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Theorizing Transnational Language Teacher (Educator) Identities: An Autoethnographic Study of a Border Dweller

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This autoethnographic study chronicles and explores some of the lived experiences of an English language teacher (educator) as she grappled with and tried to make sense of her transnational identities and positionings. The aim of this research was to gain insight into my transnationality, in order both to better inform my beliefs and practices as an educator, and to highlight the value of exploring transnationality as an important dimension in language teacher identity (LTI) construction. Drawing on autobiographical writing and artwork as data sources, constant comparison and line-by-line analysis were employed to identify themes in the data, which were synthesized with relevant literature to make sense of and theorize my transnational LTIs. Featuring theme-focused experiences from my life, findings are organized in a past-present-future structure representing a journey towards self-acceptance and empowerment. Major insights gained from this research include: (a) social categorization, whether conferring high or low status, is a form of objectification, closely linked to the concept of (un)desire; (b) viewing emotions as signals of sites of growth can help to free us from emotional overwhelm; and (c) identifying and acknowledging our strengths can emancipate us from unjust power dynamics and empower others to do the same. Implications for integrating LTI and transnational LTI exploration into language teacher education are discussed.

INTRODUCTION

Of such discordant elements to produce a harmonious whole. (Woolsey, 1899/Data Source, *Poem*, 2019)

When I write, I feel alive. I feel powerful... Writing is my emancipation. (Data Source, *The story of my writing life*, 2018)

I begin with these two epigraphs because they symbolize the journey I have taken through this research. The first, written over a century ago by my great-grandmother in her thesis focusing on race relations and reproduced as the title of a poem in which I explore my language teacher identity (LTI), connects me to my roots, reminding me that identity is transgenerationally- and temporally-constructed; it will always be entwined with and built upon those gone before, which acts as a precious source of empowerment. The second, written a few years ago, represents the power of writing as a way of knowing (Park, 2013b) and means of emancipation.

In this research I attempt to theorize my own identities as a transnational language teacher (educator). I take an autoethnographic approach (Bishop, 2021; Ellis et al., 2011) because it facilitates the use of writing as a way of knowing (Park, 2013b) and allows for the framing of identity construction as a storied journey, with a past, present and future. In understanding my transnational identities and how they have developed over time, I can more intentionally exercise agency in imagining and enacting the kind of LTIs that align with my goals to emancipate myself from destructive power dynamics. This research reveals insights

into transnationality as a dimension worthy of exploration (Gu & Canagarajah, 2018) and illustrates the merits of engaging in LTI exploration in language teacher education (LTE) programs (Fairley, 2020; Varghese et al., 2016a; Yazan, 2019).

LITERATURE REVIEW

Language Teacher Identity

LTI has become a major focus of research in the TESOL field over the past few decades, with several special issues and edited volumes recently dedicated to the topic (Barkhuizen, 2016b; De Costa & Norton, 2017b; Lindahl & Yazan, 2019; Varghese et al., 2016b). This interest emerged with the poststructuralist turn, which posited that identity is not a fixed, unmalleable or solely individual entity as it had previously been viewed (Norton, 2013). Rather, identity is fluid, complex, multiple, and contradictory, individually as well as socially and discursively (co)-constructed, and continually shifting—a process of *becoming* (Barkhuizen, 2016b; Clarke, 2008; Edwards & Burns, 2016; Norton, 2013; Varghese et al., 2016a). LTIs are imagined, practiced, performed, claimed, and ascribed, and each of these identities shapes and is shaped by the others (Kelly, 2018; Lawrence & Nagashima, 2020; Varghese et al., 2005). In other words, identity *is* malleable, and thus an important subject for educators to explore, especially in our aspirations to become more intentional and agentic in the LTIs we imagine, practice, perform and claim for ourselves (Fairley, 2020).

