another self because my past self is lost, gone for ever, but in actual fact has it ever really existed? Losing myself, reclaiming myself, reinventing myself. How confusing it all is. There seems to be so much pain at the center of this kind of human experience.

My exasperation sends me scurrying down the deserted corridor, out the main campus gate and into the narrow, winding streets of the city. Amidst the bustle of my favorite market, surrounded by a profusion of enticingly displaced fruits and vegetables, I watch as the ingredients of our evening meal is weighed on lopsided brass scales. Here there is everything to attract the eye, and delight in. Back in the welcoming quiet of our cosy flat I turn to cooking to calm my dizzying ideas. Conjuring up an ending to the story about my grandparents has proved daunting. The complexity of imposing closure on my narratives is also an oddity I share with my students. Somewhere, tucked into our minds, there must an inability to achieve closure because it contradicts our lived experiences. Paulo Freire (1989), considers himself a “border intellectual”, and as such, he occupies a terrain of “homelessness” in the postmodern sense that suggests there is little possibility for ideological and hegemonic closure, no relief from the incessant tensions and contradictions that enforce one’s own identity, struggles and dreams of future possibilities. Said (1999), goes even further by transforming the “incessant tensions” into a form of freedom.

I occasionally experience myself as a cluster of flowing currents. I prefer this to the idea of a solid self, the identity to which so many attach so much significance. These currents, like the themes of one’s life, flow along during the waking hours, and at their best, they require no reconciling, no harmonizing. They are “off” and may be out of place, but at least they are always in motion, in the form of all kinds of strange combinations, moving about, not necessarily forward, sometimes against each other, yet without a central theme. A form of freedom I particularly want to hold on to.

In 1982 I published a collection of children’s stories. For many years after that my pen was silent. It seemed futile in the midst of despair to shape thoughts, sharpen the imagination, and polish prose. The ensuing chaos brought about by the senseless horrors of a relentless war paralyzed my creative energies leaving a deep wound that has been exceedingly slow to heal. Shortly after returning to Lebanon, I was able, once again, to spin my tales. It suddenly occurred to me that my inability to write was in some strange way connected to my inability to return to Lebanon. The act of writing and returning were tied together in such mysterious and complicated ways that without returning I would probably never have been able to write again. Now that I was back I stole moments inbetween my busy teaching schedule to write. I needed to escape, at least in my mind. To explore different ways of thinking about my life. The “suspended betweenness” of my heroines, and their transcultural circumstances had equipped them with the fluidity necessary to merge disparate identities, to transcend the artificial boundaries of culture and nationality. Their experiences, it seems to me, are valuable to those of us whose lives have been lived between cultures, who have felt the enriching texture of multiplicity, but also suffered its torments and confusions. My life, like the lives of my heroines, is subject to discontinuities and dislocations, to shifts and disruptions, to marginal roles that have to be invented again and again. Writing historical fiction satisfied my need to explore the creative potential of marginal lives, to learn how they adapted and improvised imaginatively in numerous cultures, how they continually refocused and redefined their commitments, including their sense of self. Their lives and ideals offered new ways of thinking that arise from hybridity and multiplicity, ways of merging disparate strands to forge meaningful identities.

Historical research taught me that forgetting the past can be detrimental, for any scraps of the past, no matter how insignificant they might appear, can be useful in instigating a changed present. One must first understand traditional roles and values in a society before attempting to move beyond them in any effective way. Only then can the fragments, discontinuities and identities be used to gain the necessary strength to transcend old assumptions and habitual bias. My heroines, decades ago, refused to adhere
to social and cultural expectations. Instead, they defied cultural stereotypes, thus gaining the freedom to experiment with different roles and shifting identities.

As winter gave way to the spring of 1999, the piles of handwritten papers on my desk were gradually replaced by neatly typed pages. Throughout the cold winter months, I had slogged on determined to weave my stories. Often I was overwhelmed at the mocking emptiness of the page, by the frustration of a blank mind. Clearly my moral obligation was to return to Lebanon, yet I felt a stranger in my own country and, had turned to writing as a meaningful escape. Historical fiction led me to explore the lives of my heroines together with my own life. Then, as it happened, my students began to craft their personal narratives, and I had the most reassuring feeling that we were working side by side, combining the materials of our lives in order to shape something new. We wrote about place and displacement, about loss and feeling uprooted in places where most people seems to know who they are and where they belong. We wrote about how scattered and uncertain we are concerning who we are and where we are. We explored feelings of alienation and ambivalence about the country we call home. I write around my students. I write about my students. I write away from my students. Throughout all this they remain my point of reference, and the very act of writing ties us together in a magical way, for we are all writing to create an imagined space, to give form, shape and meaning to our lives, to forge identity. We write to discover who we are; to frame the disparate elements that constitute our shifting identities. Writing opens up a new universe into which, one by one, we’ll move all our selves, thoughts, ideas, memories and rearrange them as we please thereby constructing new selves.

VI. The Inner Circle

Edward Said in Between Worlds (1998) has described the difficulty of always feeling himself in the wrong corner. “In a place that seemed to be slipping away from me just as I tried to define or describe it” (p.4). Similarly, the students in this study, in much the same way as Said, must often wish they came from a simpler background. After all, they could have been born all Lebanese, or all something else. Certainly this would have spared them the adjustments and difficulties involved in coping with hybridity. No longer would they view and be viewed by others as outsiders. The invisible line that separates
them from others both in and out of the University would disappear. Instead they face isolation, mostly by their own choosing as they profess to have very little in common with others. Temperamentally they are perceived by others as being loners, especially in a gregarious society such as this one, where there is little room or respect for the person who seeks and values solitude, for solitude in Lebanese society is thought to be odd, antisocial, even threatening to others.

A close analysis of “the group” or inner circle themes clearly shows that the respondents view themselves as misfits who attract and are attracted to other misfits. Bonding comes easy only with peers who, like them, remain outside the main arena and must learn to rearrange the unconnected parts of their experiences. They come together because they realize the difficult, but privileged role they must play in dealing with the outside world. In the shaping of their narratives, although every respondent put emphasis on their own separateness, they also attested to the continuing receptiveness of their peers in creative writing. As members of the class, they collectively feel their ideas to be at variance with those of their peers outside the group. Increased communication within the creative writing group undoubtedly contributes to an enhanced sense of shared sensibilities. Individually, and as a group, they grapple with profound changes in local, educational, and societal values which threaten their identity. The significance of collective classroom participation lies in the ability of class members to share “we” or “inside” group feelings. The class forms a new “inside” group which assumes great significance to them. It is of interest to note that in their narratives the insider and outsider perspectives were more often than not systematically combined to form clusters of the same theme. Consistently the image of the “outside” world is associated with suspicion, apprehension and rejection, all of which require constant vigilance and control; while “inside” the group is associated with understanding, openness, freedom of expression, and most importantly a sense of collective presence.
The “we” or “in-group” feelings expressed by the respondents is perhaps worth examining. This distinction is parallel in some respects to the “backstage vs. frontstage” developed by Goffman (1959) in *The Presentation Of The Self In Everyday Life*. When students enter creative writing class, “backstage” situations, they are free of the unreasonable controls and values of a society that is both alien to them and at the same time views them as outsiders. One of the surprises of my early teaching experiences was to discover how quickly students bonded to form a tight knit group which assumed a collective identity based on shared and similar experiences. Despite obvious differences in age, educational background, academic class, and major, they were brought together by significant commonalities that by far out weighed the differences. The facility with which they became integrated and at ease with one other was evidence that the creative writing group provided comfort, understanding and insulation from the outside world. Commenting on her experiences regarding this theme, Abir writes:

