

Dangerously Knowable

A Paradoxical Case of Constructing Radical Hybrid Literacy Practices

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The Importance of Attending to Paradox in Educational Ethnography

ARE educational ethnographies *educational*? How do ethnographies educate us about youth in schools and about ourselves? Long time educational ethnographers LeCompte and Preissle (1993) tell us that educational ethnography describes, interprets, and explains “the social world and the operation of educational phenomena within this world” (p. 28). However, by examining the process of creating an ethnography, a paradox seems to surface: “The practice of ‘making it strange’ by a researcher studying a familiar culture is equivalent to the practice of ‘making it familiar’ engaged by an anthropologist studying an exotic culture” (p. 3). The paradox of making an educational scene seem strange or seem familiar so that we can come to know it better deserves our attention: This practice seems to remove the researcher from themselves (as if removing ourselves from ourselves is even possible) and may deny the researcher’s stance.

How do educational ethnographers reinscribe and reify our own beliefs about youth when we research and write about youth in our ethnographies? I like to think of myself as a poststructural critical ethnographer who dispels the myth of the objective observer and embraces contradictory and multiple meanings. However, as I work to present this ethnographic case study in various papers and presentations, I begin to question the possibility of representing multiple meanings and perspectives of the participants. I share the ongoing concern of poststructuralists: “representation is always in crisis” (Britzman, 2000, p. 27). I am beginning to recognize the paradox of educational anthropology in that, in the end, no matter how many ways I present the voices of the participants, the story I construct is very much *my* story of ‘the other’—perhaps educating me about myself more than educating anyone else about participants in my study. But there must be something I can do to present my work in ways that do not take part in the dreaded practices of being prescriptive or appropriating the Other (Trinh, 1999).

In this paper I will present some of the paradoxes of my work, to self-reflexively describe the case of Lucy Luna. By describing paradoxes in the research, I will try to do what Trinh T. Minh-ha (1999) employs as a way to wrest anthropology away from a simple, prescriptive, and Other-appropriating project: “open up non-identifiable ground where boundaries are always undone, at the same time as they are accordingly assumed” (p. 215). In other words, I will embrace paradox

as an essential aspect of my educational ethnography in order to “trouble confidence in being able to ‘observe’ behavior, [and] ‘apply the correct technique,’” to representing the Other (Britzman, 2000, p. 38). The paradoxes seem to help my ethnography educate us about my story of Lucy Luna and the youth in her class.

New Ways of Thinking about Difference

I began this case study quite concerned about the need to disrupt “notions of multiculturalism and diversity that focus on binary relations or dualities: majority/minority; White/Black; center/periphery; developed/underdeveloped” (Greene in Dimitriadis & McCarthy, 2001, p. vii). Such a focus perpetuates hierarchy and limits understanding—especially within bilingual classroom settings. In the past 40 years in the United States, the education of people who are culturally/linguistically¹ different from the majority group of White, middle-class, native English speaking people has been addressed through a variety of multicultural principles and practices (Banks, 1993; Nieto 1995; Sleeter 1996). However, this work tends to perpetuate fixed classifications of people: “Despite initiatives of this work, a standing critique is that much of the work was limited because its efforts involved and recreated dualistic ways of thinking, which re-establish the very culture it aims to critique and pluralize” (N. Lesko, personal communication, April 9, 2002). Instead, along with post-colonial and post-structuralist theorists, I believe we need to introduce ways of conceptualizing difference that consider the messy spaces between binaries as valid places for thinking about difference.

After much research and reflection, I came to the concepts of hybridity and liminal spaces as potentially useful ideas that I hoped could be translated into classroom practice. Green (as cited in Bhabha, 1994) offers a three dimensional metaphor to describe between-spaces of identity. Green imagines a building with an attic and a boiler room in the basement, the attic with plaques displaying “Black” and the boiler room with plaques reading “White” with a stairwell in-between. The stairwell is a place to keep identities shifting:

The stairwell as liminal space, in-between the designations of identity, becomes the process of symbolic interaction, the connective tissue that constructs the difference between upper and lower, black and white. The hither and thither of the stairwell, the temporal movement and passage that it allows, prevents identities at either end of it from settling into primordial polarities. This interstitial passage between fixed identifications opens up the possibility of a cultural hybridity that entertains difference without an assumed or imposed hierarchy. (Bhabha, 1994, p. 4)

The stairwell as liminal space is much like how Kamberelis (2000) describes Bakhtin’s (1981) hybridization that is “a strategic deployment of the resources from different discursive worlds to forge new codes and to achieve new and richer forms of intersubjectivity and shared understanding” (Kamberelis, 2000, p. 264). These new forms of communication, tied closely to the shifting identities of students, seemed to be important aspects of classroom engagement that could be defined as literacies. Therefore, in this study I define literacy broadly as making, interpreting, and communicating meaning. Fortunately, I met a teacher who was interested in co-constructing what I was calling *radical hybrid literacy practices*. To do so, Lucy Luna and I attempted to encourage student performance of hybrid identities as the source of and means of curriculum and teaching.

