

# (Im)Possibilities of “Undoing” Identity in a Third Space<sup>1</sup>

SEUNGHO MOON  
*Teachers College, Columbia University*

**Second language learning and identity: Cracking metaphors in ideological and poetic discourse in the third space.** Mika Yoshimoto. Amherst, NY: Cambria Press, 2008. xviii + 332 pp.

*Second Language Learning and Identity: Cracking Metaphors in Ideological and Poetic Discourse in the Third Space*, published by Cambria Press, is a book that explores second language (L2) learning and identity constructions. Mika Yoshimoto (2008), the author, examines the English language learning experiences of four Japanese women, including herself, and their identity constructions in relation to their own socio-cultural conflicts. The author uses socio-cultural theories and critical theories as well as the notion of third space (Bhabha, 1994; Wang, 2004) as the major frameworks within which she analyzes women’s identity constructions. Using autobiography as a mode of inquiry, the author investigates what stories are created “in-between” spaces and how Japanese metaphors, such as haiku, can be used to represent Japanese women’s identity construction.

This book is comprised of seven chapters. Chapter One is devoted to addressing Mika Yoshimoto’s “autobiographical self” as she draws on her own experiences learning English as a second language (ESL). In this chapter, Yoshimoto uses autobiography to describe what it means for her to learn English as a Japanese woman who migrated to Canada at the age of 50. Since then, she completed the Certificate for Teachers of English as a Second Language (CTESL), a master’s degree in applied linguistics, and a doctoral degree in education from Ottawa University. Most notably, she reflects on her past and considers patriarchal power structures that have influenced her identity constructions in both Japanese and Canadian cultures.

In Chapter Two, the author reviews literature with three major themes: language, identity, and autobiographical inquiry. Yoshimoto addresses how traditional L2 learning research mainly examines the learner’s cognitive processes and has separated concepts of language and identity. In addition, the author explains how sociocultural theory and critical theory are important in her research in terms of exploring the relation among L2 learning, cultural ideology, and identity

construction. The author situates her work within previous studies in the fields and addresses the rationale of her own study. In Chapter Three, Yoshimoto describes the life stories of her three research participants: Rie, Yoko, and Aya. The author also presents how she collected data, including diaries, group conversation, and in-depth interviews. Chapter Four is a brief section that explains what haiku is, and why the author uses this traditional Japanese poetry format in order to represent the “emerging self” throughout the study.

The next three chapters are devoted to an analysis of the research participants’ experiences in English language learning as well as their own reflections on identity construction. In Chapter Five, “Narrative Self: What Stories of Japanese Students Emerge in the In-Between Space,” the author includes narratives generated by Rie, Yoko, Aya, and herself. The autobiographical narratives of the research participants offer beautiful description; participants use metaphors to represent themselves such as a rubber ball (Rie), a migrating bird (Yoko), a pear (Aya), and a starfish (Mika). Chapter Six examines the metaphorical self that the research participants create with images and metaphors in relation to issues of gender, age, Japanese society, and Canadian society.

In the final chapter, “Troubling the Authorial Self: What Does It Mean for a Japanese Woman to Study English,” Yoshimoto analyzes how the research participants negotiate, challenge, and construct their identities between Japan’s cultural ideology and that of Canada. The author analyzes that questioning the authority of teachers, avoiding plagiarism, and expressing one’s opinion directly are some of the Western cultural ideology that the four Japanese women confront within the Canadian context. The author also explains the importance of politeness, the influence of Confucianism, group thinking, and hierarchical bureaucracy to Japanese cultural ideology. She finishes the chapter by describing how these cultural conflicts are generated as “double voices within in-between spaces” (p. 19).

*Second Language Learning and Identity* is about exploring the relation between L2 learning and identity. The author considers how Japanese students’ historical background, socio-political experiences, culture, discourse, and the power structures of their environment affect identity construction. Her thick descriptions of her participants and her own transnational experiences enable readers to explore how these women accept, deny, enjoy, and negotiate their hybrid identities in Canada. Readers witness how the subjects’ identities have been challenged, changed, and reborn in a third space.

Yoshimoto’s study enriches research in the field of L2 learning and curriculum studies. She expands L2 learning research beyond interrogating and displaying positivistic theory and knowledge about language acquisition. In other words, she opens possibilities of L2 learning studies that move beyond examining L2 learning students’ cognitive development, developing effective L2 curriculum, designing assessment, and enhancing students’ motivation to exploring the relation between L2 learning, identity, and power.