> All my life has been spent travelling from one country to another because of my father’s job. When we returned to Beirut two years ago I developed a fear of meeting people I could neither understand or identify with. I felt uncomfortable in a city I had known only as a child. I have always loved to write, so I began to keep a daily record of my experiences to ease my pain and loneliness. My relatives and acquaintances found this hilariously ridiculous. It was only when I joined this creative writing class that I began to feel comfortable. Suddenly I was surrounded by open and expressive people who understood my need to write. They understand that I am different and they respect my feelings (Abir)

Because Abir felt uprooted and marginal, she was incapable of coping with the outside forces that threatened to alter her life. Instead, she opted to gain some control by shaping and recording her inner feelings on paper. Writing became a way of reclaiming her life and identity, a way of easing her pain. Yet she was only able to express the intensity of her feelings with a group that shared similar concerns. True understanding and acceptance could be acquired strictly “inside” the group where there is collective identity and the ability to keep an open mind. Like many others in class, she reveals that there is comfort to be found in sharing her writing with like-minded peers. By doing this she creates a special space in which to re-invent herself and her surroundings, but more importantly, Abir finds support and encouragement among people who are like her.
Finally, once inside, this imagined space, she and her peers are able to control and reshape their lives through social integration.

Carine confesses to similar feelings:

I really don’t belong at A.U.B. or anywhere else, but in creative writing class I feel at ease because I can openly share my ideas and feelings with people who think like I do. Besides the group enhances my imagination. It makes me unafraid of being who I am. (Carine)

The group allows students to come together in productive mutual support. Once "inside" alternative worlds and realities can be imagined, explored, discussed and written about. Furthermore, when enlivened by other creative writers, students can exchange ideas freely without the fear of ridicule for their lack of rootedness and conformity. The distinct selves of the student writers are free to blossom within their shared narratives. As society continues to threaten and challenge their self-image, they ward off their fear by remaining in control of their texts: Here their self-image remains in tact and their ideas are reinforced through their strong identification with the group.

As a group, the respondents remain acutely aware of the traditional demands in Lebanon which stipulate that a person performs well or ill with little margin or tolerance for deviation. Yet in contrast to this, the "in-group" situations allows open and critical reflection which thwarts intellectual confinement or stagnation, and which vies with traditional beliefs. This scenario presents enormous and exciting possibilities, for once the students are "inside" the group, they can be themselves instead of chameleons adapting to the needs of the moment. Inside there is no longer any need to fight with the stifling and confining strictures that plague their existence. They are now free to concentrate entirely on their creativity.

Hence the creative writing group allows students to construct their own subjectivity, which includes their own notion of specialness. In an odd way, they can only recognize themselves as a group by being apart and different from other students at the University. Once inside the inner circle, they are free to use their writing to form a strategic creation of space where they gain collective presence and complete control. The
group provides a much needed respite and creative outlet from the immense pressure imposed on them by society to conform. Writing carves out special places and spaces for social interaction within the creative writing group. It offers specific ways of transcending isolation, ways of being and communicating with others.

I would like to share one final observation regarding the six thematic categories explored in this chapter. Although they all imbue students with a sense of equilibrium and control in their texts, and by extension in their lives, by carving out imagined spaces for coping with a hostile environment, each theme serves a particular purpose while remaining connected and interwoven to the other themes.

- The exiles use writing to claim individual presence and defy the forces that attempt to silence them.
- The travellers crave out spaces and places in their texts for social and cultural liberation, openness and fluidity.
- Romantic visions of Lebanon are examined and dismissed in an attempt to move forward devoid of the sentimental baggage and constraints that accompany these nostalgic perspectives. Students are freed from unrealistic notions of the past.
- The Flâneur and Flâneuse write to acquire spaces for detached observation, reflection and commentary.
- Students with fragmented personalities write to bring the different selves into play in the hope of gaining insight or constructing a unified self.
- The group allows isolated and marginal students to experience enriching encounters by coming together in a creative and supportive environment characterized by mutual understanding.

- A Circle of Light

The campus is ablaze with spring flowers. From my office window a brilliant blue sea is visible behind a thick row of umbrella pines. I take comfort in knowing that beyond the trees, a vibrant city thrives, as it did so many centuries ago. For months now I have been engrossed in the personal narratives of my students, continuously encountering and experiencing other lives. Glimpsing endless thoughts and feelings, though insightful,
can be a sobering experience. Their journey through life is accompanied by a “melancholy tension” which is expressed in a variety of modes as students craft and shape their texts. The power of autobiographical narratives becomes a testimony not only to students’ feelings of physical displacement, but also to the restlessness that characterizes their inner reality. The road they travel is not straight but full of bends. At every step there are interruptions, signposts pointing in another direction. We have worked together to explore the twists and turns, but no matter how we navigate, Lebanon foregrounds their narrative texts. Rooted in their texts are ambiguous postmodern themes and variations that stem from tension with their homeland: The desire to integrate, and not to integrate, to merge in some unknown way with the society lived in, while struggling to belong to a more suitable environment as well. Ultimately it is the circle of light on their pages that assumes priority because it excludes the real world, allowing an escape into creative imaginings.

I love the energy of my classes, the seriousness with which everyone takes their writing, and the lively meaningful discussions. Students stop me in the corridors or patiently wait outside my office door throughout the day to show me their texts or share ideas. The intellectual excitement generated by this study is overwhelming, and without realizing it, I am being defined by my new role, by the decision to embrace a mode of thinking which is practical, contextual and narrative instead of distant, formal and abstract. For a person who hasn’t quite belonged or felt completely at home anywhere, within weeks after the semester started, I began to view my feelings as perfectly normal. I was greatly moved by the unsparing honesty and trust students showed towards me. A feeling of belonging and light infused my consciousness enabling me to relax and enjoy our sustaining classroom environment and the research that was unfolding.

While I sat, day after day, in the gathering dusk of my office reading endless piles of narratives, I had a profound sense of belonging to the world my students write about. As I watched them shape their texts, we shared a sense of involvement and discovery that touched my life in memorable ways. McWilliam (1997), recognizes that there exists a third “moment” in research; the instant in which the researcher and the researched become co-theorists. It translates into a magical, reciprocal phrase, a period of collective
reflection-in-action on the texts produced by both students and researcher. My work assumed personal meaning because it touched upon “real life”. Gradually I began to envision potential energy, an energy that could perhaps be released into action. Suddenly the liberations and possibilities of multiplicity seemed immense. This was not a time for timid or frozen textual performances, but a time for more bold and adventurous ones. Students need to keep pushing beyond the invisible barriers to experiment with different voices and envision a more challenging environment. At the same time, this practical endeavor led to countless unsettling questions. What does it mean to create a different space in which fixed categories and identities are disputed? How can other performances and more creative ways of being actually take shape against the dominant forces in society? So far, the textual strategies have resulted from the tensions of the multilayered identities of my students, but the common search for a successful discourse to chart our journey from the present to a future of possibilities that allows for the construction of different sensibilities is far from easy. What made all this even more challenging, was the striking realization that students continue to work from within constraints of a tradition even while attempting to enforce what the tradition has refused or attempted to ignore. The strategies employed to resist invisible forces of power are intriguing. Foucault’s (1979) claim that where there is power, there is resistance made me all the more determined to shift the standpoint of my study from why and how a group of students have been marginalized to helping them further develop emancipatory social practices that challenge the narratives of the unthinking, obedient individual practices, that offer freedom from dominant narratives through the crossing of cultural boundaries and negotiating new, hybrid identities. I know that in order to do this I must:

- Use individual stories to understand certain trends and currents within Lebanese society and witness how the dynamics get played out.
- Make sure that the silence is broken by offering narrative opportunities that give voice to students’ marginalized lives.
- Work with students to negotiate a dynamic within the research and writing that challenges the oppressive structures that create the conditions for silencing.
• View the exploration of text and the lives examined as an important act of resistance in itself. Along with representation there is always the challenge of discovering ways to alter existing conditions.