Participant and Setting

In this case study, the participant was Lucy Luna, a White female teacher who taught at Normopolis School. Normopolis is a K–5 school located in a large city in the Northeastern United States. Normopolis is situated in a primarily Dominican- and Puerto Rican-American neighborhood, a fact established by the respective flags suspended in front of the school. Brownstones line the street, and there is a small blacktop-covered park with a few trees adjacent to the school. Parents, guardians, and grandparents accompany younger children to the school each morning. The school building is five stories high and has unique architecture, including gargoyles peering down over the corners of the building. Once through the double doors, a security guard signs in and directs people to the second floor main office. First-time visitors are often lost in Normopolis's maze of hallways and stairwells.

Lucy is a bilingual native English speaker who had studied and lived abroad for extended (over a year) periods of time in Spanish-speaking countries. The study took place during her fourth and fifth year as an elementary classroom teacher. Lucy taught in a fourth grade classroom in spring 2002 and in a second grade classroom in fall 2003. Lucy's fourth grade classroom was an English language component of a dual language Spanish/English bilingual program; there were two classrooms, each with a group of students, one focused on English instruction and one focused on Spanish instruction. The groups of students changed classrooms every other day. The second grade classroom was a self-contained, gifted, dual language classroom. Here, Lucy taught a half-day each of English and Spanish. The school had a dual language bilingual program as well as a monolingual program. Both classroom settings had a large proportion of Learners of Second Languages (LSL) (over 90%) who were primarily native Spanish speakers of mostly Dominican- and Puerto Rican-descent.

Methodology

I collected data intensively over a six month period. However, Lucy and I were in contact for the entire year in which the study took place and I often collected data when we were together outside the classroom. Data collection in the classroom began in the spring and continued in the fall when Lucy had a new group of students with which to work with the idea of *radical hybrid literacy practices*. In the summer between the two intensive classroom data collection periods, Lucy and I engaged in co-analysis of data that we felt was important to the study concepts. Data collection sources included: classroom observations, formal and informal interviews, a video-taped lesson, e-mails, document analysis of lesson plans, student work samples, co-analysis sessions, and my researcher journal.

I was interested not only in patterns and themes (Miles & Huberman, 1994) but breaks in patterns as well. Although patterns help to describe what is usual thinking and activity for a person, this analytic mode alone seems to ignore those not so usual ideas that may have importance to the case and teacher themselves. I tried to upend the traditional anthropological search for patterns in the object of study by intentionally noticing contradictions and disruptions in patterns as possible sites of fruitful analysis instead of solely as disconfirming evidence. However faithful my intentions, I was not prepared to find paradoxes in my work. I expected disruptions in patterns to be clear and useful data points to show the uniqueness of Lucy's teaching and learning. I did not realize that paradoxes would "haunt" (Lesko & Bloom, 2000) and limit my understanding of the study until I had unearthed them.

I break the typical rules of case study reporting and present the case of Lucy Luna, a White woman and bilingual teacher, as an ethnographic play that is part fiction and part fact. Richardson (2000) would designate my play a Creative Analytic Practices ethnography, which she describes as playful, creative, and analytic. Richardson (1997) states, “‘Good’ ethnography like ‘good’ literary works invites the reader to *experience* a culture or an event” (p. 182). The acts are factual episodes that took place during data collection that I rearranged and compressed into shorter periods of time. In each act, I present words and actions from my study and build an analytic theme. Much of the characters’ dialogue is verbatim classroom and interview dialogue. Presentation of the play, comprised primarily of raw data, and analysis separately gives the reader the opportunity to make their own analysis. The two can be read together or separately and can work together or against one another.

Data from the 2nd grade classroom is the foundation for the excerpts from the play that you will read below. The excerpts illustrate paradoxes that I identified in the case study. In the following scenes, you meet the following characters: Lucy, a White, bilingual (Spanish/English) teacher; Wanda, an African American, native English speaker; Myrna, a Puerto Rican American, English dominant, native Spanish speaker; and the Fool (me, Trish), a White, bilingual (Spanish/English), university participant researcher.

Paradox Number One: Mastering Hybridity

Recipe for radical hybrid literacy practices: Take thirty students, one teacher, one researcher, a liminal space and stir. Place on a rug at 350 degrees for 40 minutes and...