Power, Criticality and Agency in Language Teacher Identity Construction

Because the processes of identity construction are happening in particular contexts at particular times (Edwards & Burns, 2016; Haneda & Sherman, 2016), and as such, are shaped by various, often harmful, power differentials at play, LTI scholars advocate the need for criticality in LTI exploration (Yazan, 2019). Power differentials are operating at the macro/global and societal levels; at the meso/institutional levels; and at the micro/classroom levels (De Costa & Norton, 2017a). As such, they interact with identity categories such as race, gender, social class, sexuality and native speaker status, as well as the intersectionalities of these categories (Lawrence & Nagashima, 2020). These power differentials also profoundly affect agency (Kumaravadivelu, 2016), which can be defined as “the capacity of people to act purposefully and reflectively on their world” (Rogers & Wetzell, 2013, p. 63). As Kumaravadivelu explains, coloniality continues to operate in TESOL circles in powerful ways, determining who is accepted as a legitimate English speaker and teacher and dictating where textbooks and materials can be developed, who can publish, who can get a teaching job, and how English should be taught. Thus, it is crucial to develop an awareness of how these power differentials operate, including the discourses that shape them, if we want the individual, and especially the *subaltern* (Kumaravadivelu, 2016), to be able to speak back to these power differentials and make social change happen.

Transnationality as an Important Dimension of Language Teacher Identity

Transnationality can be broadly defined as the crossing of national borders, whether physically or virtually, and the influences resulting from these border crossings. In her definition, Kasun

(2017) further emphasizes “the inherently unbordered social practices in the world and their situatedness among the structures that have governing power over those practices” (p. 55). In other words, transnationality at once problematizes nationality as a binary or fixed category and is also itself problematized by the unequal power differentials inherent in the influences resulting from transnational interactions in an increasingly globalized world. Thus, although Kasun warns that we need to be careful of romanticizing the term as automatically neutralizing power dynamics, transnationality does have unique potential for dismantling binaries implicated in national and other identity categories. Transnationality has been identified as a defining element of language teaching and learning (Gallardo, 2019), but surprisingly it has only recently begun to receive due scholarly attention (Gu & Canagarajah, 2018; Menard-Warwick, 2008; Solano-Campos, 2014; Yazan et al., 2023). Solano-Campus has identified transnationality as a form of diversity, and as such, worthy of exploration, as much as gender, race, native speaker status and other more established categories. Further, Gu and Canagarajah advocate that transnationality be viewed as a disposition that can be harnessed as a resource by educators in their work. Thus, the present study is framed by the concepts of transnationality as a form of diversity and a disposition that can be harnessed as a resource.

The Case for Centering Identity in Language Teacher Education

In order to develop in language teachers an awareness of how power differentials operate, as well as to empower themselves to exercise more agency and construct more informed LTIs, scholars argue that language teacher education (LTE) programs should center LTI exploration (Fairley, 2020; Varghese et al., 2016a). Because identity is so complex, and so context-dependent, and because transformation takes time, appropriate emphasis should be dedicated in LTE programs to doing (*critical*) *identity work* (Miller et al., 2017; Yazan, 2019). This involves understanding LTI and engaging in activities and assignments to assist teachers to construct LTIs more intentionally, and to develop agency as they work towards *becoming* their imagined identities.

One place to start this process is through having teachers explore and theorize their (transnational) LTIs, of which this work is an example. Engaging personally in the process of reflecting on my LTIs through writing and arts-based work has helped me connect more intimately to LTI literature, beginning to understand it not just through reading, but also through writing and applying it to my own emerging LTIs on a regular basis. I note after writing about interrogating my privilege: “Writing this story and these poems has helped me to clarify and articulate an important area of marginalization in my life, coexisting with another of privilege, both of which have shaped me deeply” (Data source, *Interrogating my privilege*, 2019). In other words, writing is a way of knowing (Park, 2013b), as is art and expressive writing (Eisner, 2008; Hanauer, 2012; Park, 2013a). The autoethnographic model used in this research additionally provides teachers in LTE programs access to the more powerful identity of ‘researcher’ (Varghese et al., 2016b), which can provide them with more capital to exercise agency. The research questions used to frame this study were: (a) *How do I theorize my transnational language teacher (educator) identities?* and (b) *How can I draw on my transnationality as a resource in my work?*

