

Pedagogies of the Home and International Schools: New Models for (Inter) Cultural Education?

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Abstract: As an educator at an international school located in a pre-dominantly Balkan cultural milieu, I see myself crossing several contact zones (sometimes more than one, simultaneously). While there is a dangerous sense of enjoyment that comes with this sort of 'cultural ventriloquism', on the behalf of said practitioner, I cannot but help and wonder about its long-term effects. Exacted through the medium of the English language, students are encouraged to live out in what seems like a cultural safe-haven: as they are continuously reminded of dominant social paradigms (gender, race and ethnicity, sexuality, religion, to name a few) and their operational value within 'an imagined international community', the cultural identity of their discourse becomes foreign, un-Balkan, yet also un-English (perhaps a quiet cosmopolitan? a delocalized 'other'?). They seem to remain dwellers of a cushioned 'non-place', a cultural contact zone within a larger contact area, for the duration of their studies, and even beyond.

Key words: contact zone, cultural ventriloquism, non-places, heterotopias, quiet cosmopolitan, transnational denizenship, pedagogies of the home

Introduction:

Constructing a cultural identity is as easy as mastering the nuances of a foreign language while travelling to the country of its origin on an eight-hour flight. Indeed, there are gifted individuals among us who are able to carry out such a feat in less than eight hours. (Fortunately or not, they are few in number.) However, for most of us, nowadays, the process of constructing our cultural 'selves' is the journey of a lifetime, as we struggle to position ourselves within a cultural space that is no longer (re)presented as monolithically uniform. We constantly enter battles with our cultural heritage (who we were before we were 'we' or 'I') and our cultural responses (who 'we' or 'I' are now that we contribute to the 'living out' of the said cultural legacy), since for the most part these two notions are at odds with each other. In other words, we might be born into a certain cultural group which, in turn, due to various social, political, and or religious circumstances may have distinctly reshaped and restructured its beliefs and customs, so that it strikes the outsider as non-existent in the first place. Therefore, when such individuals decide to reaffirm their cultural identity against the background of strong ties to the indigenous culture they were born into and the greater social milieu they had assimilated to (as a result of education, religious conversion, power accessibility, etc.) the outcome may prove disheartening, both to the individuals in question, and to the larger social and familial environments. As an educator at an international school located in a pre-dominantly Balkan cultural milieu, I see myself crossing several contact zones (sometimes more than one, simultaneously). Cultural historian Mary Louise Pratt was the one who originally coined the term 'contact zone' (which seems to have become over the years inextricably tied to the proliferation and understanding of auto/ethnographic narratives), herself searching for a descriptively dynamic way to approach the study of social and personal relations amidst the intersecting frontiers of spaces marked by colonial encounters. In her work on the relationship between travel writing and colonized historical discourse, titled *Imperial Eyes: Travel Writing and Transculturation*, Pratt defines *the contact zone* as "the space of colonial encounters, the space in which peoples geographically and historically separated come into contact with each other and establish ongoing relations, usually involving conditions of coercion, radical inequality and intractable conflict." (Pratt, 1992, 6) By choosing a denominator ('contact') that is closer to linguistics than traditional historical analysis, Pratt hopes to bring into perspective the relational side to subject formation within the terrain of the colonized frontiers, therefore allowing for the production and distribution of auto/ethnographic 'expressions' that are 'heterogeneous' in structure, idiom and reception.

While there is a dangerous sense of enjoyment that comes with any sort of 'cultural ventriloquism', border-crossing, or bo(a)rding, so to speak, on the behalf of said practitioner, I cannot but help and wonder about its long-term effects. Exacted through the medium of the English language, students at international schools are encouraged to live out in what seems like a cultural safe-haven: as they are continuously reminded of dominant social paradigms (gender, race and ethnicity, sexuality, religion, to name a few) and their operational value within 'an imagined international community', the cultural identity of their discourse becomes foreign, un-

Balkan, yet also un-English (perhaps a quiet cosmopolitan? a delocalized 'other' in pursuit of global human agency?). Some recent scholarship might go as far as to suggest that international schools are not unlike what French scholar Michel Foucault deemed 'heterotopias', or, non-hegemonically arranged spaces which operate under the condition of 'otherness'. (Foucault 1986) As such, their function is to join together, on the one hand, utopian perspectives, and on the other, real spaces, intellectual or physical, which in turn, stand as sites of cultural otherness, linked yet produced in opposition to cultural hegemonies. Hence, cemeteries, gardens, movies, brothels, boarding schools. And even if the daily life of individuals in one such space is controlled, according to Foucault, by the bell and not the whistle, in truth, local students at international schools in the Balkans seem to remain dwellers of a cushioned 'non-place' (Augé, 1995), a cultural contact zone within a larger contact area, for the duration of their studies, and even beyond. And with that, dangerously removed from any prospect of living an integrated cultural life.