Like many thoughtful teaching practices, there is no particular recipe. However, Lucy’s and my goal in this study was to co-construct and *record* radical hybrid literacy practices over two school semesters and a summer of work together in her multilingual/multicultural classrooms. Therein lays the paradox. In our second semester together, our focus settled upon the concept of hybridity and how Lucy and I could create liminal classroom spaces for students to express their hybrid identities. Paradoxically, we tried to understand and define hybridity and liminality, which are undefinable, contradictory, ambivalent, shifting, and in constant motion (Ashcroft, Friffiths, & Teffin, 2000; Bhabha, 1994; Trinh, 1999). We worked hard to describe and define what liminal spaces were like and how we and students performed hybridity. Unintentionally we set out on a grand adventure to *know* and *find out*—to *master hybridity*—mapping students as we traveled. As we researched liminal spaces and hybridity, we tried to catch them, pin them down, and define them. Our journey to discover this teaching practice coincided with “education’s traditional fixation on knowledge transmission, and its wish for the teacher as master of knowledge” (Luhmann, 1998, p. 148). Although this paradox of *mastering hybridity* presented challenges for us, we did seem to get closer to understanding *how* to foster creation of liminal classroom spaces wherein students could express hybridity. However, as the following two scenes from the ethnographic play show, our attempts to define the undefinable created some tension-filled results:

The students are seated on the blue Spanish rug. Their notebooks are open in their laps. A couple of students are staring out the window.

LUCY: Ustedes escucharon la palabra “Puertorriqueño” [You’ve all heard of the word “Puerto Rican”].

ANNA (*interrupts excitedly*): Oooh! Sí! [Oooh! Yes!]

LUCY (*continues*): Dominicana. ¿Qué eres si eres de los Estados Unidos? No estan escuchando (*claps a pattern and the students respond by clapping the same pattern and quiet down*). Yo voy a inventar una palabra. En vez de Mexicano, Dominicano, yo voy a poner New Yorqueños (*writes the word on the chart paper*). Si quieres escribirlo en una página nueva, hazlo. [Dominican. What are you if you're from the United States? You're not listening. I am going to invent a word. Instead of Mexican, Dominican, I am going to put New Yorqueños. If you want to write it on a new page, go ahead.]

Later, Lucy and the Fool are seated at a table talking about creating the word New Yorqueños.

LUCY: So then they could start making up words that describe their own experiences of being hybrid. What do they want to call themselves? When we allow students to name themselves? It's affirming. It means that whatever it is—it's okay. And anything in between is okay. Offering language about their hybrid identities is providing that liminal space.

FOOL: Yeh. I really noticed that by coming up with the words—New Yorkqueños—you're offering them language to describe something that has never been described before. The word describes people who are New Yorkers but are also Spanish speakers. It's something that's not part of the school curriculum. And that's fantastically crazy that it's not—(*emphatically*) because this is kids' identity. This is who they are. And we don't give them any language or means for talking about it. I mean it seems like that's what multicultural education should be. So word creation is an important part of helping to define liminal spaces and to legitimize literacies.

LUCY (*in a matter of fact manner*): Then we could encourage kids to make up their own words.

In this data selection Lucy invented a new word, to describe a complex student identity and upon reflection, importantly, emphasized the need to encourage students to name themselves. I tried to describe her practice of coming up with a language to help students express hybridities as an important project for multicultural education. This word, “New Yorqueños” began to create a vocabulary to talk about the hybridity of students who have identities rooted in the Spanish language in a particular city. This was significant because many Learners of Second Language in New York City share the Spanish language but are often grouped separately based on nation. The word “New Yorqueños” offered a way to describe one aspect of the intersection of speaking Spanish and New York City. However, Lucy's inventing “New Yorqueños” was also problematic for two reasons. First, although she later said students should name themselves, Lucy, a White, native English speaker, chose the word and named this group, which is not compatible with a decolonizing project of naming wherein indigenous people name themselves (Smith, 2001). Second, lumping all Spanish-speaking New Yorkers into one group may serve to homogenize all the different languages/cultures that the grouping may represent.

Paradox Number Two: Estranging What's Strange

Occasionally, like imperial explorers, Lucy and I fell into filling in the map based on our unconscious, unchecked, White, native English speaking privilege and colonial ideologies, calling for students to reappropriate ‘authentic’ and ‘exotic’ identities, cultures, and languages (Wilinsky, 1998). The most significant and perhaps paradoxical and counterintuitive way that liminal spaces were created was through what I call *estrangement*.

Analysis revealed that Lucy and I engaged in projects of estrangement and within these

projects occasionally made students ‘strange.’ By estrangement I mean that we suspended knowing what we formerly had affection for and loyalty to about ourselves, schooling, and learners of second languages. The concept of *making the familiar strange* is not new (Luhmann, 1998). My conception of estrangement draws upon Luhmann’s queering pedagogy. Along with queer theory, the process of estrangement encourages the question: “How can the very notion of a unified human subject be parodied and jointly with other discourses, radically deconstructed into a fluid permanently shifting, and unintelligible subjectivity?” (Luhmann, 1998, p. 146). Queering is a subversive practice and is not an “easily identifiable counter-knowledge but lies in the very moment of unintelligibility, or in the absence of knowledge” (p. 147). In my conceptualization of estrangement I want to emphasize the suspension of knowing what was known before—an intentional amnesia that allows new ideas to enter. Estranging students is *not* about “expand[ing] the definition of *normal*” that takes place in assimilationist politics (Luhmann, 1998, p. 143). I am not calling for teachers to make the familiar seem strange, in order to make the ‘other’ acceptable to the ‘colonizer’ in a colorneutral manner. Rather, estrangement is about suspending familiar ideas, making one’s own ideas strange to oneself, therefore intentionally creating moments where one can no longer know or know about the ‘other.’