METHODOLOGY

This study takes an autoethnographic approach (Bishop, 2021; Ellis et al., 2011) to theorizing my transnational LTIs. Autoethnography, both individual and collaborative, is becoming an increasingly favored approach for exploring LTI (e.g., Canagarajah, 2012; Iams, 2016; Park, 2014; Yazan, 2019; Yazan et al., 2023), because it facilitates the exploration of self in relation to society, and is thus well suited for understanding identity from a critical and political perspective (Yazan, 2019). Barr (2019) writes that autoethnography “not only offers novel forms of writing but also provides a way to expand our definition of what constitutes the political and to connect the private troubles of individuals to public issues and to public responses to those troubles” (p. 1106). Through making these connections, autoethnography can thus encourage critical transformation (Custer, 2014). As a transformative research approach, autoethnography also allows for creativity in methodological choices, which can provide space for indigenous researchers and others in Global South and marginalized contexts to honor their cultures and heritages in re-envisioning and expanding the landscape of what research can be (Bishop, 2021). As such, Bishop asserts, autoethnographical approaches can speak back to dominant ideologies that have so long colonized what research is allowed to be. For these reasons, an autoethnographic approach was selected as a fitting methodology for this study focusing on transnationality and LTI.

The Context

As part of the coursework I was required to complete for my doctoral studies in Composition and Applied Linguistics at a mid-size northeastern university in the United States, I took an elective course on LTI in summer 2019. The present article is the revised outcome of a research project we engaged in throughout this course, entitled *Theorizing My LTI*. This project required us to read diverse LTI literature, discuss readings in class, and engage in regular in-class writing and various arts-based activities focused on using the readings to make sense of our LTIs. Using the in-class writing and art, along with other work as data sources, we theorized our LTIs in an attempt to better understand where our LTIs come from and to more intentionally inform our future LTI trajectories.

My Transnational Background

Born to white, lower-middle class parents from small towns in Western United States, I spent the first four years of my life on an Indian reservation in Poplar, Montana, where I remember playing with Native Americans and attending pow-wows. At age six we moved to Arusha, Tanzania, where I attended a Greek international school. We often spent weekends traveling to villages in the area to assist with various community building and development activities. At age eight, we moved to Tegucigalpa, Honduras, where I attended an American school. The students were almost solely upper-class Hondurans, and I remember being bullied for being American and a child of teachers. In my neighborhood, however, I recall playing happily every day with middle-class Honduran children, and learning Spanish. At age 10, we moved back to Tanzania, this time to Dar-es-Salaam, where we lived on the campus of an international school which I attended. I became fairly fluent in Swahili during this time. At age 18, I moved to the US to attend college, where I experienced a sort of identity crisis, struggling to fit in with American culture. I joined the third culture kid (TCK) club, and found solidarity with TCK

friends. I did a study abroad semester in Ecuador, where I strengthened my Spanish. Taking a break from school, I then spent 18 months in Haifa, Israel, serving in an administrative office at the Baha'i World Centre, where I became close friends with colleagues from Africa, Asia and the US. I moved back to the US to finish college, graduating with a degree in Hispanic Studies. During this time, my first daughter was born. Her father was Kenyan and died when I was 8 months pregnant. At age 23, I moved back to Tanzania with my daughter, this time settling in Iringa for two years, where I taught English at a rural Tanzanian secondary school. At age 25, I moved to Egypt, where I continue to reside today, and where I married and later divorced an Egyptian man. We have two daughters together. During my time in Egypt, I have worked at local Egyptian educational institutions, a Pakistani international school, a Muslim university, and an American university, where I am still currently employed. I have learned to communicate in Egyptian Colloquial Arabic. I obtained my master's degree in TEFL in 2010 from an American university in Egypt, and my PhD in composition and applied linguistics in 2022 from an institution in the US.