In order to understand Yoshimoto’s work within the context of current literature, I overview some related works in the field of L2 learning, identity research, and curriculum studies. Among many studies, I focus here on three outstanding studies that have close connections with Yoshimoto’s work. I introduce these studies in order to expand the discourse about L2 learning and identity, although Yoshimoto does not include them in the literature she reviews. Similar to Yoshimoto’s work, all of these studies delve deeply into how L2 learning is connected with students’ identity construction in a hybrid, in-between, and border space.

First of all, in her book chapter, “Between Languages and Cultures,” Anna Kirova (2006) challenges positivistic and deficit-oriented views toward second language learners. Guided by

Heideggerian hermeneutics, Kirova depicts immigrant students’ experiences. While describing their struggles to learn English as a second language, she challenges a deficit model that considers these students as lacking in agency, competence, and knowledge. She uses Heidegger’s notion of “language as the house of being” and addresses the close connection between language learning and identity construction.

Kirova emphasizes hybridity and in-betweenness as significant lenses through which to view and analyze immigrant children’s identity constructions. This perspective relates to Yoshimoto’s work in terms of describing identity construction in L2 learning, using notions of hybridity. While Yoshimoto concentrates on thick descriptions of the participants’ transnational experiences, Kirova strongly attempts to challenge the traditional assumptions about immigrant children grounded in deficit-oriented views. Kirova explicitly opens up pedagogical possibilities to emphasize immigrant children’s capacity to construct new relatedness in a hybrid space.

Samina Hadi-Tabassum’s (2006) work *Language, Space and Power: A Critical Look at Bilingual Education* is another book that deals with relationships between language, culture, power, and identity. Based on her research on a 5<sup>th</sup> grade dual language immersion program in New York City, she dismantles binary constructs in L2 learning and culture, such as English/Spanish, majority/minority, mainstream/marginalized, and superior/inferior. In her book, the author describes dual immersion classrooms as places where space and time are unstable and shifting. According to the author, this fluid space is a borderland where permanency and solidity do not exist.

Major differences between Hadi-Tabassum’s study and that of Yoshimoto relate to the age group of the research participants and educational settings. Hadi-Tabassum’s work is an ethnographic study about a dual language immersion program for 5<sup>th</sup> graders in New York City. In contrast, Yoshimoto targets Japanese college students who are learning English as a second language in Canada. Although both of the authors emphasize notions of borderland identity, Hadi-Tabassum focuses more on the power relationships between languages that are established in the English/Spanish dual language immersion classroom.

“The Parched Tongue,” by Hosu Kim (2007), is another important book chapter that explores the tension between L2 learning and identity (de)construction. Kim uses poetry, testimonies, and narratives to illustrate the “meaning” of English in the identity-construction process. She introduces narratives of Korean adoptees in the US, their birth mothers in Korea, herself, and her own mother. The metaphor of the “parched tongue” reveals the struggles of people whose “mother” tongue is not English. She explains that her “broken tongue” (p. 34) is related to a shame and a loss of verbal capacity within the power of English in the world economy and politics (e.g., as a result of understanding of English as a business language). Similar to Yoshimoto’s work, Kim explores the politics of English and illustrates how English language influences a person’s culture, ways of seeing the world, and identity construction. Kim’s study is connected with that of Yoshimoto in that Kim focuses on the images of the world out of her own images of “Self” and “Others.”

Compared with other L2 learning and identity literature, Yoshimoto’s book is salient in terms of its diverse forms of research representations. The author uses “haiku,” a traditional Japanese poetry form, to depict her transnational and transcultural experience. She develops metaphors through the use of haikus. Yoshimoto’s work contributes to a qualitative research field that is struggling continuously with challenges of representation. Utilizing haiku as a mode of representation is an exceptional strategy “in the crisis of representation,” when qualitative researchers cannot capture the absolute truth or represent lived experiences accurately (Denzin & Lincoln,

2005; Lather, 2007; Miller, 2005). Yoshimoto uses haiku and metaphors to express her voices that she can never express in conventional language in either Japanese or English. The issues and images of gender, age, modesty, silence, group harmony, and school are metaphorically and delicately depicted via haiku. For example, the author describes the meaning of silence in the format of a haiku:

沈黙の金の落に自己喪失  
*Silence is golden*  
*As the price of silence drops*  
*So does my self-worth*

In this short haiku, Yoshimoto metaphorically addresses the struggles of the three research participants and herself in English as Second Language (ESL) classes. In Japan, silence is valued as the place where thoughts ferment and new thoughts emerge, whereas silence is perceived as “no classroom participation” in Canada. Using haiku, the author depicts how her self-esteem drops when the value of silence in Japan is ignored in the Canadian university, thereby contributing to what she describes as her identity crisis.