• **Closing Thoughts**

 Initially, in this chapter I drew upon content analysis, followed by narrative analysis. The former provided the means for identifying, organizing and categorizing recurrent and prominent themes in students’ autobiographical texts. Once the themes had been isolated and classified according to the thematic content element, I turned to narrative analysis for a more subjective and sensitive mode of analysis. The close analysis and reading of the thirty texts left a number of impressions that I would like to share. To begin with, none of the thirty students are passive targets of the dominant groups they come into contact with. They discursively challenge, even resist unwanted pressure in their texts, and by extension, in their lives. This is no easy task in a society that views them as a threat to the cultural and social order. The second observation has to do with the standards these students set for themselves. As creative individuals, they are high achievers who accept confusing uncertainties, and view the risks of failure as part of the process they have set in motion. Important aspects of their lives and work are handled with considerable intensity and engagement, with an internalized licence to challenge the conventional, and to express insights frequently and fervently. New worlds and ways of living are creatively invented and imagined in their texts.

On a final note, I would like to argue that while it is true that in writing narratives students are reflecting on their experiences, telling us “about their ways of seeing and thinking” (Cortazzi, 1993, p. 139), the underlying implications are far greater. Scarry (1985), believes that when attention is focused on the self-experience of the person what develops is “mental imagining” and with it evolves the vocabulary of “creating”, “inventing”, “making” and “imagining”. All this translates into a presence, or a way of becoming visible, a way of insisting that their way of thinking and living matters. In much the same way, I believe that class encounters enable students to enter their feelings and experience into a realm of shared discourse that is wider and more social, than that which characterizes their writing. In a group-centered situation this strategy is highly
successful as it allows for an enhanced sense of objectives and shared problems. Narrative activity becomes a collective medium for probing, for testing limits as well as problem solving; a strategy for negotiating social, cultural and personal identities. Students can rethink and reflect what is feasible and what is not aided by the checks and balances of their fellow writers. By transforming or modifying possibilities and “mental imaginings” to reinstate a realistic sense of equilibrium, adversity and hostility can assume positive and constructive directions. When sustained imagining is modified, according to Scarry, what follows is the shift from “believing” to “making”. From the first to the second stage comes the attribute of “realness” and I believe that this “realness” activities a power dynamic, a strong presence in students’ narrative texts, and by extension in their lives, because it is lifted out of the realm of imagined spaces and placed into the realm of reality.

It comes, finally, to the whole notion of empowerment. By employing narrative texts students imaginatively break their silence and the ability of society to render them marginal and voiceless. To do this with dedication and creativity, as well as a realistic sense of the tremendous obstacles involved is, I am convinced, a kind of freedom. The strong emotional need, the underlying optimism and determination of students to capture something new in the map of possible strategies more than anything else, gives me enormous hope.
Chapter Seven

Creating a “Third Space”

• Entering a New Realm

Working with my creative writing students from a biographically subjective perspective has been hugely rewarding. Apart from our sustained classroom environment, we shared a sense of involvement and discovery which has touched my life in countless ways. Memorable and insightful “third moments” (McWilliam, 1997) were made possible due to the personal significance of the work and its concern with real life experiences. In the examination of issues that matter, students became bold and eager in their discussions and textual performances. Above all, is a drive to push beyond invisible barriers through their resolute determination to remain “non-socialized”, to resist, no matter how difficult, the overwhelming pressure to conform and integrate. Instead, they embrace a state of ambivalence, flux and fluidity which ultimately translates into a kind of life strategy. Their plight is to be at home in many homes, but to be in each inside and outside at the same time. They are in, but not of Lebanon as they struggle with the intention to integrate primarily with the idea of non-integration - a trick that sedentary people are unlikely to learn. Bauman (2000) has referred to this condition as “liquid modernity”, a state of being that is “often painful and agonizing, yet ultimately victorious” (p. 209). It stems from a pressing need for exiles, like my students, to stand out from the physical place they are in, to conjure up a place all their own which is vastly different, a place unlike any place they have left behind. This special place becomes their distinguishing mark, that which sets them apart from all the rest. Initially, this is a healthy type of resistance, a way of saying we are here too. The danger, of course, is that it can all too easily rigidify becoming another reason to apply discrimination and exclusion (Said, 2001).

While trying to decipher how my research findings could be put to some practical use, it occurred to me that our lived experiences had entered into a realm of shared discourse. The arena had grown wider and more social as we moved from the stage of “mental imagining” to achieving a collective “realness” (Scarry, 1985). In and of itself, this process was enormously satisfying and enabling as it generated an equilibrium which
allowed for positive and constructive directions that could ultimately have practical implications.

- **Another Kind of Inbetweenness**

  Looking for guidance I returned, once more, to my journal entries only to realize how often I had jotted down an observation which characterized the talk and texts of students. Time and time again, I had noted a particular tone of voice, choice of words, or just the underlying implications of what they were saying or writing about. It had to do with an unmistakable sense of sadness and loss, disappointment and intense feelings of disillusionment that translated into positions of anger and defiance. Despite my fluctuating levels of absorption during the research, this pervasive mood was on-going and foregrounded all their work. One episode in particular caught my attention. I had entered it in my journal after a rather lengthy and painful follow-up interview session that focused on the difficulties of returning to Lebanon.

Ziad: It's as if my being away for long periods during the war has been recorded against me. People are constantly watching to see if I say or do something inappropriate or wrong.

Karim: Of course. To the people who stayed, you have sinned, and all that you do now as a returnee will be used as evidence to incriminate you.

Ziad: The strange thing is that I don’t mean to do anything wrong. Most of the time I don’t even know what the rules are. Of course once I find out what they are by breaking them, I start to reject them.

Beneath this entry I had made a note to myself about how vulnerable and fragile these two individuals suddenly seemed despite their resolute determination to live according to their own convictions.
In my journal I had also recorded two autobiographical excerpts.

I am unhappy and disturbed by my surroundings. Very often I feel sad that I can’t better adjust to Lebanese society, but I refuse to give in to what is superficial and confining. I will keep rejecting and fighting the things I don’t believe in (Fayez).

It’s hard to be different. Most of the time I rebel against people who try to make me conform to their way of life. I get very tired and even angry, but I don’t have any choice (Reem).

Just as I was about to conclude my thesis by exploring some practical implications and strategies that would move student texts into a more social realm, my journal took me on a detour. I needed to examine one last theme that for some reason had been left out, to make another unexpected twist and turn on my research journey.

