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### **On the Cusp of Invisibility: Opportunities and Possibilities of Literacy Narratives**

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#### **Reflections**

2828 East Grimes was removed from Ona and Cora Street in Harlingen, Texas. My mom saw it as progress and a new opportunity. Yet, year after year, we barely made it. Jumping into dumpsters around the apartment complex to collect cans for money and watching our vehicle get repossessed was embarrassing. “Embarrassing is when you steal,” mom would say. I was embarrassed, embarrassed by the fact that my mother had to be both my dad and mom. One of my first recollections of reading and writing was to a person I only knew through letters and pictures. “I want you to be better than me, stay in school and do good,” he’d say. As a child I felt like I was seeing and experiencing the world differently. I worried that I could not be better than him as my mother herself barely had a high school diploma. “There is no manual for how to raise a child as a teenager,” my single mom would tell me, as she tried to sooth my concerns. I turned to writing at a young age in an attempt to understand my situation. My friends and I teetered between what was and what could be, never without the overriding sense of knowing our place and knowing our differences. These differences for some of us would make all the difference between “what was” and “what could be.” 2828 East Grimes may have been removed from the barrios, but we were not.

In her cocina I’d sit after school every weekday. “¿Como te fue en la escuela?” she’d ask, both out of concern and longing for a formal educational experience. When my grandma came to the U.S. from Xilitla, San Luis Potosí, Mexico, she was denied the opportunity. She didn’t know how to read or write in Spanish or English. In fact, whenever a signature was required, she’d mark the line with an “x.” Yet, on the mesa would be a tape recorder that would say words in Spanish and translate them into

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English. When I'd get to the house, she'd practice with me, speaking in English, and I would practice with her, speaking in Spanish. On the mesa, as well, there would be evidence of her practicing the English alphabet, numbers, addresses, and her signature (See Figure 1)