This transnational experience has intimately informed my beliefs about the purpose of life and of research. "My world view is that we are all on a journey and our purpose is to better the world through bettering ourselves" (Data Source, *My ontology and epistemology*, 2019). I believe that research should help to achieve this purpose—it should benefit the researchers and the researched, and it should benefit the world around us. I am also committed to disrupting dominant discourses that marginalize by advocating for alternative ways of knowing—such as through the methodologies used in the present study—as well as promoting the valuing of all people. To realize these goals, I must engage in reflexivity (Berger, 2015; Fairley, 2020; Palaganas et al., 2017). I must be willing to look at myself, however uncomfortable (Pillow, 2003), in order to change the parts of me that may be perpetuating the dominant discourses I so much yearn to change. I must emancipate myself from harmful discourses if I hope to be able to work with others in our collective journeys of emancipation. Thus, although the present study is focused on myself and my own LTIs, I do so with the aim of inspiring others to learn from my insights and to engage in similar work as well.

Data Sources and Data Collection Procedures

The data sources used were collected mainly during the course of three weeks in July 2019, as I participated in a doctoral level LTI course. These sources include:

- eight in-class autobiographical reflections written over the course of three weeks (each consisting of 15 minutes of freewriting connecting readings to my LTIs);
- a one-page reflection interrogating my privilege;
- three poems depicting insider/outsider-ness and my LTIs;
- and one artifact, one image, and one metaphor representing my LTIs.

I also draw on prior work, including a linguistic autobiography, a reflexivity narrative, a story of my writing life, a few poems composed over several decades, exploring a story of marginalization, and a piece on my ontology and epistemology. Although I drew on these other sources, I focused more on the work done during the course because of its direct focus on LTI exploration. Throughout this article, data sources are cited with the label DS (data source), followed by the title of that data source.

Data Analysis

I took a critical qualitative approach (Guba & Lincoln, 2004) to making sense of my language teacher (educator) identities as they emerged through the recursive process of autoethnographic data analysis and write-up. Such an approach allowed for the interrogation of power dynamics that shaped my identity constructions. I also chose to employ Clandinin and Connelley's (2004) temporal framework of *past-present-future* as a particularly useful way to frame and gain insight into my ongoing transnational LTI constructions because it aligns so well with my ecological perspective of identity (Appleby, 2016; Edwards & Burns, 2016; Haneda & Sherman, 2016; Song, 2016; Varghese et al., 2016b). This perspective places special emphasis on contextual and temporal aspects of identity construction, privileging identity as a continual process of *becoming* through interacting with particular contexts (Clarke, 2008; De Costa & Norton, 2017a). This framework thus allowed me to situate my experiences as a storied journey towards critical emancipation.

I analyzed my data using constant comparison analysis (Park, 2009), which involved reading through my data multiple times. In the first stage, I analyzed each data source line-by-line, highlighting anything that struck me (Saldaña, 2015), with special attention to emotions (Song, 2016). I then highlighted sections that related to marginalization/privilege and sections that related to my past, present and/or future teacher identities. In the next stage, I went over the highlighted text, identifying themes, particularly in relation to transnationality and power dynamics. I then began to write about these themes in order to theorize my LTIs, and as I did so, continued to go back to the original data sources, lifting representative quotes from my data that could act as evidence and further explanation for the crystalizing themes. Simultaneously during this process, I was also making connections to LTI literature, considering which research could help me to theorize my language teacher (educator) identities. Thus, the data analysis was a recursive process, in that as I began to write, themes were clarified, and as I went back through the data and LTI literature to look for evidence to support my themes and insights gained, additional themes were identified.

INSIGHTS INTO MY TRANSNATIONAL LANGUAGE TEACHER (EDUCATOR) IDENTITIES

Insights into my transnational LTIs are organized into three sub-sections, corresponding to my past, present and future, with the understanding that the process of identity construction will always be unfinished (Clarke, 2008).

Looking Back: Border Dwelling and Denizen of the Contact Zone

One of the prominent transnational themes that emerged from my data analysis is related to boundaries, dichotomies and borders (Anzaldúa 1987). I theorize my experiences as a border dweller through Mary Pratt's (1991) notion of the contact zone, which she defines as "social spaces where cultures meet, clash and grapple with each other, often in contexts of highly asymmetrical relations of power, such as colonialism, slavery, or their aftermaths as they are lived out in many parts of the world today" (p. 519). In this section, I look back on these experiences, exploring my struggles as a border dweller in the contact zone, and my search for acceptance and positive identity formation.