Paradoxically, estrangement included a concurrent process of Lucy and my making students ‘strange.’ In other words, as we attempted to let students tell us what their identities were, we saw students with a colonial lens, positioning students as the exotic ‘other’ “speaking on their behalf” (Trinh, 1999, p. 66), *knowing* them, and encouraging them to reclaim the Spanish language and ‘authentic’ Puerto Rican and Dominican identity “lost” and “hidden” *to us*. Therefore, what was implicated within a decolonizing practice of estrangement was a practice of colonization—making students ‘strange.’ Although I struggled to keep our colonial desires in check throughout our year together, within projects of estrangement Lucy and I made students ‘strange.’ Lucy did so using her colorneutralness and we both drew upon our ambivalent desire for ‘authentic’ language/culture (Ashcroft et al., 2000; Bhabha, 1994). Perhaps because both Lucy and I “love to travel” to “*different* places” we felt comfortable exoticizing Dominican-American and Puerto Rican-American students and desiring for them to reclaim some kind of fantasized, fixed *island identity*. Why would students want to be merely ‘Americans’ when we knew that (as normalized, culture-less ‘Americans’) ‘American’ identity can be so *boring*? I intentionally use the word ‘strange’ to underscore our colonial gaze that sees the ‘Other’ as an aberration from the ‘norm.’ Our making students ‘strange’ was dangerous to classroom liminal spaces and threatened and/or limited them.

The data samples in the play scenes that follow show how Lucy and I made students ‘strange’ meanwhile the students claimed blank spaces of identity, performing their hybridity, thus ‘estranging’ them for me and Lucy. We now catch up with Lucy and Trish at lunch, grading papers, and talking about liminal spaces and hybridity in the classroom. We discuss Arianis, a Dominican-American bilingual (Spanish/English) speaker. A new character is present in spirit, an Indian post-colonial theorist, Homi Bhabha, who comments on the conversation. Then the Ghost of Classroom Past transports Lucy and the Fool (me) to the previous year (Lucy’s 4th grade classroom) to witness how Lucy and The Fool opened a space for multiple national affiliations. Here, we meet Yesenia, a light-skinned, English dominant, and bilingual Dominican-American.

FOOL (*sits down and opens her bagel sandwich*): Like, what we’re talking about...now I think we’ve gone to a deeper level of what between-spaces of identity are...

LUCY (*bites into her sandwich in her left hand and grades math papers with her right, draws a big smiley face at the top of Ritu's paper*): Uh huh.

FOOL (*her mouth full of sandwich, slides a few papers out from under Lucy's pile, grabs a marker from the glass jar on the table*):...of language and culture.

LUCY (*grades a new paper*): Which brings us more into...instead of the superficial speaking, but like feelings and how you feel in the different place because of what you look like and...

FOOL (*wipes her fingers on a napkin*): and your beliefs that are attached to those feelings...like who you're supposed to be and where.

LUCY: Yeh, and how you...how you're valued or not valued and in different groups and in society.

FOOL (*nods her head and draws a green star on Johnny's paper, then looks up at Lucy*): Right. Yeh. So, you see liminal spaces now as kind of these projects we've created and giving them language to talk about their different selves and attached to skin color and attached to language and culture?

LUCY (*swallows and takes a bite of her sandwich*): Um hm.

FOOL (*gets up and walks over to the door and throws her lunch wrappers away*): Last year, Arianis was saying that 'I'm not Dominican because I was born here but I speak mostly English and Spanish at home...only English to my mom' which isn't necessarily true. But she's trying to say she's American, like she's like she's throwing out the Dominican part. Right? (*steps on the corner of the English rug and drags it so it unwrinkles*)

SPIRIT OF HOMI BHABHA: "Hybridity intervenes in the exercise of authority not merely to indicate the impossibility of its identity but to represent the unpredictability of its presence" (Bhabha, 1994, p. 114).

LUCY (*opens her drink and unwraps her straw, furrows her brow*): Yeh. She's resisting this conversation about her being Spanish-speaking...like to be successful you need to be English-speaking.

FOOL (*returns to the table and stuffs homework folders with assignments*): Which is very true.

LUCY (*sucks on her straw*): Um hm...And it's useful. Her sister's in college in Connecticut and I'm sure she speaks English 99 percent of the time and only one percent Spanish which is probably with her mother. So that's her role model.

FOOL: Yep.

LUCY (*puts down her drink and looks serious*): Which isn't a bad thing...but it would be wonderful if she could just be proud of the fact of where she comes from and that she speaks Spanish.