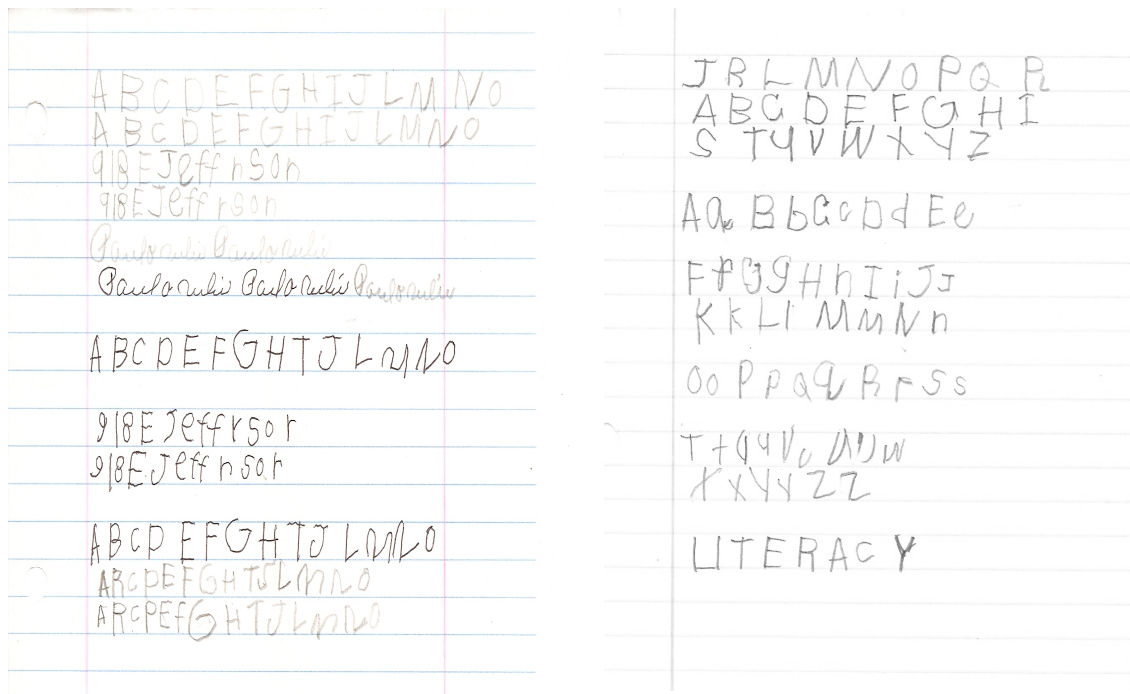


Figure 1: Grandma Practicing the Alphabet, Numbers, Addresses, and Signature

“Siéntate,” she’d say as I entered the kitchen. This was platica, cuento, and testimonio time for us, which would eventually extend from the kitchen to walking. There were several important parts to our conversations: 1) she’d ask/say, “¿Entiendes?” 2) she’d say, “Te digo esto para que sepas y aprendes,” and 3) she’d underscore all this by saying, “No te dejes.” Then, we’d go for walks, sometimes to the mall, other times to go visit comadres. Our conversations were never just unintentional and our walks involved more than just the physicality of movement. My grandma was situating me in a history and memory of survival, preservation and resiliency. She was showing me the paths “we’ve” walked together all along. Grandma, entiendo, I continue to listen at to know and learn. I’ve learned to speak back for “we” are always on the cusp of invisibility and silence.

On the weekends, we'd head to Brownsville or Weslaco for la pulga. "Tengo botas, vestidos, zapatos," a man in the distance would yell out. The pulga had

everything from ropa to animales to food. In the Lower Rio Grande Valley (LRGV), la pulga was a space for our people and it is a place maintained for the benefit of our people. I was always curious of the white man who displayed confederacy memorabilia. He was one amongst many, pero nos dio un sentimiento malo. After the pulga, we'd head over to my tíos. I'd go to the backyard to "help" my tíos work on cars. There were life lessons to be learned with them too. "Mi'jo listen to the car." He'd lean back in and then out and ask if I could hear it. The first lesson—the capacious work involved in listening, well and deeply. "Mi'jo, eres inteligente. Pero, tienes que enseñarles que puedes abrí un libro y leerlo también." The second lesson is self-evident even in translation. What I knew then, and today, is that the series of events that have played out in my life to remind me of my otherness—the man selling confederacy memorabilia at la pulga, the agent at the Sarita, Texas checkpoint checking for my papers as I travelled to College Station, Texas, and the constant "checking" of my body in gringoland and gringodemia—is the consequence of whiteness. Whether in the majority (the LRGV) or the minority (higher education), I've internalized difference brought on by whiteness.

A couple of years ago, in a course taught by Chandra Mohanty, I had the opportunity to listen to and read Judy Rohrer's work. She writes:

We are the set of stories we tell ourselves, the stories that tell us, the stories others tell about us, and the possibilities of new stories. I am these stories. I lived them or I inherited them, and they live vibrantly and turbulently in and around me. All stories are political; they involve power that has structural underpinnings and material consequences. (189)

This passage had an impact on me. It made me reflect. In graduate school, I opened up and read everything I could get my hands on pertaining to race, oppression, and resistance. Yet, my individual experiences, and the opportunities I've had to teach at Texas A&M University Corpus Christi and Syracuse University, have reminded me that theory does not and cannot account entirely for how people are shaped by historical and material conditions, how people are agents in the production of meaning in space-time. Today, I speak in the register of pedagogy and rhetoric. Before all this, my interest in praxis began in the intricate conversations with my family and community and my experiences of survival and resiliency. This is where my story began. Today, I focus on the plight of the Mexican American student. This is where my past meets the possibilities of "new stories." The import of "entiendes," "para que sepas y aprendes," and "no te dejes" stands across space and time because we remain on the cusp of invisibility. I return to the literacy narrative for its opportunities and possibilities.

I am aware of the critiques of literacy narratives. Ann Feldman in, *Making Writing Matter*, discusses how literacy narratives “embody contradictory rhetorical and generic aims” (101). I beg to differ—I will expand later—with Feldman on such matters. This contention does not weigh in on the discussion of modes of composing and genres, but on the opportunities and possibilities afforded in assigning literacy narratives. Literacy narratives can be about inhabiting space and place-making, recalling and memory-making, shaping and meaning-making, knowledge and community-making. In this dialogical and dialectical and residual and emergent experiential process of being and becoming, literacy narratives offer the possibility of representing and presenting epistemological practices as strategic methods of being, seeing, and doing. Through my teaching experiences, I have observed what literacy narratives can do for marginalized students. I am interested in re-imagining literacy narratives in the contexts of place, knowledge, and meaning-making, difference, and community-building in the classroom. In this article, I provide a review of literacy narratives and briefly re-imagine literacy narratives in pedagogy throughout.