Paralysis in the Contact Zone: A Place of Marginalization

As a border dweller, I identify as transnational (Menard-Warwick, 2008), plurilingual (Ellis, 2016) and a global citizen, in that I see myself as having temporary local roots, and permanent transnational roots. Each country in which I have lived was made up of complex micro contexts that were often drastically at odds with one another. For example, in Tanzania, I attended an international school with a student body of over 65 nationalities and no one majority (DS *Interrogating my privilege*, 2019). Most of these students were from elite families, whose parents worked in diplomacy, international development, and business. On weekday afternoons, I often spent time with my family at home, with household domestic helpers, and with children of teachers who lived on the school campus. On weekends, I often spent time with local Baha'i families, who were mainly of black Tanzanian origin and of lower socioeconomic status. Because my parents were involved in local community building endeavors, I also often accompanied them to remote villages, where I experienced what it was like to sleep on straw mats in mud huts, bathe in water carried from great distances, and eat ugali cooked on charcoal or firewood stoves.

In this way, I was exposed to vastly diverse groups of people belonging to different cultures, races, socioeconomic classes, religions, and linguistic backgrounds. While this experience afforded me unique and rich opportunities to interact with and understand difference, it also meant that I grew up and have continued to live in spaces where I was often positioned as not belonging—foreign, separate, other: “Although I share(d) some qualities with [all] groups, I was an outsider” (DS *Interrogating my privilege*, 2019). I was/am often referred to as “Mzungu” in Tanzania, “Gringa” in Honduras or Ecuador, and “Agnabeya” in Egypt. I write “I am always feeling like an observer looking in on the place I am living – never a native and always a visitor” (DS *In-class writing*, July 1), and “I carried that heaviness of being unimportant” (DS *The story of my writing life*, 2018).

This positioning by others has had a profound impact on my identity constructions thus far. It resulted in my (self) positioning as eternal visitor to whichever context I was currently in, no matter how long I resided there, which has continued to feed my deepest yearning to belong, to be accepted as an insider (DS *Interrogating my privilege*, 2019). As a visitor, I often took on the role of (silent) observer, second-guessing myself before speaking or acting, searching for ways I could gain entry into the group. While in some contexts I felt a sense of paralysis, in others I became adept at assimilation (Menard-Warwick, 2008), shuttling between the various personas I saw as able to grant me more access to the various groups in my life. My identity often felt obscured and fragmented, “like puzzle pieces that didn't fit together” (DS *My linguistic autobiography*, 2019), a characteristic of transnationals, who may define their cultural identities as “split, hybrid, mixed” (Menard-Warwick, 2008, p. 635).

(Un)Desire in the Contact Zone: Labeling and Objectification

Motha and Lin (2014) write about “the subtle and complex power of desire, the ways in which specific desires and repressions are socialized in every-day interactions” (p. 332). Through close examination of the data sources, I gained an important insight into how the various labelings and ways in which I have been positioned are linked to powerful discourses of (un)desire, and as such, are a form of objectification—regardless of whether or not it is a label that comes with cultural, social, or linguistic capital.

To illustrate this insight, I tell a story (DS *In-class writing*, July 15) recollecting a time when I was privileged for my white native-speaker status and position at a university that is considered prestigious. As I recounted this story to a fellow transnational colleague to co-construct meaning from it, my colleague remarked on how sad he felt this story was: (my perception of) being chosen to be a keynote speaker based on an NES label, rather than based on my qualities as an experienced language teacher (educator). This comment reminded me of the objectification I experienced as a young woman in various contexts, when I was pursued, or sometimes harassed or assaulted because I was labeled as sexually desirable for my gender, whiteness, blondness and youthfulness. I often wrestled with the peculiar feeling that a romantic partner might really only have chosen to be with me for these labels that positioned me as an object of desire, perhaps for the social capital it afforded. I came to understand this labeling as objectification, realizing that being considered sexually desirable was dehumanizing, because it marginalized or obscured the qualities and accomplishments for which I wanted to be valued. At the same time, I must also acknowledge that being desired in these ways is very much connected with privilege, which afforded me a great deal of status, along with greater access to educational opportunities and speaking floor that this status brought. This manifested most noticeably for me at school, where I was often privileged by my teachers for my white native-speaker status (DS *Interrogating my privilege*, 2019). By being given more respect and space to speak in class than most of my NNEs classmates, I felt empowered and valued in ways that I did not as a girl and (sometimes) lower-class child outside of the classroom (DS *My linguistic autobiography*, 2019). Through juxtaposing these experiences, I realized that theories of (un)desire and power dynamics operate in complex ways that can both objectify and empower the individual, though not necessarily in the ways I wanted or deserved.