- Afterthought

In chapter two, I discussed how returning to Lebanon positioned my students between two entirely contradictory ways of life. On the one hand, they are confronted with a kitschy and hedonistic post-war society complete with the superficial trappings of instant gratification and compulsive consumption neatly packaged and peddled by those who advocate the need to make up for lost time. On the other hand, students are faced with the unbending traditional fabric of retribalization that upholds the restrictive values and norms of family and community. Caught between two contradictory ways of life, they soon become highly critical of both. Once again, this dichotomy positions them in an inbetween situation, reinforcing feelings of entrapment and disappointment which are often manifested in both sad and hostile attitudes. The feeling of being sandwiched between two conflicting yet co-existing trends in post-war Lebanon is an issue never far from student’s minds.

During the interview sessions Karim discussed the many restraints imposed on him by “a closed and traditional society,” and how questioning these restraints leads only to “instant suspicion and distrust.” Charlotte revealed the importance of asserting herself as a serious woman writer in order to avoid the pitfalls of “an easy and comfortable life,” that is coveted by the “mindless students” she comes into contact with. These sentiments are expressed in all but three autobiographical narratives.
I am disappointed and offended by Lebanese society because it is mostly show. People my age love to show off what they own. In actual fact they are superficial and poor in spirit and character. Their attitude makes me angry and hostile toward them. I have little patience or interest in their silly life style. They are weak and depend on their family for everything. Maybe this is why they do what is expected of them and have no ideas of their own. (Ali)

Students at AUB are conservative and modern at the same time. They love the good life. They drive fast, expensive cars, carry cell phones, and spend their time clubbing and eating in fancy restaurants. On the surface they appear modern but they are conservative in the way they think. I feel sorry for them because they are so limited and I am determined never to be like them. (Habib)

I am shocked by how much money the girls my age spend on clothes and makeup. Physical appearance is very important in Lebanon. Everybody wants to look beautiful and have a good time. Actually many of the girls I know have had plastic surgery. The strange thing is that they are really looking for husbands. At first, I thought they were liberal but now I know they still hold on to old fashioned values. When we first returned to Lebanon I was puzzled by their behavior. Now I think they are hypocrites and they make me upset and depressed at the same time. These are not the people I want to have as my friends. (Sherine)

**Writing Without Boundaries: Rejecting Public Discourse**

The inbetween position students find themselves in is the inevitable result of falling between the cracks because they have rejected the hierarchical domination of both groups, each of which elaborates a code of behavior that justifies the privileges of those who uphold them. Their inbetweenness renders students culturally and socially stateless, especially since reconstructing a place of their own through narrative engagement situates them on the crossroads between cultures. Bauman (2000) argues that “to create always means breaking a rule; following a rule is mere routine, more of the same – not an act of creation” (p. 208). For my students breaking rules is not really what they intend to do. Instead, it is an eventuality that is beyond their control. Returnees like Ziad do not know enough about the rules, nor do they regard them worthy of adhering to once they are made aware of them. Rule-breaking becomes their trademark not out of malice but out of ignorance followed by conviction. Bauman (2000) is quick to indicate that this is unlikely to endear exiles to the natives of any of the countries “between which their life itineraries are plotted. But paradoxically, it allows them to bring to all the countries
involved gifts they need badly without knowing it, such gifts that they could hardly expect
to receive from other sources” (p. 208).

As one might surmise, for these students who struggle to gain presence, this is of little or no consolation. They detect a concerted effort by the groups in control to avoid, insult or publicly demonize them. Open encounters, they soon learn are risky as they threaten to expose the illegitimacy of those in authority.

It is hard to live in a society that does not respect the individual, where you’ll never get anywhere unless you conform to a certain way of life, where people fear and mistrust you if you are different. People with authority in Lebanon impose rules and obligations only within the limits of their own convenience. There is prejudice and hypocrisy in this society but if we don’t play along we are made to seem not only different and unwelcome, but crazy and dangerous. (Zuhair)

In one of my journal entries I refer to an in-class discussion between four students who talked about being told to contain their inappropriate ideas so as not to pose a threat to society. Reem quoted her aunt as saying that only mad people, idiots and children have the right to behave differently.

Goffman (1959) points out that public discourse is geared for general audiences, because it is discourse “where the individual goes about constrained to sustain a viable image of himself in the eyes of others” (p.185). To creative writing students the social contexts in which public and private discourse come into play and acquire a double exchange is key. Routine encounters that have led to conflict are looked upon as dramas of social censorship which are enforced in order to maintain and control the public order. Students fail to comprehend the need of people in Lebanon to conceal from public attention any feelings or emotional ideas and reactions that are different. Furthermore, they show no intention of paying deference to those who represent them.

In their narratives, twenty four out of thirty students describe, in various ways, how they have been warned by authority figures that their discourse, whether spoken or written, must remain in the public area of everyday, ordinary language and interactions. Nelly writes:

I would like to belong to a less suffocating society where people are not so concerned about their outer image. This image, sad to say, is very different from the reality which is superficial and materialistic.
The reality is one of intolerance, prejudice, hypocrisy and greed. The worst part is that people are forced to keep quiet about what they see and know. If I try to express my feelings, people look at me in horror as if I'm violating some sacred code or unwritten law. (Nelly)

Students are reprimanded if they do not remain in the sphere where they conform to given personal ideals. They are expected to maintain self-control and not defy the social order. The inner moral consciousness is of no importance here. Instead, what matters is their public comportment in connection to those with whom they have regular face to face encounters. Not surprisingly, students resent this forced discrepancy between public and private modes of discourse. Conforming to cultural ideals imposed by society would secure their self-preservation but crush the expression of any “inner reality”. The institutionally oriented view, as demanded by Lebanese society, is similar to what Turner (1976) has suggested in that the self is considered “real” only when it is expressing social ideals as opposed to the “real self” as expressed in spontaneous impulse.

What I have witnessed in the writings and conversations of my students is a Goffmanesque alienation from the cultural ideals of their society. They acquire a cynical attitude as they witness social actors putting on social displays merely as acts of self-preservation at the expense of self-expression. This mode of behavior in the public sphere is often compared in students’ discourse to wearing a mask for self-approval, an act they strongly ridicule and condemn. If by chance they fall into this trap, it is justified as a consciousness technique they employ in order to be left alone by society.

As Munir explains:

I have a special mask for every occasion. Rarely do I take it off and relax my face. (Munir)

Goffman has described this very same sentiment:

In their capacity as performers, individuals will be concerned with maintaining the impression that they are living up to the many standards by which they and their products are judged --- But as performers, individuals are concerned not with the moral issue of realizing these standards, but with the amoral issue of engineering a convincing impression that these standards are being realized (Goffman, 1959, p. 251).
For creative writing students it is a matter of self-respect and individual pride that they play by their own rules. Belonging is not a major concern as they feel more comfortable outside established groups. They turn instead to alternative expressive outlets other than the ones that demand conformity.

- Rendering the Invisible Visible

The younger generation has been conspicuously absent from writing in Lebanon. The achievement of students, who against all odds, manage to nurture their creative talents have remained, for the most part, unrecognized and invisible. In schools the creative literary potential of students is repressed. Generally the arena of the written word is tightly controlled as is power, privilege and recognition. Returning to the students’ texts made me suddenly aware of how autobiographical narrative allows for exceedingly “deviant” expression without regard to cultural constraint and the control of sentiments which is a reflection of the cultural character of the Lebanese. This genre is the complete antithesis to rigid forms of writing that offer a certain amount of protection to society; that disguise statements in formula, convention and tradition by rendering content impersonal. The formulaic language required by Lebanese society means that people view their experiences as similar to others. Uniformity transforms personal experiences into social conformity that eradicates any violation of the moral code. Contrary to this, autobiographical narrative writing allows a certain kind of freedom. According to Gusdorf:

> The genre of autobiography seems limited in time and space. It has not always existed nor does it exits everywhere … It asserts itself only in recent centuries on a small part of the map of the world. (Gusdorf, 1980, p. 29).