In lieu of a biographical note

When I graduated from the Department of English at the Faculty of Philology within the framework of the State University in Skopje, almost a decade ago, I was certain of two things: a.) I wanted to teach literary texts (no grammar, no tenses) and b.) I wished to work solely within the medium of English. With this in mind, I applied for a position at then one of a few international high schools in Macedonia, Nova High School. Having successfully completed Professor Ekaterina Babamova's graduation course in ELT Methodology, I felt up to the challenge: I believed I had acquired the necessary tools that would guide me on this new path. I had also, prior to enrolling at the Faculty of Philology, graduated from a US high school, on US soil, thus the added confidence. Perhaps even cockiness. In October of 2000, I was assigned two classes, nominally called English 9 Regular and English 12. The former comprised of students (sans three) who had recently graduated from state primary schools in Macedonia, whereas the latter consisted of fifteen students who were a part of the very first class of students the said high school had enrolled in September of 1997, when the school opened its doors for the first time. Oddly enough, or so it seemed, the latter group was the more culturally diverse one, not just in terms of the ethnicity pool but also in terms of citizenship. During that very same academic year, both classes allowed me to witness a few key insights about cultural instruction in English, as well as English cultural instruction. Although the 9th graders, for instance, had nearly polished syntax, their communal insights were tied to a Macedonian context; if we were going to make any progress with a Renaissance play or a contemporary American short story, I had to engage with them at a 'local level'. Which in turn, would ask for a comparativist method, and a good deal of popular culture immersion. Whereas, with the 12th graders, whose English grammar skills were picked up, peace-meal by peace-meal, from native speakers who taught at this school or at various other international schools abroad that these students had attended prior to transferring, the communal insights were so varied and versatile, that there seemed to be no common denominator. These 'third culture kids', or better, these 'hybrid cosmopolitans' could relate to everything and nothing; it all seemed too easy, or perhaps too vast.

Since then, the school's student population, in particular the one relating to the high school division, has quadrupled; numbers aside, what has struck me, and those who have taught/teach, especially within the Language Arts Department, is the overwhelming change local students (Macedonians, Albanians, Turks, Roma) who matriculate at Nova International Schools bring with them, through distinct epistemologies and pedagogies, which allows them to stay connected locally while thinking and writing and being internationally. Again, this staggering change, which could and should be examined thoroughly through apt statistical data, based on entrance exams' results and interview notes, has allowed me to conceptualize, as well as further explore, the following research questions:

1. By attempting a delocalized 'territory of culture' through their respective missions and objectives, do international schools in the Balkans contribute to a (re)creation of a 'pseudo nation-state scenario'?
2. Even so, could their products (students) legitimately question the unspoken acceptance and affirmation of culturally determined roles, imposed on Balkan individuality by various mechanisms of compliance (governmental decisions, communal practices, tradition and gossip)?
3. Yet, when all is said and done, who is to implement a newly designed cultural mythos: individuals or institutions?

On that note, in September 2005, upon return from graduate school, I started a project with a group of 25 entering 9th graders (freshmen), tentatively embedded within the context of our English 9 Honors class, yet entirely for extra credit. Throughout the 4 years I spent with this group, which indeed changed in size and circumstance, guiding them towards a successful completion of an Advanced Placement (AP) English Literature and Composition class, this 'pet project' of mine, became our focal point of discussion, immersion and self-assessment; in turn, giving birth to student-initiated projects, such as the one I will discuss later on in the text.

'Journal Keeping' Project: a 'quilted' way towards a reciprocal cultural methodology

The histories and lives of international students, in particular local kids from multicultural milieus attending/attempting an international education setting, are not (well) represented in the local cultural policies. Since said students have optioned out, for various reasons, to attend private schools (often deemed elitist and viewed by the public as 'the breeding grounds for snobs'), their presence within a non-state education facility for the duration of four years, resembles, to a point, a prolonged banishment from all matters relevant to an integrated communal life. In other words, the local community does not feel responsible for their 'cultural upkeep' as they no longer exist as its young offspring. To take it a step further, according to French thinker and scholar Michel Foucault, what we are facing in this case is another example of the intricate relationship(s) existing between the production of various systems of knowledge (i.e., discourses) and the production of power within a social framework. That is to say, each society exerts different rules and regulations that would 'lawfully' police and discipline 'undesired' discourses, thus maintaining its hold on power. Those who are considered a viable threat to the dominant discourse and its tight grip on social structures may be dismissed as 'mad', 'non-conforming', to say the least. Classifying non-conforming individuals as mad eases the 'burden' of 'dealing with them'; they could be almost surgically removed from the cultural unconscious, leaving a space which is momentarily filled up by subjects that have been instructed to conform to the norms and ideals of the dominant discourse. (However, even in a 'well-rounded' oppressive social framework there is a push by the marginalized 'mad subjects' to re-claim/re-map this space which has been taken away from them.)