Simultaneously as I was being privileged, I was also positioned as an outsider for my *undesirable* social categories that positioned me as “other.” I write about feeling “rejected, not seen as human, deceived” (DS *In-class writing*, July 1), as a foreigner, girl, and of lower socioeconomic status. Again, this (un)desirability objectified me for my social categories, marginalizing my other qualities. In other words, whether a label is one that is desirable or not (conferring status or not), it still objectifies, because status is not conferred based on merit, but rather on a particular attribute that carries particular (often unearned) capital in that context, both at the macro and micro levels (De Costa & Norton, 2017a). This experience and the insights gained through its interrogation also highlights the “recognition of desire as situated and co-constructed, acknowledging that our desires are not solely our own but are intersubjectively constituted and shaped by our social, historical, political, and economic histories and contexts” (Motha & Lin, 2014, p. 333).

Intercultural Communicator in the Contact Zone: Straddling the Borders and Bridging Divides

Menard-Warwick (2008) defines interculturality as “seeing cultural issues from multiple perspectives” and transnationality as “having significant interests or experiences that cross nation-state boundaries” (p. 618). She goes on to make a case for the importance of intercultural competence, along with meta-cognitive awareness of this competence, as essential competencies for language teachers. These competencies, she notes, transnationals tend to embody well because they have had so much opportunity for practice. This rings true for me, as I explore here.

As I continued to grapple with how I was being positioned and positioning myself as an outsider and object of (un)desire, I also began to construct an identity of intercultural communicator, gradually gaining access—not fully into each social group per se, but rather access to friendships in one-on-one situations. These friendships were an outcome of my traversing the borders, evidence that borders are permeable (Anzaldúa, 1987). I formed genuine connections with individuals from very diverse backgrounds: cultural, socioeconomic, racial, linguistic, religious, gendered (DS *My linguistic autobiography*, 2019). I began to identify myself as culturally savvy, competent at communicating across differences, and increasingly taking the role of intercultural bridge and mediator, which has been found to be a common strength of transnationality (Menard-Warwick, 2008). The gradual and growing realization that I was good at this bringing together, having acute perception and sensitivity to others' emotions, meanings, and intentions, began to build up a new, more positive sense of (self) value. Here, I must also acknowledge that transnationality is not a power neutralizing identity (Kasun, 2017). As such, I recognize that this space as cultural bridge was one I could more easily claim as a white American NES. Placing myself in the center of transcultural interaction, rather than on the periphery of monocultural living, helped me to resist, to begin an intentional or conscious shaping of who I wanted to be. I see my claiming of the identity of intercultural communicator as developing out of my transnational experience in the contact zone, and also grounded in the belief that the purpose of life is to bring people together. I write “I want to shorten the distance between myself and others as much as I can – to level the field as much as I can” (DS *In-class writing*, July 9). In acknowledging my privilege as a white American NES to claim the space of intercultural bridge, I also see it as a more urgent responsibility to use that privilege to bring people together and address injustice, because this power gives me more of a platform to do so than those who are not as privileged.

Understanding My Present: Emotionality and LTI

Another theme identified in the process of data analysis is emotionality and how emotionality is linked to identity, power and transformation (Benesch, 2018; Song, 2016; Zembylas, 2003). I place emotionality in this section of understanding my present because I feel it is having the most profound impact both on my current understanding of my transnational LTIs, and also on the emancipatory work I am currently doing on myself, a theme which I take up further in the section on my future.