GHOST OF CLASSROOM PAST (*flies in through the open window and stops in front of the table where Lucy and the Fool sit immobilized and tense*): Remember when you encouraged the students to express their allegiances to multiple nations in their immigration play? When they raised many different nations' flags during the Pledge of Allegiance to the United States and when they sang "This Land is Your Land" (Guthrie, 1940)? Look at this mirror (*pulls out a small compact from under her gown*).

Lucy and the Fool can't help but look. In a flash they emerge in the previous year's fourth grade classroom on a sunny spring day.

YESENIA (*walks up to the Fool and proudly hands her a piece of paper*): Look.

FOOL (*takes the paper and reads it out aloud*): "I pledge of allegiance to the flag of DR for which it stands one nation under God indivisible for liberty and justice for all."

FOOL (*smiling, looks at Yesenia*): Why did you write the Pledge like this?

YESENIA: There can be a different kind of flag for different places. I'm gonna show it to Ms. Luna (*walks away*).

FOOL (*writes*): With all of our practicing of patriotic songs and the classroom focus on immigrating to 'America,' Yesenia may feel the need to assert her loyalty to the Dominican Republic.

The Ghost of Classroom Past shoves her compact in Lucy and the Fool's faces. Instantaneously, they are standing in the same classroom later that week. Lucy, the Fool, a student teacher, and a group of students discuss what flags they should display during the play. They suggest Italian, United States, Mexican, and Ecuadorian flags. The Ghost of Classroom past sends them back to the present, leaving no trace of their time-travel.

LUCY (*clutches her drink and sucks up the remainder of the juice quickly*): That was stressful!

FOOL (*wipes the sweat that has formed at her hairline*): It's one heck of a way to reflect on practice!

In this scene, Lucy and the Fool made Arianis 'strange' when they tried to analyze how Arianis was mapping herself in pure ways but ended up reinstating a splitting. We recreated the dualism of American-English/Dominican-Spanish when, in fact, Arianis was expressing a much more complex dynamic of being American and bilingual and was engaged in an "inner war" because she had "taken up and was taken up within incommensurable social/cultural spaces" of American-ness, Dominican-ness and as a bilingual Spanish/English speaker (Kamberelis, 2000, p. 262).

Juxtaposed with this incident was Lucy's ease in promoting 'estrangement' of a narrow definition of American patriotism throughout her time with the fourth graders. Lucy's ability to be open to students' self-definition occurred with the fourth graders when Lucy was supportive of students' multiple cultural and national affiliations. A risqué example of her support took the form of encouraging students to hold up flags from their home countries during a play—even during the Pledge of Allegiance to the United States. Her support of multiple nationalisms that students feel, often taboo in U.S. schools, allowed more than a singular identity patriotic to 'American' culture and nation. During this performance, students simultaneously represented themselves as American *and* Ecuadorian, Mexican, and Dominican. The simultaneity of hybrid identities moves beyond binaries to defy simple and fixed categorization of students (Dimitriadis & McCarthy, 2001). Lucy's promotion of multiple cultural affiliations in school recognized people's homelessness and made a space for students to move between different internal "homes" instead of reclaiming some essentialized identity loyal to a particular nation (as we tried to impose on Arianis.) This was an incident where students were able to write their own identity maps in the space Lucy left blank for them.

This scene offers an example of how we both estranged and recreated identity maps in the classroom through making students 'strange.' The map refers to the knowledge we previously held dear about student identity and draws upon the notion of colonial mapping of the world and renaming of indigenous lands and people (Willinsky, 1998). Our paradox was this: Lucy and I metaphorically placed old maps over students, identifying and reifying the strange and "exotic" places they came from and concurrently left blank spaces where the students could map identity in their own ways, thus suspending the authority of our maps about students. Lucy and I talked about how the different aspects of student identities or "selves" are devalued in school and by students themselves because they do not fit the template of the American English speaking map

they must occupy. The scenes above showed Lucy and the Fool attempting to value the different “selves” that students brought to the classroom as they engaged in the paradoxical practice of estranging what was ‘strange’ to us.

Paradox Number Three: A Wonderwomanesque De-colonizer Colonizes

The case can be viewed as a *Wonder Woman-esque* story. That is, although I remain aware that I wrote *for others* (Smith, 2001) and tried to incorporate multiple perspectives through extensive use of Lucy’s and the students’ words, as well as through Lucy’s and my co-analysis of data, I still spent a lot of my research and writing metaphorically ‘saving’ and ‘rescuing’ students and Lucy. Exacerbating the sense that I saw myself as a de-colonizer or emancipator is Lucy’s and my intensive focus on student identities when the research questions were directed at Lucy and perhaps my identities. We talked so much about student identities, first, because our goal was to create classroom curriculum that responded to the hybridity of students and made spaces for them to reflect their hybrid identities. Second, perhaps because student hybridity seemed more obvious to us through our desire to see learners of second languages as the “other,” we could more easily talk about “them.”