This genre presented a whole array of possibilities to students because the rules and patterns are no longer “set” or “given”, let alone “self-evident”. Rather than framing a specific course for expression and cohabitation, autobiographical narrative opened up spaces for them to fill with their own special vision, for different experiences to be shaped and reshaped through flexibility and expansiveness.
Autobiographical narrative became a collective venue for dismissing the expressions of external social discourse which, in student’s eyes, is designed simply to gain respectability by conforming to society’s officially espoused values.

I really don’t belong at AUB or anywhere else, but in creative writing class I feel at ease because I can openly share my ideas and feelings with people who think like I do. Besides the group enhances my imagination. It makes me unafraid of being what I am. I’m not ridiculed or made to conform to useless moral and social codes. (Carine).

Students began to assume a strong presence. Narrative bonding transforms their situation into one of empowerment. Shared sentiments developed outside the confines of what is deemed acceptable by society allowing for an open demonstration against external restrictions. Their defiance to the code of everyday discourse was achieved by writing against and outside the limits of the formulaic conventions propagated by society. As the following extract will demonstrate, in no time at all students began to acquire a measure of self-mastery and control that translate into a certain power dynamic through the act of redirecting sentiments away from a rigid and conventional discourse.

People in Lebanon love power, money and social standing. They are very dogmatic and closed in their views. Yet I refuse to give up my open-mindedness to suit the views of others. In my writing I can express the way I feel. It is refreshing and encouraging to know that the people in this class feel the way I do. Together we create our own little niche. (Noura).

Here the refusal to be dominated is key and sharing these sentiments actually enhances the moral standing of students. There is tremendous satisfaction in the realization that their dissident or subversive writing contradicts ordinary discourse which is informed by the values of conformity and obedience, the moral correlates of the ideology that serves to uphold the social system. Their discourse, with its contradictory message, is informed by an opposition to the system, and as such it serves to generate shared values that challenge the very system that aims to condemn and repress them.

Michael White and David Epston (1990) have argued that people experience problems when the stories of their lives, as others have invented them, do not sufficiently represent their lived experience. Therapy then becomes a process of re-storytelling the lives and experiences of these people. As one might surmise, White and Epston attribute tremendous importance to narratives as they come to play a central and significant role in
therapy. Similarly, the narratives of my students are of immense importance because they present a different set of values and ideals that touch directly upon the personhood and identity of each student writer. More pressing than their opposition to the structured sentiments of the groups that confine them, is the opportunity to shape and mold language and theme in order to record lived experiences. Authoring their own texts brings mastery and control. No longer are students at the mercy of accepted yardsticks that stipulate what and what not to write about. The freedom to express experiences which exist outside the system is crucial here. Stretching beyond the limits of dominant ideologies enables students to shed the stories of their lives that others have invented for them. Their writing becomes a record of the development of consciousness and of an identity. By breaking the spell of invisibility they can tell their own story with a distinctive voice.

When we returned to Lebanon from Canada, I had the shock of my life. Teachers overwhelmed us with subjects to memorize. Both students and teachers ridiculed my attempts as creative writing. I faced tremendous difficulties. Finally I learned to ignore my surroundings by escaping into my writing. (Nidal).

Nidal is a very gifted writer. She has already completed three short stories and is working on a novel that highlights her experiences in Lebanon. White and Epston (1990), believe narratives to be expansive and unconfining because they allow fresh, new voices to emerge. Narrative puts forth an endless array of possibilities for students to explore and ultimately adopt. It serves to fill the spaces that have been left empty.

Because I was different and observed things in different ways, people grew suspicious of me. I became very frustrated until I realized that I could use my strangeness to create a unique and special identity in my writing. (Salim).

What takes shape, is a discourse of defiance that remains firmly lodged outside acceptable conventions. Moreover, it is utilized to challenge any confining power, molding instead a kind of resistance that occupies created spaces. Presumably, within these spaces students cannot be reprimanded or demeaned in any way. In addition, narrative allows, even celebrates the desire of individuals against the system and as such it can easily become the discourse of opposition to the system and of defiance to those who uphold it. Autobiographical narratives in particular can function as the discourse of liberation because “autobiographical truth is not fixed but an evolving content in an intricate process of self-discovery and self-creation.” Furthermore the self that is “the center of all autobiographical narratives is necessarily a fictive structure” (Eakin, 1985, p. 3). Unlike
fixed and rigid discourse, it offers a playful and fluid medium for students to create identities, find voice, and achieve presence in a society that keeps pushing them into the margins in order to render them invisible.

**Critical Discourse Analysis and the Language of Defiance**

The structures, language, themes, strategies and other elements of text, interviews and discussions with my students all indicate resistance to the social and cultural discourse of persuasion and manipulation imposed by the “dominant” groups students come into contact with in post-war Lebanon. The various groups and individuals that exert power, along with their discursive strategies and the maintenance of control, instigate a powerful reaction from students which, in one sense, is positively channelled and confined in written or verbal forms of expression instead of belligerent attitudes and actions. Still, I know that something more has to be achieved. My involvement in this study, my research both in solidarity and cooperation with students places me in the sensitive position of not only needing to understand and explore, but also wanting to help expose, challenge and ultimately resist relations of dominance, control and power. The “theorizing perspective” I had assumed earlier on in the study now seems limited. In trying to achieve a more positive stance, I remind myself of the importance that Fairclough (1995) attributes to textual analysis when he writes that it is often regarded by scholars as, “an irrelevant or a formalistic diversion,” yet he outlines four reasons why this is not the case. To begin with, texts cannot theoretically be ignored because they constitute one important form of social action. They allow the social analyst to spot precise mechanisms of the social and ideological work of language. Second, texts methodologically constitute a major source of evidence (Thompson, 1990). Third, historically texts have proved sensitive barometers for measuring social processes, movement and diversity. This makes textual analysis a good indicator of social and cultural change. Finally, and of major significance to my work, politically social control and domination are often exercised, negotiated and resisted through texts.

According to van Dijk (1998), Critical Discourse Analysis remains the toughest challenge in the discipline because it requires multidisciplinary, and an analysis of intricate relationships between text, talk, social cognition, power, society and culture. It is further
complicated because its adequate criteria are not merely observational, descriptive or even explanatory (Fairclough, 1985). In the end, its success is measured by its effectiveness and relevance, that is, by its contribution to change (Van Dijk, 1993). Reading about Critical Discourse Analysis made me ponder how the production and examination of the texts in my research could carry the possibility of direct application; how all this could perhaps play a part in achieving real solutions by instigating change. As van Dijk (1993) warns, dominance is often enacted and reproduced by subtle, routine actions of everyday life. Indeed the power of dominant groups may be integrated in laws, rules, norms, habits and even a general consensus, and thus assume the form of what Gramsci (1971) calls “hegemony”. Many subtle forms of dominance are so persistent that they seem natural until challenged. The concept of hegemony makes dominance exceedingly complex, often complicated by forms of dominance which are “jointly produced” through intricate forms of social interaction, communication and discourse. The discourse of my students belongs to the micro-level of the social order, whereas the power, dominance and inequity they write about has to do with the macro-level. Theoretically the role of CDA is to bridge the ‘gap’ between “Micro” and “Macro” approaches (Alexander, et al., 1987; Knorr-Cetina and Cicourel, 1981). Ideally in everyday interaction and experience the “Macro” and “Micro” levels should come together as one unified whole to create the “Meso – Level”. Clearly my study indicates that, for obvious reasons, such interaction has remained relatively limited.