### **Literacy Narratives as Potential Praxis**

There is plenty of scholarship on literacy narratives. In this section, I review two pieces of scholarship pertaining to narrative and literacy narratives. In the first close reading, Janet Eldred and Peter Mortensen focus on the elements of historical bodies and space, in place/out of place binaries, and rhetorical agents in the production of meaning. In the second reading, Mary Soliday situates the student body as text—as read, as accessed, and as performed and translated.

In, “Reading Literacy Narratives,” Eldred and Mortensen write that literacy narratives offer a way into studying the social process of language acquisition and literacy. Their close reading of Bernard Shaw’s *Pygmalion* as a literacy narrative, and how it is constructed out of a “literacy myth,” is interesting. Henry, a central character, is the educator, a “creator of something from nothing,” invested in ‘inventing new Eliza’s’ at the expense of Eliza’s cultural and social displacement (515; 518). Eliza, the other central character, is the subject of Henry’s obsession with control and power, a sponsor of literacy (Brandt 167-168) and a gate keeper, who “writes in a code intelligible to only a few” and who “inscribes language according to an exclusive standard in order to make it ‘properly’ readable and in order to represent its deviant qualities” (517). Eliza’s vernacular body, language, and literacy are suspicious and seemingly empty of knowledge and meaning, at least from Henry’s perspective. Eliza

is “caught between old and new selves” because of Henry, but eventually begins to contemplate at what expense (519).

The close reading illuminates several important factors about language acquisition and literacy. First, identity, language, literacy, and region (and place) are bound together. Yet, the question of “where to locate them” and what “to say about them” highlights the undertones of colonial tendencies of situating who/what is in place/out of place. Eldred and Mortensen write: “regions, like maps, describe space: they enclose homogeneity and thereby mark difference” (524). Second, language, literacy, and identity are shaped by space and time. Yet, the impact of spatial and temporal colonial difference reinforces literate/illiterate spaces just as they reinforce the absence of bodies or bodies present in objectified ways. Eldred and Mortensen write: “Henry believes in a primitive/civilized distinction...he is Culture, and Eliza that savage Other” (527). Stereotypes have affective value because they rely on “historical narratives about identities and human characteristics” (Wingard 21). Lastly, people are shaped by space and time, but they too are rhetorical agents in production of it. Reading literacy narratives, Eldred and Mortensen write, is to focus “on a battle over language” and “movement into multiple literacies” that “are rarely isolated, uncomplicated” (530). While language and literacy are in polylog with and intertextualized in histories and memories, I also believe Eliza’s movement draws “attention to a relationship between time and space,” where the corporeal body (and consciousness) and language are always becoming, created out of “purposely or habitually adding action elements” that helps define, renew, and/or redefine the self (Pennycook 140; “Social Reproduction” 12; 19).

In “Translating Self and Difference through Literacy Narratives,” Soliday states that literacy narratives are told in “ordinary people’s conversations about their daily lives” (511). Her focus is on the “passages between language worlds,” the “liminal crossings between worlds,” and the possibility of literacy narratives as “sites of self-translations where writers can articulate the meanings and the consequences of their passages between language worlds” (511). Soliday believes literacy stories can offer a lens by which students view language as unusual. This approach, she contends, enables students not to see language as natural but as strange. She argues: “When they are able to evaluate their experiences from an interpretive perspective, authors achieve narrative agency by discovering that their experience is, in fact, interpretable” (512). The arch of Soliday’s essay relies on this argument that student’s stories matter, that they are interpretable, and that they provide the opportunity to explore and interpolate the interplay of their dialectic and deliberative performances. The latter offers the occasion for students to be in polylog with and intertextualized themselves in histories

and memories of language and literacy acquisition in and across the dialogues of other classmates' literacy stories. Soliday emphasizes how students are constitutively shaped by and shaping meaning.

Soliday believes that literacy narratives can be a site where students consider rhetorical choice and re-invention. She writes: "Stories of self-translation involve representing difference, and the representation of difference is at the core of today's struggles" (513). This belief not only applies to curriculum, but also to students' own struggles over the very meaning they participate in creating. For Soliday, literacy narratives offer a space for students to enter, evoke specific experiences, and render those experiences as socially and culturally shaped and produced. Essentially, making the common uncommon and the familiar strange. The disposition of looking to the past to understand the present and foresee a future anew ensures "a dialogical account of one's experience rather than a chronological report of verifiable events" from the "vantage point of a critical present" (514-515). To illuminate all this, Soliday focuses on two written texts by a student named Alisha. Alisha exhibits the performativity of languaging<sup>1</sup> across affective borders, edging and challenging "neutral truths" about language. Astonishingly, and what often is overlooked, is how students like Alisha make distinctions between hybridizing and assimilating language, between strategic approximation and assimilation. In negotiating the "complex demands of her cultural situation" (518), Alisha reveals how she is a multiply-situated subject, shaped by historical and material conditions, an engineer of negotiated languages and literacies, and a rhetorical agent in the production of place, knowledge, and meaning-making.