My role as the de-colonizer who still colonizes echoes White European colonial desires to save students (ironically) from colonization. I admit I was subconsciously comfortable with this role, and my confidence must certainly have limited my ability to listen to Lucy and the students and to consider alternative ways of thinking about the study. My perspective as a White, native English-speaking, former bilingual classroom teacher is evident in many aspects of the text. For example, I portray Lucy and my “discovery” of hybridity in ourselves and in the students as new and innovative for us as White women who have the privilege of not looking at our own shifting and contradictory identities and identity politics. However, the students likely experience hybridity all of the time and, as visible minorities, are aware of their shifting identities and clashes of cultures. Also, my portrayal of the Fool in my ethnographic play was, at times, somewhat one-dimensional as an overly confident decolonizer. To reconcile this somewhat, the Fool’s role could be broadened to carry the weight of my own struggles and contradictory thinking that I experienced throughout the study. Beyond being Lucy’s advisor, the Fool could have a wider range of views and roles that include how I questioned myself as well as how I responded to Lucy’s teasing me about the study and post-colonial theory.

What Do the Paradoxes Teach us?

Through unearthing the paradoxes of my ethnographical study, I think that I have learned that educational ethnographical study has the dangerous power to narrowly define youth in schools. As I self-reflexively write about mastering hybridity, estranging the ‘strange,’ and (de)colonizing, I am able to situate my work as tentative, contradictory, and even dangerous. Throughout the study, paradoxical processes were taking place concurrently. I think Lucy and my colonial desires played a powerful role in the three paradoxes described above.

In our study, Lucy and I carried out projects of undoing, unlearning, and unknowing “regimes of truth” based in foundationalism, humanism, and colonialism (St. Pierre & Pillow, 2000, p. 1). Indeed, western ways of knowing are generally a colonial project. Imperialism and colo-

nialism were and *are* (in their present-day forms) about knowing the ‘other’ through categorizing, dividing, naming, disciplining, and exhibiting the ‘other’ (Smith, 2001; Willinsky, 1998). (This is something educational ethnography could do.) In liminal spaces and through discussions, we broke sacred rules of schooling, suspending what we knew about students and ourselves. Paraphrasing Carter (1987), Ashcroft (2001) explains how sacred rules gain authority: “Colonial discourse turns ‘empty’ space into inhabited ‘place’ through a discourse of naming and mapping, which must, as a matter of course, either erase previous inscriptions and knowledges or reincorporate them into the privileged discourse of the imperial map” (p. 132). However, when Lucy and I were able to foster liminal spaces, colonial authority of English language and ‘American’ purities was disrupted making binaries and hierarchies momentarily improbable.

Within liminal spaces, students performed their hybridity by breaking rules of recognition requiring Lucy and me to suspend previously held conceptions about their identities. Thus, “the display of hybridity—its peculiar ‘replication’—terrorizes authority with the *ruse* of recognition, its mimicry, its mockery” (Bhabha, 1994, p. 115). By expressing both aspects of the colonizer and the colonized (i.e., cultural/linguistic referents, desires, and affiliations), students estranged colonial authority: “Hybridity is a problematic of colonial representation and individuation that reverses the effects of the colonialist disavowal, so that other ‘denied’ knowledges enter upon the dominant discourse and estrange the basis of its authority—its rules of recognition” (Bhabha, 1994, p. 114). Not only did hybridity estrange authority, it estranged students for us.

Colonialism is a discourse “where the ‘Other’ and knowledge of the ‘Other’ can be mastered and contained” (Muñoz, 1999, p. 115). Lucy and I, over years of working with Learners of Second Languages, had developed strong ideas about and fixed maps for navigating student identity. Likewise, paper colonial maps essentialized people:

The map *itself* in which names, numerous in some places and sparse in others, inscribe a pattern of knowing by metonymizing the act of seeing, establishes the authority of European consciousness and European desire to enter the ‘unknown.’ (Ashcroft, 2001, p. 131)

Disrupting our “desire to enter the ‘unknown’” was our co-construction of radical hybrid literacy practices. Liminal spaces estranged students for us and we began to recognize the impossibility of knowing them. When we observed students expressing contradictory, shifting, and incommensurable identities, we had to toss our maps of student identity aside, suspending our authority to know students. More importantly, we were unable to recognize students using paradigms of linguistic/cultural purity:

What is irremediably estranging in the presence of the hybrid—in the revaluation of the symbol of national authority as the sign of colonial difference—is that the difference of cultures can no longer be identified or evaluated as objects of epistemological or moral contemplation: cultural differences are simply not *there* to be seen or appropriated. (Bhabha, 1994, p. 114)

In discarding our maps or rules of recognition for understanding student identity, students seemed remarkably nationally, ethnically, linguistically, and culturally impure. In our thinking, students were freed of a singular fixed origin and expressed a kind of homelessness. We could not locate or place them on a chart in a school cumulative folder, a book of child development, or in a multicultural education methods text.