To some extent the first step has been taken in that creative writing classes have allowed students to take up identity positions not available to them in other areas of social life. This was made possible by becoming part of the process of creating a community of writers with shared goals. A number of students have even gone beyond simply recording their resistance by presenting their texts in a wider and more public arena where interaction between text and society can be set in motion, the ultimate goal being one of social action and ultimately change (Fairclough and Wodak, 1997).

Ziad, during our interviews, explained that he writes scathing attacks on the Lebanese establishment which will appear in a journal he and his friends are establishing. Karim is searching for a venue in which to publish his views concerning elite medical
practices which he believes ignore the towns and villages most in need. Charlotte publishes her pieces whenever and wherever she can. She aims to be taken seriously as a woman writer in Lebanon. Jihan would like to publish her diary so that people can see who she really is. Moving student discourse out of the private realm of text and talk and into a more visible public arena will test how much they can achieve outside their secure and comfortably created spaces.

- Creating a “Third Space”: Border Identities and Narratives of Liberation

This is both a frustrating and exciting time to be working with students in Lebanon. There is a widespread sense that things are changing rapidly and drastically. Above all, conditions are ripe for returnees like my students to vie for their own spaces in which hybridity and heterogeneity can be celebrated while challenging the “grand narratives” of those in control who guard a sacred domain within which only certainties can be imposed. Both spaces, the one of textual defiance and social liberation, the other of fixed positions need to come together. Formulations devised from struggles around the power of one group at the expense of the exclusion of the other must be defused through a collapse of spatial boundaries and an attitude of fluid and flexible accommodation.

The spaces inhabited by creative writers, on the one hand, and the establishment on the other, represent a clash of identities that need to find common ground. Students must become increasingly reflexive, fluid and flexible. I continue to be haunted by the limited and biased view each group harbors towards the other. One wanting to impose closure and tradition, while the other delights in hybridity and multiplicity. There can be no understanding, no move forward with each group focusing on its separateness. Any single, overmastering space is a confinement, a deprivation.

The role of the academic in this context is, I believe, to spark negotiation between the two groups in the creation of a “third space” – a space where conflict is transformed into mediation and fixed positions are abandoned through flexibility and cooperation. It is crucial that student texts move beyond expressions of anger and defiance in order to productively utilize their full creative capacities in bringing about change. Each group must, sooner or later, come to realize that no reasonable option exists for each side except
in the process of negotiation. My hope is that creative writers will not continue to apply the same intolerance which has been shown to them by living a suspended life where they dwell on the irreconcilability of their separateness. They, more than others, know the value of openness and transparency, the necessity of devising innovative modes of cooperation in a society that cannot withstand more protracted conflict and strife. Ultimately all will depend on how they decide to channel their awareness and creativity into a more public arena.

In his new book, *Liquid Modernity* (2000), Bauman argues that there has been a shift from a “heavy” and “solid” modernity to one that is “light” and “liquid”. This change, he explains, has totally altered the human condition. Global and fluid conditions demand the rethinking of concepts and cognitive frames used to narrate individual experiences. The world we inhabit is seen as a “floating” territory in which “fragile individuals” meet “porous reality”. In this territory only fluid persons in a constant state of becoming can survive and make creative contributions. Their strength lies in the ability to stay “un-socialized”; in the consent to integrate solely with the condition of non-integration.

If students enter a quest for understanding and negotiation, the conception of a fluid “third space” will offer them the possibility to do so. How to actualize strategic alliances across such divisions in order to find some common ground becomes a crucial question. In everyday interaction and experience the “macro” and “micro” levels are not coming together as one unified whole to create the “meso-level” that van Dijk (1993) evokes in much of his research. It is here, perhaps, that interactive and reflexive research can address the problem by attempting to bridge the well-known gap between discourse and communication belonging to the “micro-level” of the social order and the power dominance of the “macro-level.” If the creation of a flexible third space ever materializes it will, in my view, be due to the imaginative and creative minds of these student writers. My hope is that they will facilitate the creation of a unique space through flexibility and awareness, by not continuing to completely sensor the groups which sensor them. One thing, however, remains certain. For these students, writing is a powerful tool for communicating the sentiment of resentment and nonconformity. Their texts are directed towards a certain end. Furthermore, in sharing their discourse with like-minded peers,
and fellow writers, they activate an important and far-reaching dynamic that empowers
and enables them. The outcome of this dynamic is yet to be determined. Much will
depend on how many of these students opt to remain in Lebanon and continue challenging
the powerful discourses so prevalent in the culture. Those who remain, I believe, will
make a significant and valuable contribution in transforming the way in which Lebanese
society views them and their creative accomplishments. In moving beyond what is
acceptable, they will introduce a whole range of radically new voices that will not only
challenge the mainstream and taken-for-granted discourses but will ultimately succeed
in altering them all together. In the meantime, these student writers seem determined to
ingeniously use their discourse to remove them from the realm of everyday control by
recasting and recreating their personal experiences, identities and sentiments, to
successfully violate the given code.

This alone, Homi Bhabha (1990) cautions, is insufficient. The answer, in his
view, is the creation of “the third space of translation”. Translation is when cultural
identities move towards becoming “decentered structures” constituted in relation to others
(pp. 210-211). Bhabha is actually calling for a condition of hybridity which will persist
provided the otherness continues to intervene not allowing the subject to “fix” itself in a
closed and static system of meaning. This results in “a new area of negotiation of
meaning and representation” (p. 211), and “new structures of authority, new political
initiatives, which are inadequately understood through received wisdom.” Similarly Joel
Kovel’s (1991) “philosophy of becoming” is to “speak to a practical wish to be free” and
to adhere to a philosophy “in which the self can become other to itself, and from that
sense either become alienated or transcend itself.” (p. 108).

Creative writing students can, I believe, free themselves from the strictures of
dominant narrative by negotiating a third space within which cultural boundaries can be
crossed and negotiated, where new hybrid identities can come into being replacing static
and fixed identities. Where narrative identities of liberation can focus on the meaning of
difference. In one sense, my students have already achieved this “multiple
consciousness” by approaching identity as a subjective formation which rejects confining narrative forms. Moreover, students have transformed the classroom into a hybrid pedagogical space where they experiment with identity through expressive modes and reject the narratives fabricated for them by “outsiders”, constructing instead, counter narratives of liberation. This pedagogy serves to destabilize the dominant narratives that draw on a monologic identity, lifting students to a freer realm of existence.

Cornel West (1990), calls for “a new kind of cultural worker” who can “exercise a politics of difference” that will enable people to “interrogate the ways in which they are bound by certain conventions and to learn from and build on those very norms and models” (p. 107). A number of academics and thinkers have joined West in calling for “border identities” which in many ways are similar to the notion of a “third space”. According to McLaren (1992), “border identities” are created by means of a passionate connection through difference. The established link is expanded by narrative imagination which forms critical linkages between our own stories, and the stories of cultural others (McLaren, 1992; Darder, 1992). At the same time, becoming a border crosser necessitates a productive dialogue with others within created third spaces where dominant social relations, ideologies, and practices can be challenged and overcome so as not to erase the specificity of the voice of the other.