There are concerns regarding assigning literacy narratives. There is the reality that acquiring literacies and languages come with some kind of cultural and/or social sacrifice (Corkery 62). Are students prepared to come to terms with this sacrifice? There is the reality that some educators do not acknowledge difference in generative or productive ways. As a result, there can be both a "polarizing rhetoric of difference that turns on a reductive view of culture" (Soliday 522) and a "[d]evaluating of the historical and unresolved struggles of groups that have been traditionally underrepresented" (Gilyard 286). Are compositionists and rhetoricians, whether "right" or "left," able to "check" their agendas and acknowledge students desires and intentions with languages, literacies, identities, and education? For me, this is a matter of social and ethical responsibility.

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<sup>1</sup>Merrill Swain writes that languaging is a "means to mediate cognition" and a "process of making meaning and shaping knowledge and experience through language" (96; 98).



Concerning matters of social and ethical responsibility, I am reminded of students like myself from the LRGV. Yes, we embody and carry the legacies of spatial and temporal colonial difference and the import of a paradigm of rational knowledge (Fabian 78; Mignolo 470; Quijano 172). “The Mexican,” a palimpsest of identity or archetypal inscription of racial symbols and myths, is a testament of this colonial legacy we embody and carry. “The inferior races are inferior,” says Anibal Quijano, “because they are objects of study or of domination/exploitation/discrimination” (211). And, “[co]lonizing of differences by dominant groups,” claims Henry Giroux, “is expressed and sustained through representations: in which the Other is seen as a deficit, in which the humanity of the Other is posited either as cynically problematic or ruthlessly denied” (103). So, it is on the matter of humanity, of social and ethical responsibility, that we owe it to students to work from the pedagogical situation of the composition classroom and utilize the constellative and epistemological legacies students embody and carry into it. By constellative, I mean the idea that we are of historical bodies that have traceable histories and geographies (“Towards a Politics of Mobility” 18). For a student of the LRGV, such constellative and epistemological legacies look differently.

Pa’ los que saben, no passport is needed to get in or to leave the LRGV. Yet, an almost 100 mile geopolitical border at the south end and an almost parallel border of internal checkpoints at the north end perimeter the region. Before leaving the LRGV, a pass through the checkpoints is necessary to enter the interior parts of Texas. This restricted access is not about theory; this is about what the border/checkpoints mean and what effect they have on the physical body and psyche. There is a historical legacy behind the border/checkpoints. Arnoldo De Leon’s study on Texas Mexicans reminds us: “What whites found in Texas...was that Mexicans were primitive beings who during a century of residence in Texas has failed to improve their status and environment” (12). This colonial logic was the occasion for colonization. But, checkpoints and borders are the effect of colonial management and control long after colonialism as an explicit political order is destroyed (Quijano 170). Places are “about relationships, about the place of peoples, materials, images, and the systems of difference that they perform” (Sheller and Urry 214). Place is also “produced through action and action is produced in place through a constant reiterative process” (*Place* 7). Students from the LRGV live within this juxtaposition of incoherencies.

If I gave the coordinates—26.1906° N, 97.6961° W—one could not gather from it a sense of the histories and mobilities and materialities that run through and make place possible. My question is this, is it socially and ethically responsible to assume all borderlands are created equal or deploy pre-commitments of pedagogical

resistance based on universal characteristics of students? Pa' los que saben, the people and culture of the LRGV continue to challenge English as the lingua franca, destabilize national historiography, and undermine colonial projects through body-graphical, geographical, and mobile-graphical displays of expression. The local and regional history of the LRGV (and the South Texas region) has been acknowledged as a *Tejano Cultural Zone* where full assimilation has been resisted, despite colonial conditions (De Leon 78-79; Mejia 123; Arreola 7-9; 24). In this region, our ethnolinguistic identities promote “social cohesion and solidarity” (“Linguistic Contact Zones” 15). We must remember Mexican Americans have evolved in disparate ways (Munoz 9). So, on matters of humanity, place is a “meaningful component in human life” and it is struggled over and re-imagined in practical ways (*In Place/ Out of Place* 51; 71). The stories we tell others of ourselves are those that indicate constellative epistemologies. The stories we tell of where we are from and going are those that indicate the emergent component of our being, seeing, and doing. The histories and materialities that run through the LRGV are reflective of a people adapting, rejecting, and/or transforming meaning. These are stories that we inherit, that surround us, that are stories of the politics of knowledge.