Multicultural Maps

What do the paradoxes of *mastering hybridity*, *estranging the 'strange,'* and a *(de)colonizing* tell us? How does my proposal that student hybrid identity can only exist and thrive when teachers *suspend knowing students* speak with and against issues in multicultural teacher education? The following section will address these questions and, in effect, estrange what these literatures know about teaching other people's children (Delpit, 1988).

One can imagine the literature on multicultural education as a sort of map or guidebook constructed by the academy for working with multicultural/multilingual students. Like the ancient *mappa mundi* that divided the world according to those in power, the literature could be seen as a sort of *mappa multicultural* (Willinsky, 1998). In fact, scholarly work on multicultural education is compiled into James and Cherry Banks's *Handbook of Research on Multicultural Education* (2004), a 1089 page guidebook that contains a huge body of research on multicultural education. Even the title *Handbook* implies this knowledge about the 'other' can fit in the palm of a teacher's hand as they tour their classroom. When I apply the lens of student hybridity, "a strategic space for a range of new possibilities in identity struggles" (Trinh, 1999, p. 27), to the notion of the *Handbook*, it makes mapping student multiculturalism/multilingualism improbable if not impossible. That is, if culture is unfixed and undefinable, mapping it is unlikely.

Mapping Students

However, multicultural teacher education literature tends to map students in particular ways that I contend disallow the possibility for hybridity, liminal space creation, and estrangement. Remarkably absent in the first edition of the *Handbook's* (Banks & Banks, 2001) chapters, "Curriculum Theory and Multicultural Education" by Geneva Gay and "Multicultural Teacher Education: Research, Practice, and Policy" by Gloria Ladson-Billings, is a discussion of the concept of student culture. It would seem particularly important to think about what culture might mean when the *Handbook's* goal is to create equal educational opportunities for diverse *cultural* groups. Gay and Ladson-Billings take for granted what student culture might mean and at times seem to treat it as fixed and dangerously knowable. Perhaps in the need to defend from attack (Ravitch, 1990) the merits of attending to culture in education, researchers have forgotten to interrogate what they mean by culture. Inattention to culture may also be related to how the word 'multiculturalism' has lost meaning:

In the United States, multiculturalism is a word that many people of color strongly reject. The only place where it appears as a positive catchword is in the mainstream media and that is a clear indication of how the word is being appropriated. The reason it has been rejected, in my view, is because it has become so unthreatening and depoliticized in its use; multiculturalism almost has the same connotation of as the word 'pluralism.' (Trinh, 1999, p. 185)

By assuming those who read multicultural education research know what culture is and thus can apprehend it, researchers ascribe to a realist epistemology (St. Pierre & Pillow, 2000) reifying and fixing culture.

Similarly, in her chapter, Gay (2001) claims that "principles of child-centered education could easily be identified as basic tenets of multicultural education" (p. 32). My ethnographic narratives suggest that estrangement is necessary for students to perform hybrid identities so that centering or focusing upon children and deriving their needs, paradoxically may be counter-

productive to *knowing* and understanding who students are. There are some lofty goals for the future of multicultural education that assume cultural identity is something that can be apprehended and learned. In her review of the literature, Gay recommends “the acquisition of an accurate base about the history, culture, and contribution of contemporary life of different ethnic and cultural groups” and contends that “this new knowledge will help educators to design instructional programs that more accurately represent the contributions, experiences, and perspectives of all people” (p. 35). Although learning about groups of people is important, it may also be dangerous to do so because this assumes individual students can be understood according to some fixed and essential aspects of their groups’ culture and history.

Another trend in multicultural teacher education is for teacher candidates to immerse themselves into communities of students having “the opportunity to observe and learn from the people they will eventually serve” (Ladson-Billings, 2001, p. 754). Although the intention of this practice may be to help teacher candidates learn about students, I contend it is far more important that teacher candidates recognize what they think they know and then forget what they knew, unlearning and engaging in a process of conscious amnesia, leaving liminal space for hybridity. There is a danger of remapping students, especially by White teachers, in colonial ways by attempting to know students, acting as tourist in their communities.

Mapping Teachers

Although there is a push in the literature for social reconstructionist, multicultural teacher education (Zeichner, 1991) that “attempts to promote in teachers a disposition towards opposing inequity, not just celebrating diversity” (Ladson-Billings, 2001, p. 749), *how* teachers oppose inequality is a key question not often addressed. For example, in Ladson-Billings’s review of multicultural teacher education literature listed in ERIC from 1988–1992 there were few studies (20 percent) that took up what Banks (1993) (in Ladson-Billings, 2001) types *knowledge construction* that addresses “the procedures by which social, behavioral, and natural scientists create knowledge and how the implicit cultural assumptions, frames of reference, perspectives, and biases within a discipline influence the ways knowledge is constructed within it” (p. 752). My work suggests that the lack of teacher education emphasis on knowledge construction is quite troubling. Additionally, suggestions for opposing linguistic/cultural inequity in the classroom are often potentially unintentionally reductive and essentializing with simplistic recommendations to *know your students*. I posit teachers shift their focus from students to themselves but not only in order to know themselves but to suspend what they know of themselves.

