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Politics of Transnational Higher Education Writing Research: Complexities, Entanglements and Messiness

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Key Theoretical Frames

1. An emerging translanguingual approach to language and literacy (as represented in the work of Horner, Lu, Royster, and Trimbur, “Language”; Horner and Lu, *Translingual Work in Composition*; Canagarajah; Lee and many others). This approach challenges common dispositions toward language difference and heterogeneity in the writing classroom as being among problems to be resolved or individual rights to be tolerated and instead, recognizes such difference as an epistemological “resource” to be promoted and productively utilized.
2. I build on the work of critical sociolinguist and linguistic anthropologist Jan Blommaert, and specifically his theorization of a “sociolinguistic of mobility”, which is by and large concerned with concrete and mobile language *resources* (i.e. specific registers, genres, practices, and varieties) in real historical, sociocultural, economic, and political contexts—and not languages as discrete, easily identifiable, and immobile objects (*The Sociolinguistics of Globalization* 5).
3. Transnational writing research that problematizes the fixity and boundedness of social categories, such as culture, community and nation-state, and instead makes more visible their dynamic making and remaking as deeply entangled with ever-changing contexts, physical bodies, subjectivities, resources, and ecologies without losing sight of historical relations of domination and difference. (You; Lorimer; Fraiberg et al.)

Glossary of Key Concepts:

1. Language ideology: is a particularly difficult and contested term. However, my own use of the term language ideology in this paper emphasizes the dialectical relation between social, cultural, discursive, and linguistic practices emergent in contact situations and brings together both the micro- of lived experiences and communicative action on one hand and the macro- considerations of power in a global multilingual world on another. This paper is based on a larger study that explores the nature and working of language ideology in the context of college composition instruction and this is made possible in this paper through an extensive analysis of multilingual students’ ways of thinking about language in the academic English writing classroom in relation to their view of the actual workings of language in the real world.
2. Language Resources: Aligning with contemporary critical sociolinguistic scholarship (e.g. Blommaert, *Sociolinguistics of Globalization*; Blommaert and Backus,

“Superdiverse Repertoires”; Pennycook, *Global Englishes*; Canagarajah, *Translingual Literacy*), I view language resources as emergent, mobile, having their source in literate individual’s life history and lived social experiences and in their concrete labor of achieving successful communication rather than general abstract, circumscribed possessions uniformly shared by all members of a largely fixed community. As Blommaert and Backus reminds us in “Superdiverse Repertoires and the Individual” the total complexes of traces of power involved in language and literacy work that we call repertoires, which are never durable but rather changing “in shape and value over one’s lifetime” are concrete “record of [such] mobility” and its different patterns, of the constant and inevitable “movement of people, language resources, social arenas, technologies of learning and learning environments” (2012, 27).

Working Draft of Research Text

Research Aims and Context

This project builds on and further extends growing scholarly conversations in rhetoric and composition and new literacy studies (to name a few, Leung and Street *English: A Changing Medium for Education*; Horner and Kopelson *Reworking English*; Canagarajah *Literacy as Translingual Practice*) that call for considerably reconstituting and reworking English as constantly and inevitably transforming and transformed by specific enactments of cultural and sociolinguistic identities and spatial-temporal contexts of use. It explores how writing students with diverse sociocultural experiences and language affiliations strive to reconcile perduring institutionalized monolingual representations of the oneness of academic written English on the one hand, and their own ideological orientation and commitment toward mobilizing the diverse ways of using English and other language resources in their repertoire as fluid, malleable, and intermingling in their academic work, on the other. Closely examining intersections and divergences in the treatment of language difference at two writing programs with disparate language policies and demographic arrangements in opposite parts of the globe, this study captures the challenges and possibilities of the kind of laborious negotiations students constantly enact but also the direct material consequences of those for their complex identities, academic advancement, and professional aspirations. Some of the research questions this study addresses are:

- What understandings of and practices with language circulate among and around young university-level writers?
- How do these writers negotiate the multiplicity and contestation in understandings of and practices with language in their local ecologies?
- What are the implications of the successes and struggles these university-level writers experience for the study and teaching of writing?