The potential of new stories becomes transformative in the reconciliation of memory, history, and trauma. In the LRGV, over 90% of the population are Mexican American—Cameron (+85%), Willacy (+87%), Hidalgo (+90%), and Starr (+95%). According to the United States Census Bureau, these counties have some of the highest poverty rates—Cameron (+35%), Willacy (+40%), Hidalgo (+35%), and Starr (+36%) compared to the U.S. (15%); some of the lowest high school graduation rates—Cameron (-63%), Willacy (-63%), Hidalgo (-63%), and Starr Count (-45%) compared to the U.S. (85%). Also, according to the Texas Center for Advancement of Literacy and Learning, above 40% of the population demonstrate “below” basic literacy skills—Cameron (+43%), Willacy (+40%), Hidalgo (+50%), and Starr (+65%). I am not presenting these statistics to suggest anything but the legacies we embody and the challenges we face in the LRGV amidst designs meant to limit our economic, educational, and political visibility. The predicament of the Texas Mexican American is the disposition to colonial conditions. In the matter of literacy stories, I am reminded of its value as it ties literacy to epistemology and ontology, as it ties embodiment and performativity to composing from the body, and as it signifies the communication of “selves” to others that “involve power that has structural underpinnings and material consequences” (Rohrer 189). Literacy stories may not always be easy or comfortable to tell, but in providing students the opportunity to reconcile memories, histories, and lived experiences in narrative ways, the possibility of experiential learning is greater. Literacy narratives could mean all the difference for a student like me from the LRGV.



Literacy narratives are not created equally (Lindquist 180). To assume otherwise is propose the “everyday” is a given, by either conflating or erasing differences. I am interested in literacy narrative for its transformative possibilities, of encouraging students see and practice literacy, language, and identity in their everyday lives (Eldred 697; Tinberg 287; DeRosa 2-3). I am also interested in: how people organize experiences and memories “of human happening” in the form of narrative; how we view them as a “set of procedures for life making”; and how to locate them “to make them comprehensible” (“The Narrative Construction” 4; “Life as Narrative” 692; “Self Making” 72); how the dialectical relationships between individual, community, and society influence practice and social structures (“Social Reproduction” 9-12; “Place as Historically” 280-284); how a nexus of practice is connected to our historical bodies, spaces, and local histories that enable forms of social and cultural action that are tied to body-graphical, geo-graphical, and mobile-graphical expressions (Scollon and Scollon 14; Mignolo 460-461; “Towards a Politics of Mobility” 18-20); and, how writing provides the opportunities for social realities to be constructed in space and time, wherein “complex identity negotiations and discursive positions” (Hesford 149) can be recognized and wherein self, place, knowledge, and meaning-making can be told in literacy stories as a transformative process (see Royster 35; Williams 345; Berry 156). I am particularly interested in how these ideas affect our pedagogy for Mexican American students, specifically, the Texas Mexican Americans whose exigencies of preservation, survival, and resiliency heighten their awareness of social and cultural action.

### Re-Imagining Literacy Narratives

***A reflection:** It has been 13 years since I “crossed” that Sarita, Texas checkpoint into gringoland and gringodemia. I was conditionally admitted. I did not speak white, write white, or behave white enough. In their eyes, they just had to wait me out. I was destined to fail out. Today, I still have an accent. I am still prieto—the gardener, the wetback. But, I continue to enter white spaces and others never imagined by my family or myself. I still listen to corridos and norteño music. I still say “soy del Valle,” I still carry the Valley with me because I am Valley no matter the distance. They continue to know little about my community and I continue to ensure we do not remain on the cusp of invisibility.*

In this section, I conclude with some final thoughts on re-imagining literacy narratives. First, I clarify my intentions and expectations for students in assigning literacy narratives. I consider models of sponsorship as well and one possible take to

compliment the assigning of a literacy narrative. Then, I offer some reflection on an IRB approved study that has motivated me to continue to assign the literacy narrative in my courses.