Mapping the Student-Teacher Relationship

The literature that addresses culturally specific pedagogy “describes teachers’ attempts to make the school and home cultures of diverse students more congruent” (Ladson-Billings, 2001, p. 754). These studies are problematic in that if culture/language is hybrid, shifting, and constantly in motion, then culturally specific pedagogy (as currently conceived) is quite unlikely. Recently, multicultural educators have been exploring ways of providing culturally relevant or responsive practice for all students (Ladson-Billings, 1994). However, some of such research implies that there can be a one to one correspondence between school and home/community. Two such examples are Panofsky’s (2000) call for research that “identifies ways of interconnecting the forms of literacy traditionally valorized in school contexts with the literacy forms which children experience elsewhere” (pp. 208–209) and Moll, Amanti, Neff, and Gonzalez (1992) who press for work wherein teachers make school experience connect to community experience

outside of school. Radical hybrid literacy practices may be a form of culturally relevant practice that more deeply articulates student identity beyond a matching to some potentially homogenized and fixed form of culture at school and home/community. However, radical hybrid literacy practices also raise the issue of the impossibility of culturally relevant pedagogy. Although there may be common threads among people who identify with a particular group, a positivist conception of cultural identity is severely limiting when thinking about the complex, shifting, and changing needs of hybrid students in the classroom.

Suggestions for Research: Entertaining the Void

The paradoxes revealed within this ethnographic case study answers post-structural feminists call for “a lusty, rigorous, enabling confusion that deterritorializes ontological reckonings, epistemological conditions and justifications, and methodological situations” (St. Pierre & Pillow, 2000, p. 2). In calling for educators to estrange students, I hope teachers may consider allowing a kind of void in their classrooms that in essence is a classroom practice that makes “education unintelligible to itself” (Britzman in St. Pierre & Pillow, 2000, p. 2). Educational ethnographers may also benefit from entertaining a void.

In this study, through projects of estrangement, Lucy and I worked towards beholding a kind of void. As we tried to foster creation of classroom liminal spaces where students could express hybridity, we learned that students were not to be found on our maps. They were in an entirely different space, a void:

For some, ‘void’ is apparently on the opposite of ‘full.’ As absence to a presence or as lack to a center, it obviously raises a lot of anxieties and frustrations because all that is read into it is a form of negation. But I would make the difference between that negative notion of the void, which is so typical of the kind of dualist thinking pervasively encountered in the West, and the spiritual Void thanks to which possibilities keep on renewing, hence nothing can be simply classified, arrested, and reified. There is this incredible fear of nonaction in modern society, and every empty space has to be filled up, blocked, occupied, talked about. (Trinh, 1999, p. 222)

Because of the paradoxical nature of this study wherein we attempted to master hybridity or make estrangement ‘strange’ in order to describe it, as well as because of the process of (de)colonization, we did talk about and try to fill up liminal spaces or voids. Luckily, students also were able to use these voids and in turn, we became confused and they became unknowable to us—essentially recreating a void.

So what to do with the *Handbook of Research on Multicultural Education* (Banks & Banks, 2004)? The academy cherishes its maps of student multiculturalism. Are we to discontinue all research on students because they are unknowable and our attempts to know them could be a colonizing act of mapping? That would be a gross misinterpretation of my research. My research suggests that noticing classroom voids and letting them exist without judgment and classification may be fruitful for new hybrid linguistic/cultural possibilities. My recommendation may make people nervous:

So why all this anxiety [with the Void]? What’s the problem with presenting life in all its complexities? And, as we have discussed earlier, isn’t such a reaction expected after all

when the authority of specialized or packaged knowledge is at stake? (Trinh, 1999, p. 222)

Yes, allowing paradoxes and estrangement does place the research in multicultural education at stake. But if researchers were to ask themselves why voids such as not knowing students make them uncomfortable, they may be able to formulate research questions that estrange their ontological and epistemological underpinnings, and “by exploring this Third Space, [they] may elude the politics of polarity and emerge as the others of our selves” (Bhabha, 1994, p. 39). Researchers could attempt to leave a blank space on the *mappa multicultural* for young people. “The negation is what the negative, dualistic reading of the void points to, while a radical negativity entails a constant questioning of arrested representations” (Trinh, 1999, p. 223).

Although I have tried, I have learned that the paradoxes cannot be mastered. Inviting paradoxes may be an integral part of poststructural educational ethnography and seems to be an important part of making ethnography more educational for un-knowing youth.

NOTES

1. Culture and language are considered to be deeply intertwined aspects of identity in this study (Thiong'o in Ashcroft et al., 1995; Anzaldúa, 1987). In this study I will refer to them together except when necessary to show instances where they have been artificially decoupled.

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