Current Study

This paper is based on the findings of a six-year transnational ethnographic study collected from urban university campuses in two superdiverse cities, the capital city of Lebanon, Beirut, and the largest city in Washington State, Seattle. The present ethnographic study is based on semi-structured interviews with university writing students from a variety of disciplines and their teachers. The analysis in this project also emerged from the triangulation of a multiplicity of data sources, such as official institutional documents (e.g. mission statements, diversity statements, presidents' speeches, university-wide and program-specific webpages, etc.), instructional materials (e.g. textbooks, lesson plans, assignment prompts, rubrics, etc.), and classroom observations.

From Beirut to Seattle: Ongoing Reflections

I've been engaging in cross-border work between Lebanon and the United States over the past decade or so. Writing from the nexus of this dual membership, I attempt to bridge current developments in U.S. scholarship on a translingual orientation to English language and literacy education (Canagarajah 2013; Horner et al. 2011; Horner and Tertreault 2017; Lee 2017) with contemporary global classroom realities. Here I reflect back on my experiences observing, interviewing and collecting various written materials from 91 students and 25 teachers in the superdiverse cities of Beirut, the capital of Lebanon, and Seattle, the largest metropolitan area in the Pacific Northwest region of the U.S. My narrative brings to light the considerable challenges in doing transnational ethnographic research, which has required me to "slow down" (Sayer 2012, p. 203), listen with intent, and engage in an ongoing process of reflexivity as I looked at how language ideologies and practices might be similar or vary across sites and teachers in superdiverse settings.

As a U.S. trained researcher exploring the push-and-pull dynamics of competing language ideologies in the teaching and learning of English in multilingual contexts, I noticed that I too, just like my student and teacher participants, was forced to navigate the tensions and complexities of negotiating diverse ideologies, identities, and power relations and their associated representations, practices, and discourses. In writing about the writing teachers in both geographic locations in this project, their classrooms and students, I was constantly shuttling between multiple roles. My main goal was to rigorously understand, explore, and explain the diverse, and often contradictory, roles, manifestations, and workings of the local language ideologies that are vibrant and constantly circulating among and around my participants. At times, I took the role of what Karen Lundsford (2012) describes as an "information broker", constantly translating and shuttling new knowledge, discourses, and underlying assumptions between national and international research networks (221). At other times, I was torn between taking up the role of a participant observer reporting on the nature and workings of local language ideologies in each context, on one hand, and, on another hand, that of an activist deliberately intervening in and rewriting the dominant language ideologies that these teachers seem to internalize, subscribe to and perpetuate. I am hoping to further explore how my own ongoing investments in translingual understandings of language and its teaching and how my embodied "translingual and transdialectic experiences", histories, and identities (Motha et al. 2012, p.14), which clashed with the more conventional views of the qualified and experienced writing teachers I was working with, may have shaped the transnational ethnographic insights I produced.

Born and raised in Lebanon, I experienced high in-group solidarity and affiliation with the research community as a once insider to the four-year American style university, both schooled and held a three-year teaching position there. In fact, I enjoyed close ties with the majority of my teaching participants who were once colleagues or even my own college-level language and writing teachers. With regards to my work in Seattle, I also had personal connections to the institution under exploration in this project and to teachers in the writing program there, most of whom were either colleagues or teacher candidates I had mentored and trained in a graduate pedagogy course. However, I was a relatively novice ethnographer in Seattle still discovering and learning about this research community and had to locate my own information brokers in order to delve deeper into the specific historical, social, cultural, and political contexts that have shaped local assumptions about and responses to language and its difference. Enjoying these different levels of insider/outsider statuses did not automatically grant me expertise in the language hierarchies, policies, and practices I end up describing in both locales, but it did give me a vantage point from where I could be more cognizant of the nature of the explicit and tacit language assumptions and representations structuring, informing and at times constraining my teaching participants' linguistic and professional identities and pedagogical practices in their English classrooms.

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