*On Intentions and Expectations*

I do not think of the literacy narrative as a “baby assignment.” Because literacy narratives provide the space for students to situate the body as text—as located, read, accessed, and translated—it has implications well beyond the immediacy of a first assignment. In a lower division course that focuses on language and literacy, I typically begin with a discussion of lived experiences and then continue by reading a condensed version of my literacy narrative. I take this approach for multiple reasons; there is a degree of impact upon students when a person of color reads his critical interpretations of language, literacy, and rhetoric as bound to identity and region. I do not assign readings for the first week or so of the semester as students flesh out what I am asking of them. Essentially, I do not ask students to situate their language and literacy experiences under the principle of contact zones. While useful, contact zones simplify fixing rules and features in space and time. No. I am interested in the idea of friction (as a principle and analytic), not as a synonym for resistance, but as a consequence of encounters and interactions (Tsing 6) that leads to rhetorical re-invention and strategic choices.

My expectations are not for a narration of truth or presentation of authentic self, but for an exploration and critical interpretation of performativity of “selves,” shaped by and shaping meaning. Alastair Pennycook writes, “The locality of language practices is not then a stage back-cloth against which language is used but is a space that is imagined and created. The landscape is not a canvas or a context but an integrative and invented environment” (141). In every environment, students can and do challenge its fixity, and when provided the opportunity, engage in re-invention. This re-invention makes possible, I’d argue, the making of the composition classroom as a place that fosters community building. It is also the locality of embodiments and performativity that I believe sheds insight into how Western values and systems can be destabilized. This approach makes possible more nuanced ways to think about making and practicing literacy and language as social and cultural action. As compositionists and rhetoricians we know language is not fixed and that language moves and changes according to rhetorical contexts, situations, and desired outcomes. But, just like “the everyday,” the “body” is not a given in this movement. Yet, we indeed compose from our bodies. We need to foster an environment that enables

students to acknowledge this embodiment and possibility for its performativity onto pages. We need to provide spaces of composing that can help actualize it.

My pedagogical approach of listening and caring has so often worked around my grandmother's phrases, "¿entiendes?" "para que te acuerdas," and "para que sepas y aprendes." These are my models of sponsorship that help me talk about literacy narratives. Entiendes is both a declarative and an inquiry-based phrase. On the one hand, the entiendes is used to make sure that one understands what is being communicated; on the other hand, entiendes is used in a way that provides the opportunity to ask questions. Memory and participation are at the center of my pedagogical approaches. Whether students are writing about their families, community, and/or individual language and literacy experiences, "para que te acuerdas" involves more than just recalling and reflecting. At stake is the opportunity to transform the nexus of practice towards one's own ends. I believe that listening—para que sepas y aprendes—is a form of social and cultural action. I follow this listening up with "andale" moments. Andale has several meanings—go, way to go, or you got it—and I use it to convey encouragement and possibility in listening as to know and learn.

Literacy narratives offer students the opportunity to come to terms with the realities of our "everyday" lived experiences. I have and continue to question what it meant to be conditionally admitted into higher education, even as a soon-to-be faculty member at The University of Utah. Yet, I am using this opportunity to compose from my body, offering the possibility of social and cultural action through writing and rhetoric. I still do not speak white, write white, or behave white enough. Gringoland and gringodemia had and continues to have a way of reminding me of what I "lack." Then and now, I have had a critical awareness that cannot be wholly defined or described by theory because "this" is a politic of the flesh. As educators, we cannot dismiss this possibility and opportunity to work from the stories students embody who can and will narrate it if provided the space. My reflections in the introduction and now are not meant solely to implicate those in gringoland and gringodemia, but to build connections with others in academia in and across differences. That is the power of literacy stories—community and coalitional building.