“Border Crossing”, according to Paulo Freire (1985), suggests that teachers and other intellectuals both problematize and let go of the cultural, theoretical, and ideological borders that make them feel comfortable and secure. In Joan Borsa’s words (1990), “of the places and spaces we inherit and occupy which frame our lives in very specific and concrete ways” (p. 36). Laclau (1988), writes that being a border crosser means inventing traditions not within the discourse of submission, reverence and repetition but by constructing one’s discourse as difference in relation to that tradition, implying continuities and discontinuities that occur simultaneously. A border being is an exile, according to Freire (1985), an intellectual poised between different cultures, a critical educator and cultural worker who crosses borders in order to assure new positions and plural identities. This in turn offers resistance to and relief from structures of dominance. A healthy “restlessness” develops from these tireless attempts to produce new spaces of
resistance and to construct a language that imagines new ways of reaching them. It is important to emphasize that what makes the narratives of creative writing students important is that they don’t stand still. There is a tension that necessitates writing and rewriting, creating a textual borderland open to endless possibilities, to subjectivities that resist the absolutizing tendencies and allow for what Saldivar (1990) terms a “dialectics of difference” (p. 175). McLaren (1992) also suggests that “teachers and students” learn to represent themselves through a form of border writing in which the narratives they construct for themselves in relation to the other are effectively deterritorialized politically, culturally, and linguistically so that the meaning-troupes through which subjectivity becomes constructed fails to dominate the other (p. 221). He calls for mutual cooperation that goes beyond individual identities and “the politics of the border guard” to create hybrid spaces that are alive, diverse and encompass endless possibilities. Real cultures Said (2001) argues, are plural, diverse and dynamic. Apart from containing movement and opposition, they are the bases for communication across national and group boundaries.

All the proponents of “border identity” refer to the need for subjectivities of resistance to thwart the “absolutizing tendencies of a racist, classist, patriarchal bourgeois world that Founds itself on the notion of fixed positive identity and attempts to convince others of it too. Their concern with post-colonial narratives of liberation and market identity, however, remain applicable to other forms of domination. Clearly like “border identities”, strategies to create a “third space” also emanate from resistance to already entrenched identities and inflexible positions. Both call for a hybrid space that is alive and diverse, that is not based on nostalgia and familiarity. Defiance alone is a negative force. Students must learn to channel their energy into a space where real change can occur. Trinh T. Minh-ha (1991) recognizes that multiculturism does not come easily. It occurs, “in the intercultural acceptance of risks, unexpected detours, and complexities of relation between break and closure” (p. 232).

Creative writers are willing to take risks and unexpected detours. Their strategies of identity are not of fixed difference, but of transformation of open ideas and spaces of operation that evade both invisibility and assimilation. Currently, their identity
positionings assume a kind of resistance, a way of saying that they exist too. This in itself is not enough. The practical question is whether these students can continue to reject all forms of rigidity and exclusion and not become entrenched in their own habits and patterns of behavior. In essence, they are the border crossers that post-modern intellectuals are calling for. Better still, they are even natural border crossers because they have unconsciously internalized critical multiculturalism from an early age as a result of their lived experiences. These students embody a new post-modern hybridity which manifests itself in critical narratology.

Bauman (2000) argues that there are reasons to consider ‘fluidity’ or ‘liquidity’ as fitting metaphors when we wish to grasp the present phase in the history of modernity. It is the extraordinary mobility of fluids that associates them with the ideas of ‘lightness’, which in turn, is associated with “weightlessness” and mobility. The new and fluid modernity he writes about does not intend to melt the solids in order to clear the way for new and improved solids. The aim is not to “replace the inherited set of deficient and defective solids with another set but to keep a state of liquidity that does not solidify.” In this time of fluid modernity, the melting of solids has acquired new meaning. “A need to break the mold without replacing it with another” (p. 2). Creative writing students should understand the value of maintaining a state of fluidity and expansiveness in their lives. Despite the high risk and anxiety of this condition, the opposite “forecloses what freedom needs to stay open” (p. 62). Their itinerary can never be completely safe or risk-free but it holds the essential ingredients to re-imagining the set concepts that have so far framed Lebanese narratives.

Many scholars have cautioned against the inability of critical discourse to make a significant difference when confronted with the real issues and problems of today’s world. Van Dijk (1993) is quick to indicate that while some results are encouraging, most remain limited. Perhaps to some extent he is correct, yet my study tells me otherwise. Two observations immediately come to mind. First, on a personal level my study assumed enormous significance in my life because reflexivity enabled me to take an active part in the research process instead of observing and recording from a distance. Second, I become entirely convinced of an urgent need for action. These highly creative
young people will, I am certain, contribute enormously to a post-war society badly in need of new ways of living. Fluid "third spaces" can materialize through writing strategies that seek to include rather than exclude, where tolerance can be demonstrated, and contradictions become a challenge rather than a negative force. Students’ natural border identities can facilitate the creation of fluid, flexible spaces of understanding and acceptance.

Yvonne Lincoln (1997) calls for alternative research strategies. She sees a need for educators as researchers to join forces with the silenced in order to "tell the stories and present the narratives of non-mainstream border individuals" (p. 35). Tierney (1993) joins Lincoln in stressing the need to achieve a critical understanding of the complexities of the silenced. McLaren (1992) urges educators to become "theorists of a resistance postmodernism that can help students make the connections among their desires, their frustrations, and the cultural forms and social practices which inform them" (p. 230). In Said’s view (2001), the role of professors is central and basically Socratic: to test all orthodoxies and offer routes by which young minds may travel from one culture to another and learn a valuable type of estrangement from their own. Central to this, is the ability to detach oneself from all belonging and love of place in order to acquire a vision that can overcome barriers of resistance.

Students must be encouraged to work towards constructing the story of hope and change, to create a better and more open society in which their multicultural perspectives are put to use. By assuming the role of meta cultural mediators a fluid "third space" in which critical and open dialogue may occur in a more social and much wider domain. Their individual and collective stories will foster understanding of other political, cultural and social currents and even determine how the dynamics get played out. This study has convinced me more than ever that my role as an educator and human being is to encourage students to destabilize mindless narratives, creating instead cultural and social spaces where counter-hegemonic subjectivities can come into play. Critical narrative is, if nothing more, an initial step in achieving this end for it holds the key to challenge the oppressive structures that create the conditions of silencing by empowering students with the necessary venue to foster meaningful change. McLaughlin and Tierney (1993) have
expressed this very same sentiment when they say that life histories are a way to document how we live now so that we might change how we live now.

- **Some Parting Thoughts**

  At this stage, it may be worth pointing out that this paper, like my life, has a double orientation. I write about a group of student writers who are not only marginal in their own country, but also excluded, and exclude themselves from the mainstream wherever they go. (In an ironic post-modern way, they have actually succeeded in becoming “the mainstream”). I write as an exile about exiles. My research and writing have strengthened my belief in the value of a distinctively subjective approach. In fact, I could not have explored this topic by separating myself from my subjects as if dealing with two different domains. Quite the contrary, I see real advantage in not doing so as it allows me to focus with more awareness and sensitivity on the subtle issues and complex processes involved in the production and communication of student texts. Finally, one observation in particular captured my attention during the course of this study. As I read the numerous narrative texts and listened to students talk, I became increasingly aware of how excluding and censoring one group, only leads to the censoring and exclusion of the other. This condition of being silenced has forced students to take refuge in their written and spoken discourse. Ultimately the presence or spaces which they have ingeniously created by employing texts in the resistance of social dominance will, I am convinced, have significant and far-reaching implications in fostering change if properly channelled into a flexible “third space”.