The aesthetic as well as political value of haiku is that it presumes the reader should possess “the necessary cultural knowledge to interpret the [writer’s] intended meaning” (Yoshimoto, 2008, p. 70). This does not guarantee the exact interpretation of the author’s meaning nor does it imply that there is one exact meaning; rather, it opens possibilities for interpreting “meanings” in relation to special social, cultural, and historical contexts. Haiku becomes a tool to “feel and express the contradictory emotions that accompany [the] stories” (Yoshimoto, 2008, p. 20). As much as the four Japanese women’s transnational experiences between Japan and Canada become blurred and complicated in a third space, so do representations of their life experiences. Yoshimoto’s experimental use of haiku and metaphors to represent the women’s lives within the “crisis of representation” make her book unique and outstanding.

In *Second Language Learning and Identity*, notions of hybrid identity, “in-betweenness,” and third space are some of the major theoretical concepts used to analyze and interpret the four subjects’ transnational/transcultural experiences. Yoshimoto uses the important notion of “a third space” which is vital in terms of understanding, analyzing, and interpreting “transnational” identity constructions. In particular, the discourse of a third space challenges any fixed concepts of identity, and it provides possibilities for examining open spaces and reconsidering identity not as pre-given by birth but as socially and discursively constructed (Butler, 1999). Culturally, notions of a third space challenge our perspectives in terms of looking at collective cultural groups and cultural identities (e.g., ethnic group, gender group, racial group, and more) beyond monolithic, predictable, and stable descriptions. Framed by this malleable, unfixed, and always in-the-making notion of identities in a third space, educators can think of opening possibilities for teaching students from diverse backgrounds, beyond teaching them based on fixed, stereotypical, and predictable images of those students.

Many scholars have emphasized the fluidity, flexibility, hybridity, in-betweenness, malleability, and unpredictability associated with notions of a third space, across curriculum studies (Wang, 2004), cultural studies (Bhabha, 1994), geographic studies (Soja, 1996), and architecture (Lefebvre, 1991), and other disciplines.<sup>2</sup> Homi Bhabha (1994) states that a third space “constitutes the discursive conditions of enunciation that ensure that the meaning and symbols of culture have no primordial unity or fixity” (p. 55). He emphasizes the malleability of a third space where the meanings and symbols of cultures are always shifting. Edward Soja (1996) theorizes a third space as a tentative term that captures a shifting milieu of ideas and

meanings. According to Soja, in-betweenness is a space for initiating new signs of identity. Hongyu Wang (2004) theorizes a third space as a “transformative space” (p. 13) where different cultural layers of the subject transform, interconnect, and constantly change. She values the notion of a third space because it cultivates new thoughts within these “in-between” intersections. Thus far, the value of notions of third space lies in their emphases on flexibility, unpredictability, malleability, and fluidity of identities, as well as their socio-discursive construction. If, however, these characteristics of a third space are misused or ignored, this fluid metaphysical space can become frozen in yet another static, predictable, and stereotypical image and identity construction.

Reading this book, while guided by the theories of a third space, I wonder how far Yoshimoto attempts to challenge, interrupt, and dismantle her descriptions of a “home (Japanese)” culture and “Other (Canadian)” culture beyond collective, stereotypical, monolithic, and predictable ways. Yoshimoto (2008) underscores that a third place is a complex concept with many possibilities, and she states that her identities are “discursively constructed” (p. 265). However, in Yoshimoto’s actual description and analysis of the four Japanese women’s transnational experiences, the stories seem to converge on the fixed gap between “one” Japanese culture and “one” Canadian culture. The stories and experiences of the four women seem to be explained by an additive model and subtractive model (Valenzuela, 1999) based on these “two” collective cultures. This can be symbolized as “ $1 \pm 1 = X$ .” A third space (X) is generated by the addition and subtraction of one Japanese culture and one Canadian culture. In other words, “We lived in one Japanese culture”  $\pm$  “Now we are experiencing one new culture, Canadian culture” = “We add some part of the Canadian culture as well as subtract some part of the Japanese culture. Consequently, our new identities are created within a third space (X).”

In this book, the notions of a third space are generated based on these two fixed collective cultures. This is not a sufficient analysis for teasing out the complexities and multiplicities of a third space. In the analysis, the author contrasts two collective cultures using the binary concept of East and West and develops the notions of a third space. It is not difficult for the author to find some collective national identities based on the research participants’ testimony. Rie, Yoko, Aya, and Mika’s autobiographical narratives report their struggles as women in a patriarchal Japanese society where the modesty of women, group harmony, and silence are emphasized. At the same time, the four Japanese women are reporting their new cultural experiences in Canada, in a context in which they are experiencing gender equity, independence, and a close relationship with teachers. For instance, Yoko believes that “Canada’s society thinks that women and men are equal, so Canadian women can express their opinion strongly to men without hesitation” (Yoshimoto, 2008, p. 194). Another research participant, Aya, testifies that “in Canada, the relationship between teacher and student seems more equal than Japan” (Yoshimoto, 2008, p. 206).