#### *Praxis: Time-Use Mapping*

Literacy narratives are about space and place, but they also need to be about time and mobility and materiality, so this is my intervention. In the discipline, there is this consensus that language is on the move, but what about the body, and, how it moves

in space and time? Specifically, I am interested in the idea that places are “delineated by movement” and are “knots of stories” (Ingold 34; 41), as well as the idea that movement “is rarely just movement” because it “carries with it the burden of meaning” that is irreducible (*On the Move* 4-7). To see this idea into fruition, I describe a time-use mapping exercise. Students would be asked to consider three to four discourse communities in which they participate. The idea, similar to the concept of time-use diaries, is to document and yield a microanalysis of literacy practices as they occur in various forms of exchanges and interactions in space and time (Lundquist et al. 209; 221). I imagine students might produce both digital and hard copy documents. Students are asked to triangulate language and literacy practices: first, by mapping them out with images; second, by tagging the rhetorical context and situation in spaces and times; and third, by considering what rhetorical choices and performativity was necessitated in those spaces and times. Students, thus, would not only think about language on the move, but also consider their socio-cultural and political bodies on the move, carrying and performing meaning. Literacy narratives are stories becoming of social and cultural action—we are descendants of stories—but stories do not stay fixed in one location. Pennycook writes: “focus on movement takes us away from space being only about location, and instead draws attention to a relationship between time and space, to emergence, to a subject in process—performed rather preformed—to becoming” (140). From the cocina that my grandma and I spoke into these pages, I have composed; I am an agent in production of space and time. This type of agency is possible for students if they are provided the opportunity to see their place, knowledge, and meaning-making practices as viable options for strategic negotiations. In this way, we can increase geo-graphical, body-graphical, and material-graphical visibility. This is possible by making space and time, together, a focus of analysis.

## Conclusion

I am not inclined to believe that students are not aware of their social material world or that they are in need of consciousness-raising. Also, in the years that I have assigned the literacy narrative, no student has asked for a grade he or she did not earn. Perhaps, this reflects teaching styles, or the students being taught. Nonetheless, both students and I have learned, year after year, of the importance of telling and circulating our literacy stories. I conclude this article by reflecting on a 2015 IRB approved study I conducted in the LRV at the University of Texas-Rio Grande Valley (UTRGV). In 2016, UTRGV’s Strategic Analysis and Institutional Reporting (SAIR) office reported it had a headcount enrollment of 27,560 students. Almost 90% of the student

enrollment was Hispanic students and almost 93% of students were from the LRGV—Cameron (27%), Willacy (.5%), Hidalgo (61%), and Star (3.2%). I observed two first-year composition courses, conducted interviews, collected surveys, and held two group sessions. The students I worked with taught me that students are makers of place, shapers of subjectivities, and engineers of negotiated linguistic and literate practices. Below, I share some highlights from my research for the purpose of showing the possibilities of working from student's lived experiences with languages and literacies.

*Scene 1:* On my first day of classroom observations, the following played out:

[At one table]: *¿Como se escribe...?*

*Be | a | de | erre | e | a.* [Naming the letters in Spanish, another student at the table spells out the character name]

*Thank you.*

*De nada.*

[At the middle of the room]: *Mándame, tenemos que hacer everything, mam?*

[At another table]: *Badrea era...* [The student pauses and asks aloud]

*Como se dice?*

[Group members respond] *of the majority.*

[The student says to herself and others] *Como que no—la mayoria.*

[Processing in English and Spanish, the student writes in the notebook a sentence in English with side notes in Spanish]

In this bilingual scene, students' languages move with facility and assurance. Such students engaged in code switching scenes with phatic conversational fillers (pos, pues, etc.). But, notice, in this scene, the processes of linguistic partnering. It is much more than "pos" or "pues." At the center of this scene are student's decisions to construct discourse, to create meaning in ways they desire, and to represent intentionally that meaning by layering Spanish with English.

*Scene 2:* In talking with a student, Andrea, I asked her why she chose to write a sentence in English and add side notes in Spanish. Andrea explains:

When I think about things, I do it unconsciously in Spanish, because that is my first language...Sometimes I have to remind myself that I also need to think in English. But, still, I write side notes in Spanish, because some things just do not translate in English. If I write something in Spanish, it helps me remember what I was thinking about at the time more clearly.

Assimilation is not Andrea's primary goal. Students like Andrea share similarities with non-traditional and ESL students, but they do "fit neither the traditional ESL nor non-traditional student definition" (Newman 44). Here, Andrea is reconstructing note taking, and essentially the classroom, through bilingual negotiations. Andrea is also spatially and temporally aware. She describes:

At my grandparent's house, we all speak Spanish due to my grandma only understanding that language. My cousins and I speak to each other both in English and Spanish and sometimes even Spanglish. My friends vary, some speak only English, others speak only Spanish, but most of them speak both languages and very well.

