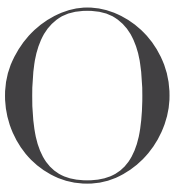


Trans-ing Our Way through Matter and Meaning

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ur conception of the transnational has shifted dramatically over the last twenty years, as the research reported in this special issue readily demonstrates. When I first invoked the term in *Close to Home: Oral and Literate Practices in a Transnational Mexican Community*, an ethnographic study of undocumented Mexican immigrants and their children in the late 1980s, I used it to describe a social network scattered across two research sites located in an isolated village in Mexico and a sprawling Mexican immigrant community in Chicago. My focus was on the linguistic relationship that bound them together socially and culturally across vast expanses of physical space, one best reflected in the everyday conversations they shared and the letters they wrote to one another. Although I examined how discursive practices shift generationally and as a consequence of travel across two nation states, the research sites rather than their literacy practices informed my conception of the transnational.

As this special issue confirms, conceptions of the transnational in composition and literacy studies are still grounded in “systems of social relations that move literacy across borders” (VI), but the focus has been amplified to include studies of the ways communication technology has complicated their formation in both localized and globalized contexts that involve individuals from migrant and immigrant, as well as international, communities. As a consequence, researchers are now able to study how individuals entangled in transnational circuits use technological advances that were not in place when I collected data for *Close to Home*. In this special issue, for example, Laila Z. Al-Salmi and Patrick H. Smith insightfully examine how parents use digital technologies to participate in and “support their children’s developing biliteracy in Arabic and English” in the course of shaping their own adult literacies (48). The growing interest in transnational inquiry has also made it possible to develop the series of principles that the editors use to frame the studies in this special issue. In the rest of my reflection, I will engage three of these principles (space does not allow me to do more) to illustrate our changing perspective on the transnational as framed by the editors and to ponder the ways in which the essays in this special issue complicate it further.

While I empathize with the contention that the transnational is not a research site but “a way of looking at literacy” (VII-VIII), I would argue that it is necessarily both and more. This is vividly demonstrated in Karen Barad’s work when she argues that “both the phenomenon and the embodied concepts that are used to describe [it] are conditioned by one and the same apparatus” (174). In other words, the apparatus (the theoretical or methodological tool) is not external to the phenomenon itself (the literacy practices being studied). There is always an irreducible connection between matter and meaning reflected across any research site, the data collected, and the apparatus (or way of

looking) used to access the site and interpret the data. In her fascinating study of a failed effort by Korean students to establish a translingual and transcultural space at the university they attend, for example, Yu-Kyung Kang uses the theoretical/methodological concept of *localization* to highlight the contradictions that students faced as a consequence of experiencing a very different “local” than the one experienced by non-Korean students unwilling or unable (it’s a two-way street, of course) to enter the third space Korean students collectively established on campus.

Moreover, while “transnational inquiry connects micro- and macro-level social practices” and “the relationship of grassroots activity to macro-level processes is constitutive of the term transnational” (VIII-IX), I would argue that we have to be careful to disrupt this binary by acknowledging the ways in which meso-level social practices inform a transnational perspective as well. There is indeed a vast territory available to researchers between the micro (local) and the macro (global) that is potentially elided when we focus our energies on the endpoints of the continuum that micro and macro set up. This special issue is rife with examples of meso-level practices and processes, among them the contexts in which Kang conducts her study and which she describes as “both discretely and simultaneously local, global, and somewhere in-between” (87). In her article, Angela Rounsaville also meticulously destabilizes the micro/macro binary by treating the Intensive English Program she is studying as an institutional third space where “the transnational political economy of English literacy is negotiated discursively” through teacher and student talk at an institute situated on “the periphery of US higher education” (68).

Finally, it is true that we must locate language at the very center of any analysis because it inevitably informs the varied patterns that transnational literacy practices take, but as I argue in a forthcoming book (Guerra, *Language*), language is inextricably tangled up with such other dimensions as culture, identity, and citizenship. For this reason, I believe that a singular focus on the transnational must be disrupted by a parallel focus on the translingual and the transcultural. In his examination of the *immigrant bargain* as a transnational migration narrative that legitimizes the high hopes parents have for their children, Steven Alvarez painstakingly engages in this process by unpacking a translanguaging event during which a student produces a translingual text. On the other hand, Kang’s study vividly illustrates how the translingual and transcultural sometimes fail to flourish by highlighting a university’s inability to establish a truly diverse campus environment because, like most institutions of higher education, it is not yet prepared to address the dramatic demographic changes taking place in this country.

If we hope to complicate our analysis and interpretation of the transnational, we need simultaneously to acknowledge and to extend the work of the various scholars in this special issue by continually expanding our earlier *and* present conceptions of this particular “way of looking” (VII) in ways that tactically and strategically serve our theoretical, research and educational needs. The payoff, as the introduction and articles in this special issue demonstrate, will not only provide us with greater insight into the challenges our students encounter in translingual, transcultural, and transnational contexts; it will also inform the theoretical perspectives and the methodological tools we develop and use, as well as the research sites we select, when we work to better understand the varied ways in which language and cultural differences intersect in a transnationally volatile world.

WORKS CITED

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