To make matters worse, once these students enter the 'hallowed halls' of international schools, they expect an unconditional welcome and a chance to participate and engage, fully, within a more or less, imagined international community that would not shun their choice of being there. The expectations are great, perhaps even illusionary, hence the disappointment, when it comes, hits hard. Just because a community is more versed in politically correct discourse does not mean that it is unequivocally open and forthcoming and giving, or for that matter, ready to welcome anyone unconditionally. While students at international schools in the Balkans are indeed taken care of, namely, looked upon as individuals and not mere numbers, many international schools, due to the very nature of their missions and objectives, and endowments, focus the bulk of their resources on a sad but palpable fact, which can be best summed up as 'teaching students to be quiet cosmopolitans', which in turn amounts to the creation of a subculture that ironically de-personalizes education while attempting to guide and foster intellect. This dangerous practice, whether we wish to admit to it or not, does double-harm: for one, it requires of students to see themselves as empty vessels, stripped off cultural-familial, raced, or gendered knowledge of their past (Thus, in the case of local students, there is a 'twice removed' emptying which takes place) (Delgado Bernal, 2002, 2006). Consequently, it convinces students that only a positivist type of knowledge (white, male, Western) can help them succeed and thus enroll, with a scholarship, at a prestigious university abroad, which is still the principal reason why most local students (and their families) make a leap of faith and apply to international schools in the first place. While I did/do understand the reality of conformity and acculturation, I wanted to find a way, through differentiated instruction, which could allow me to bequeath my students with a means that would in turn help them understand the complexities of their two communities: *the home-base and the school environment; one primarily oral, the other unquestioningly written.*

In a sense, I see now that I was attempting a kind of *auto/ethnographic self-recovery*: i.e., more than a textual representation of auto-ethno-biographical modes of contact for and in multi-vocal settings. According to ethnographer Deborah E. Reed Danahay, the editor of the first (and to this day, only) anthological work that examines this hybrid form of life-writing ethnography, titled *Auto/Ethnography: Rewriting the Self and the Social*, 'autoethnography' is a boundary-crossing practice and product, simultaneously acting out the method behind the concept; as a method and a text, the act of auto/ethnographic representing fuses "both a postmodern ethnography, in which the realist conventions and objective observer position of standard ethnography have been called into question, and a postmodern autobiography, in which the notion of the coherent, individual self has been similarly called into question." (Reed Danahay, 1997, 2) As a result, whether or not the astute literary critic or social historian decide, respectfully, to stake their claim either with the autobiographic or the ethnographic side of the hybrid-form, 'auto/ethnography' thwarts conventional story-telling practices (of the 'realist school') by trespassing cultural and social boundaries, thus exerting its presence in "form of a self-narrative that places the self in a social context." (9)

Enter: 'journal keeping'.

Cultural historian Pierre Nora examined the relationship that exists between historical investment and individual memory, offering a reading of 'historical truths' and 'remembered events' through **lieux de mémoire**, that is, 'sites of memory' which "originate with the sense that there is no spontaneous memory, that we must deliberately create archives, maintain anniversaries, organize celebrations, pronounce eulogies, and notarize bills

because such activities no longer occur naturally.” (Nora, 1989, 12) Within contemporary social practices, such ‘sites of memory’ appear to be a necessity, a final defense against misrepresentation and unilateral polemics in epistemologies and pedagogies. As children of history and memory, **lieux de mémoire**, according to Nora, are unlike any previously encountered type of history, ancient or modern, since contrary to historical objects, they are without a referent in reality. However, Nora is quick to point out that this unique trait does not leave the ‘sites of memory’ without a referent all-together; **lieux de mémoire** are their own referents. Namely, they constitute a double act: they are “a site of excess closed upon itself, concentrated in its own name, but also forever open to the full range of its possible significations.” (24) Bearing this in mind, I wanted to attempt a sort of historical recovery filtered through the tools of feminist scholarship, hoping to show my students an example of one such ‘site of memory’; and with that, a way out of the slums of ‘quiet cosmopolitanism’ and into (perhaps) the alertness of ‘transnational cultural denizenship’ (Buff, 2001).