  Throughout this project I have felt that the collection and analysis of narrative texts and my close association with the students whose lives I’ve explored and recorded is, in itself, an act of resistance against the conditions that aim to silence and marginalize them. In allowing students to speak their silence, the situation is reversed. I remain hopeful that my study will help students realize that their stories are more than just an essential exercise in their lives. Narrative texts provide the fluidity and imagination necessary to cross borders, break barriers of thought and experience, re-imagine and rewrite the relationship between the margin and the center. Texts provide “mental
imagining”, but the creation of a fluid “third space” will shift the focus from “believing” to actually “making” a significant and lasting difference.

Finally, and on a more personal note, I would like to share some parting thoughts. I have tried to place my work within an interpretive/narrative trend, to link social science to literature (Bochner and Ellis 1992; Ellis and Flaherty 1992) by creating an experimental text within which stories that are meaningful to myself and my students can be told. By situating myself in the research (Kreiger, 1991), and making myself along with my students an experimental subject, our experiences can be viewed as primary data (Jackson, 1989). From this perspective, research and writing moves beyond a purely detached, academic exercise to become “an identity - and meaning - making project” (Ellis, 1995, p. 335).

Postmodernists, post-structural and feminist scholars have paved the way to new and experimental forms for expressing lived experience. Bochner (1994) and Marcus and Fisher (1986), emphasise the need for experimental ethnographies, while Rorty (1982) points to the drawbacks of traditional methods that seek ways of “coping with” rather than “representing” lived experience. I have heeded his call to focus on stories instead of theories, to study lived experience through the biographical method (Denzin, 1989), and to value the narrative by looking at writing as a method of inquiry (Richardson, 1990, 1994) in my experimentation with a new kind of ethnography (Marcus and Cushman, 1982). In crossing disciplinary boundaries to join the humanities with the social sciences, the personal with the professional, I attempt to connect my lived experience to my research. Blending my narrative into the analysis, and fusing my life and work together renders the activity of doing research infinitely more meaningful, making it much “more than a cognitive game played in our heads and inscribed in let’s face it - somewhat tedious journals” (Turner, 1982, p. 97).

This work, no matter how imperfect, reflects my struggle to find meaning in the telling of my students’ stories as well as my own. The writing of our stories becomes an
essential step in making sense of our lives. It gives shape and voice to the significance of our coming together, to our mutual experiences as we negotiate with the complexities and contradictions of who we are. It enables our lived experiences to be viewed from within a larger context as we work to make a difference and hopefully bring about change. I am exceedingly grateful to the scholars who have opened the door to experimental ethnographies, for they have made it possible for me to be compassionately involved in this undertaking, to focus more on how my students feel, and to work from the heart as well as the mind. I would like to conclude with a quote from Bauman (2000) in which he reminds us of the extraordinary mobility of fluids, for unlike solids, they are difficult to stop.

They pass around some obstacles, dissolve some others and bore or soak their way through others still. From the meeting with solids they emerge unscathed, while the solids they have met, if they stay solid, are changed – get moist or drenched.

Bauman, *Liquid Modernity*, p. 2

Like Bauman’s metaphor of fluidity, my creative writing students have the potential to give a new shape to the society they live in. For they hold the key to “replacing the inherited, deficient and defective solids not with a new and improved set, but with something infinitely more significant: a state of liquidity that does not solidify.” They, more that any other group I know, can “break the mold without replacing it by another” (Bauman, 2000, p. 2).
Creative Writing Survey

Questionnaire

A survey on Creative Writing that I am currently undertaking requires that I solicit the views of a sample of students taking the course. Your answers to the questionnaire will help in identifying some of the factors which have prompted students to pursue writing as a creative mode of expression.

Please check/circle the appropriate response.

I. Background Information:

1. Sex: _____ Male _____ Female

2. Age: _____ 18 or less
   _____ 18-19
   _____ 19-20
   _____ 20-21
   _____ 23-24
   _____ 24 or more

3. Place of Birth: ______________________

4. Nationality: _______________________

5. Indicate your place of residence over the past 8 years

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Place</th>
<th>Period</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
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</tbody>
</table>
6. Native Language (your first language): _______________________

7. If you are to assess the proficiency of your language skills (speaking, reading and writing), how would you rate yourself on a 1-5 point-scale? (1) would be excellent and (5) deficient.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Speaking</th>
<th>Reading</th>
<th>Writing</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Arabic</td>
<td>1 2 3 4 5</td>
<td>1 2 3 4 5</td>
<td>1 2 3 4 5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>English</td>
<td>1 2 3 4 5</td>
<td>1 2 3 4 5</td>
<td>1 2 3 4 5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>French</td>
<td>1 2 3 4 5</td>
<td>1 2 3 4 5</td>
<td>1 2 3 4 5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Others (please specify)</td>
<td>1 2 3 4 5</td>
<td>1 2 3 4 5</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

8. In the space provided below, please list the schools you have attended. Indicate their location, the number of years spent in each and the diplomas received.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Name Of Institution</th>
<th>Location</th>
<th>Number Of Years</th>
<th>Diplomas</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Elementary</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Secondary</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>University</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
9. Academic Class Now:
   Freshman
   Sophomore
   Junior
   Senior
   Graduate
   Other (please specify) _______________________

10. Major: ___________________

11. Your parents’ educational level:

   Father       Mother

   No Formal Schooling
   Elementary
   Secondary
   University
   Other (please specify) ____________      ____________

12. What is your parents’ major occupation?
    Father: ________________
    Mother: ________________

II. Interests:

13. Could you identify three of your favorite hobbies or recreational activities?
    1. _______________________
    2. _______________________
    3. _______________________
14. You are considering taking some reading material with you on a short holiday. List the three books and three periodicals that you would take along.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Books</th>
<th>Periodicals</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1.</td>
<td>1.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2.</td>
<td>2.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3.</td>
<td>3.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

15. What was the last book you read? __________________________

16. How often do you read the following?

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Once or twice a day</th>
<th>Once or twice a week</th>
<th>Once or twice a month</th>
<th>Once or twice every three months</th>
<th>Never</th>
</tr>
</thead>
</table>

Magazines
Newspapers
Best Sellers
Biographies
Novels
Poetry
Plays
Short stories

17. Why do you write?

________________________________________________________________________________________

________________________________________________________________________________________

18. How often do you write?

________________________________________________________________________________________

________________________________________________________________________________________

19. Is there any writer in your family? __________________________
20. Is there any person in your childhood who has had a significant influence on you?

21. Name three people you admire the most:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Locally</th>
<th>Regionally</th>
<th>Globally</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
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<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

22. When you have a problem whom do you normally consult?

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Problem</th>
<th>Close friends</th>
<th>Family</th>
<th>Counsellor</th>
<th>Professors</th>
<th>None</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Emotional (personal)</td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>Financial</td>
<td></td>
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</tr>
<tr>
<td>Academic</td>
<td></td>
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<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

23. Were you read to during childhood?  Yes  No

24. If you answered yes, who read to you?

- Father __________
- Baby sitter __________
- Mother __________
- Others __________
- Brother/ Sister __________

25. Why are you taking this course?

26. Is it different from other courses you have taken or are taking now?  Yes  No

If you answered yes, explain how it differs:

27. Could you single out one event or incident that left a lasting impression on you or that changed your life significantly?
28. Are there any additional comments you wish to make?

________________________________________

________________________________________

Thank you for completing the questionnaire.
References