Andrea, like the other students I interviewed, knew when and where they used Spanish and English. In our interviews and group sessions, students talked about the movement of language across physical and metaphorical linguistic crossings, the role sponsors of literacies played, and the importance of being bilingual in the LRGV. There was not one student was unaware of these aspects of language and literacies.

*Scene 3:* In conversations with another student, Abrienda, I recognized clearly that she had an understanding of her politic of flesh. She displayed this understanding in her first writing assignment for the class she was enrolled in.

I was born in [REDACTED], TX but I was raised in [REDACTED] Tamps. MX. I moved to the U.S.A. on January 3<sup>rd</sup>, 2011 with the idea of persuading my dreams. I was only 13 years old. I took the decision by myself; I told my parents and they didn't like the idea but I didn't care because I knew my future depended of my decisions and not theirs. I always thought that I had the right of having a better education in the USA then in Mexico. After begging my mother for a week to let me go with my aunt [REDACTED] [REDACTED], TX (worst idea ever!) she finally agreed, even though my mom and dad thought I was wasting my time. Living with my aunt was a horrible experience, she had a grand-daughter named [REDACTED] which is my same each and a nice named [REDACTED] which back then was 16 years old; either they liked me or not I had to live with them. The first day living with them was terrible, my aunt [REDACTED] gave me a mattress not a bed, just the mattress! She placed it outside the restroom in the hall, I had no privacy, or a closet; I had to put my clothes on plastic bags, next to the old mattress; besides no privacy [REDACTED] used to inspect my bags and take my earrings, necklaces, or anything she liked that was mine, all she said after I found that she did that was "I'll give it back to you, don't be mean", but that never happened.

Figure 2: A Sample of Abrienda's Writing



Abrienda states in her interview, “No quiero parar...everyone has their own expectations for me, but I have my own too.” This statement mirrors the language in her assignment. Abrienda moved back to the U.S. because she wanted to pursue her dreams of an education in the U.S. This choice was against her parent’s wishes. Abrienda would struggle from this point onward. Abrienda’s essay demonstrates clearly she is writing from her bodily experiences and ultimately using her experiences to make herself heard and visible.

There was at least one thematic thread that connected students like Abrienda in the study. For all, there was no real expectation for them to either pursue or succeed higher education. Each student internalized this expectation. Thus, they remain on the cusp of invisibility. Yet, they will continue to pursue higher education out of a desire to achieve more than what their parents did with the intention of giving back to their family’s and community. While Abrienda’s essay does not initially mention language or literacy, the construction of self-making and world-making is evidenced with the experiences she chooses to present. Imagine the possibilities if Abrienda was provided the opportunity to explore herself in relation to literacy and language.

I walked the halls of UTRGV every morning for a semester. Every corner I walked, I heard students in dialogue, using Spanish, or Spanish and English, but never solely in English. This bilingualism says something about the LRGV and the capacity of students to make place out of their knowledge and meaning-making practices in institutional spaces. The students I worked with are aware of their social and material environment, of how contingent and situational their ethos and meaning-making practices are, and how they were creating new trajectories. I believe the students in the halls are as well. The literacy narratives I have collected differ; they matter; and they open up opportunities and possibilities. Many of the interviews and group sessions with students were focused on being heard and seen. The students in the hallways everyday were making themselves heard and seen. The idea of “on the cusp of invisibility” emerged from these conversations with students who shared their stories of being silenced or made to feel invisible by “white people” or not having experienced critical conversations of Mexican Americans in the LRGV within classrooms. As educators, we are implicated in this way, to develop pedagogies and curricula that do not silence or make students feel invisible.

For students like me whose languages, literacies, and access are denied, literacy narratives matter. What is scalable in literacy narratives is human practice that is in polylog with and intertextualized in histories, memories, and stories. Literacy narratives ask students to wrestle with ideas of being and knowing and doing and becoming, of translating and shuffling between selves, through language and literacy

differences. I learned and experienced this transformation with my grandma in her cocina and on our walks. Her stories situated me within histories and memories and today I participate in meaning-and-memory-making practices that keep those words of my grandma—“entiendes,” “para que sepas y aprendes,” and “no te dejes”—alive and a viable strategy for agency and social and cultural action. Literacy narratives require students to interpret and communicate those experiences within an appropriate genre and with a strategic stance, and to develop a form and style of narrative that is suitable for potential audiences. What the rhetoric of literacy narratives occasions is listening, well and deeply, para que sepas y aprendes.

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