I, however, argue that when Japanese and Canadian cultures are described using binary concepts (e.g., East/West, dependent/independent, patriarchy/gender equity, or teacher as authority/teacher as a friend), there are not many spaces in which to explore cultural differences beyond stereotypical images of Japan and Canada. It is problematic not to consider multi-layers, complexities, and differences within a national identity in simply attempting to display differences between the “two” cultures. This tends to depict a third space as static, determined, and predictable.

Aya’s story is a good example. Yoshimoto reports Aya’s cultural conflict in terms of the relationship with her ESL teachers. Due to the cultural differences between Japan and Canada,

Aya is juggling between showing respect to the ESL teachers and creating close friendships with them. Aya needs to negotiate her identities with the Canadian ESL teachers because the Japanese concept that “[she] must respect the teacher” is bothering her. Consequently, she cannot accept a “friendly relationship with teachers” (Yoshimoto, 2008, p. 206). According to Yoshimoto’s analysis, Aya is in “a third space” since she is stuck between the two different cultures and needs to negotiate her identity.

Aya’s cultural conflicts and her creation of a hybrid identity are somewhat predictable if we follow stereotypical images of Japanese students. Having cultural knowledge of Confucianism, some Canadian teachers assume that Japanese students were raised to respect teachers. They can easily predict that these students should have difficulty initiating a close or friendly relationship with teachers in Canada. In this sense, Aya’s new identity is already predetermined by Canadian teachers and a third space is predescribed in predictable ways. In contrast, a third space is momentarily (re)created when Aya realizes the fact that her cultural identity cannot be described using any of the categories, including “the” Japanese identity, Canadian identity, Japanese Canadian identity, Canadian Japanese identity, or any other fixed and predetermined identity categories.

Despite Yoshimoto’s limited understanding of a third space, *Second Language Learning and Identity* is still important for educators. Most notably, this book prompts readers to think about what a third space means with/in the transnational and transcultural context. There are many immigrant students who are struggling with cultural conflicts, identity crises, and negotiations of identities with/in “a third space” every day. Following Bhabha’s (1994) notions of a third space, I posit that a third space is a temporal, open, moving, malleable, and unpredictable space where hybrid identities are constantly (re)created, (re)generated, and (re)changed. Since identities are socially and discursively constructed (Butler, 1999), a third space is not predictable, stable, or predetermined. We cannot use any fixed identity categories, including ethnicity, race, gender, class, or sexual orientation, to explain this “always” in-the-making space.

Yoshimoto’s book provides concrete and tangible narratives of how students who are exposed to diverse cultures struggle with their identity constructions in their daily lives. Through the stories of these women, this book provides opportunities for educators to consider how their students’ identities are socially, culturally, economically, discursively, and politically constructed in a third space. This book also invites educators to think about how to interact with students whose identities are unpredictable, always in-the-making, (re)generated, and constantly changing. I encourage readers to consider the (im)possibilities of “undoing” identities in order to expand notions of identities beyond essentialized modes. The notions of a third space, a hybrid identity, and “in-betweenness” are theoretical concepts that educators could use for understanding and teaching students. They pry open new possibilities for students who are struggling with the issue of “survival” due to stereotypical notions of racial, ethnic, or gender identities, which are imposed by a set of social norms.

Yoshimoto’s collection of these narratives of the four Japanese women and her interpretations of their autobiographical stories become salient resources. Using their stories, educators can tease out the very complexities of any categorical identities at school and in society, such as ethnic, racial, national, and gender identity. Yoshimoto’s book provides opportunities for readers to consider the discursive meanings of cultural identities between/among/within/beyond cultures. This book also invites readers to think about the interchangeability and malleability of cultural identities. Yoshimoto opens new possibilities for examining how students’ and teachers’ identities are (re)generated, (re)created, and (re)born with/in this movable, malleable, and unpre-

dictable space. *Second Language Learning and Identity* is, thus, an important work for curriculum scholars, teacher educators, preservice and inservice teachers, school teachers, and researchers who work on in the field of second language learning, curriculum studies, cultural studies, gender studies, identity research, qualitative research, narrative inquiry, and autobiographical inquiry.

## NOTES

1. I would like to thank Dr. Janet Miller and Dr. Nancy Lesko for their comments on an earlier draft of this book review which enabled me to rethink and challenge my ideas about language, identity, and a third space.
2. I am aware of the many other scholars who have worked on/in/for the notions of a third space. However, I draw on these major scholars for this review.

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