Initially conceived as an attempt to showcase the value of written discourse, while drawing on the abundance of orally transmitted knowledge my students had grown up with, I introduced the students to the storytelling method of what Lomas and Joysmith (2005) term as ‘*testimonio*’: an ethnographic genre/strategy which allows the voiceless political subject – the local student – the necessary agency to account for the connections that exist between lived experience and social (education) context.³¹ Namely, for a semester, my 9th grade class, each Friday, worked on a reflection piece. At first, most preferred to work on their own, while with time, groups started to form. The goal in mind: to think of a way in which their own varied experiences connect them to the particular reading of the week, may it be a poem, a short story, a play or a chapter/chapters of a novel. Thus, to use the allotted class time, and write down, in the English of their choice, the said reflection. Each student had decided to ‘safe keep’ his or her own reflection pieces in a folder, or a file, or even a notepad. There was no word limit. No passing or failing grade, and no requirement deadline for a submission. Only a hopefulness, that with time, each student may choose to share his or her own piece with someone else. At the end of the semester, I had also hoped that each student would choose a piece to place on the class’ cork board, so that we could all part-take in a kind of ‘testimonial’, a quilt-making record of our unhindered critical journey through a series of English texts, i.e., texts written in the English language.

A few things occurred: the contact zone which this side-project carved out presented itself as the most rewarding and equally the most challenging one I had ever dwelled into. Namely, the project took on a life of its own, branching out in ways I had not anticipated or even hoped for. Freed from the burden of testing and grading, or excessive monitoring, the quality of writing students presented had created a sense of reciprocity, both in their distinctive relationship to each other, as peers and neighbours, and in their relationship to writing, speaking, listening and thinking in English, now the formative medium of their life in international education. Students started keeping personal blogs, they wrote Facebook notes, msn-ed their thoughts, frustrations, reflections, dilemmas. When the academic semester came to an end, they asked if we could continue with our ‘Friday project’, even if it was not possible to dedicate each Friday to its unfolding. We could meet after school, on Saturdays, during breaks, they suggested. And we did.

For the next four academic years, as they matriculated through the Nova Language Arts curriculum, these 25 local students (and in time 10 more ‘transfers’), wrote about the various points of intersectionality experienced by a Balkan native when facing the trials and tribulations of education in an international school context. In turn, this empowering practice, unburdened by the weights of grades and arbitration, propelled their written discourse in ways that no class-bound, test-teaching instruction could. In a sense, their ‘*testimonio*’ storytelling practice, allowed them to conceptualize the validity of lived knowledge (a Roma girl from Tetovo) as a key strategy in the process of any scholarly enquiry (racial formation in contemporary social practices). For a class, (and a grade), over the years, they did produce nuanced and thoughtfully researched papers on an array of topics, from the seemingly mundane enquiry into popular culture’s archetypes (think: *The Simpsons*), all the way to high-brow assertions on the relationship between the modern novel and masculinity discourses (think: Joyce). Not to mention, the college-application essays, and the strength of their argumentation, as individuals. For themselves, and their own contact zone, which seemed to expand with time, they initiated auxiliary projects that expanded the ‘territory of culture’ realm of the school, such as the MIR Celebrating Literacy Project, The on-line Student-Reviewed Fanzine (The Discourse Detectives), The Reading Group Fellowship. All these projects incorporate a reciprocal cultural methodology, thus allowing all participants to bear witness to their own

³¹ Here, I’d like to thank the work of a colleague, Dr. Judith Flores Carmona, formerly of The University of Utah, and now with Hampshire College, for encouraging me to make such an inter-cultural connection, one that I otherwise would not have made, had I been teaching at a state school, or at a local university. Her own work in the Adelante Oral Histories Project (AOHP) gave me the impetus and the strength to draw on the teachings of hooks, Friere, Anzaldua, as well as Elizabeta Sheleva, and see the many common themes which exist between the pedagogy of the oppressed and the reciprocal methodology in international education.

becoming of both subjects and objects of their own enquiry. And all have a longer shelf life than an academic semester. However, with all said and done, I am still concerned about the following long-term effects, namely as limitations and/or impetuses for further research:

1. While inspirational education does propel change, when exacted through the medium of a colonizing language and culture, could it affect real change within the leakage of the pipeline of local identity formation?
2. If so, by advocating for a 'pedagogy of the home' (Delgado Bernal, 2001, 2002), aren't we, (locally-affiliated) teachers and educators in international education, reverting to an epistemology that in turn would dispossess our students from that very home we had set out to promote, and turn them into vulnerable observers (Behar, 1996), that is, reflexive insiders/outsideers bound by the within (Hill Collins, 1990, 1991)?

In Lieu of a Conclusion

Without the intention or the pretext of further colonization, of pedagogies or epistemologies, I do believe that culturally reciprocal methodology is the only viable means, present out there for us, to create dialogue amidst students from various and varied cultural and social milieus, yet co-habiting the same education space. What I am still debating over, however, is (the extent of) the role English language instruction should play in the creation of such an educational mythos

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