Literature, Emotionality and My LTI

A few years ago, I was introduced to the ‘Feeling Wheel’ (Willcox, 1982). It was an utterly novel concept to me, not because of the sheer number of emotions it organizes into positive and negative categories, but rather because Willcox asserts that emotions are like messages alerting us that something is right or wrong and that some kind of action may be needed. For example, if we are experiencing an emotion belonging to the category of anger, this is a message that our boundaries have been violated in some way, which tells us that we need to assert those boundaries. While this approach to emotions is not at all new to the psychology field, it was a trigger for me to think about emotions in an entirely new way. I began to attend to my emotions in a more proactive way, and try to take action based on those emotions. This reorientation has begun to free me from feeling overwhelmed by my emotions, and to address issues precipitating those emotions.

Following this initial exposure, I began to read about emotion in LTI literature (e.g. Benesch, 2017, 2018; Song, 2016; Zembylas, 2003). For example, Benesch explores the concepts of feeling rules and emotion labor as a way to understand how power differentials dictate the range of emotions acceptable in professional contexts, termed *feeling rules*, and the struggle that teachers experience when there is a mismatch between feeling rules and their training and beliefs, termed *emotion labor*. Benesch (2017) explains that, “Acknowledging and exploring emotion labor is a step toward its use as a tool for informed decision-making as well as possible resistance and reform” (p. 2). Benesch points out that it is important to note here that emotion labor may often be far more intense for those who are being marginalized. So, for example, a Black, young, female NNEST would most likely experience far more emotion labor than a White, older, male NEST. Thus, exploring emotion labor could be an especially beneficial exercise for those who are being most marginalized in our profession. Because of my earlier introduction to the feeling wheel and subsequent identity work that it precipitated, I immediately connected to the concept of emotions as signals of dissonance (Wolff & De Costa, 2017), and dissonance as sites of struggle and potential opportunities for growth (Park, 2009; Song, 2016). In my reading of Song (2016), her concept of the *secret story* (the stories we feel we have to hide) versus the *sacred story* (the stories we are told about how we should be) resonated with me. I have carried her insights about emotion and vulnerability very close to my heart over the past several years, and draw on her and the work of other emotion researchers to theorize my present LTIs.

Making Peace with the Contact Zone as a place of Emotion, Emancipation and Growth

I have and continue to go through feelings of identity crisis rooted in my transnational experiences, although this is more a characteristic of my past than my present. The many identities I have fashioned in order to survive in contexts where I was not always allowed to belong, I now see in some ways as reactive identities—attempts to assimilate in order to find acceptance, rather than intentional identities. For example, when I was marginalized, rejected or belittled, I found myself trying all the harder to gain access into the various groups I felt excluded from, but did not realize this consciously (DS *Interrogating my privilege*, 2019). In analyzing the data sources exploring this feeling of identity crisis, I noticed the sheer number of words used to express the intense emotions I was experiencing, such as: *helpless, immobile, betrayed, rejected, superfluous, irrelevant, wrong, not worth, painfully shy, adrift, excluded*. Most of these emotions related to my positionality as an outsider, a “symptom” of my transnational and (intersectional) identities (Lawrence & Nagashima, 2020; Menard-Warwick, 2008), including gender, race, social class and nationality. Analyzing these emotions has helped to clarify for me just how profoundly my experiences with being positioned as an outsider have impacted my identity. For example, in exploring the anger I sometimes experienced as a younger teacher at an Egyptian university, I realized that this anger stemmed from the disrespect that some male students exhibited towards me as a female teacher (DS *Exploring a story of marginalization*, 2019). This realization allowed me to attribute the disrespect I was experiencing to systemic sexism rather than to it being a sign that I was a bad teacher unable to “control” the class. Such connections have helped to free me from some of the insecurity I sometimes feel as a teacher, because I can recognize that how I am being treated is related to systemic injustice rather than inherently personal deficiencies.

Even though I still experience emotional overwhelm at times, I have more metacognitive awareness and ability to attend to those emotions as sites for me to struggle through in order to grow (Park, 2009; Song, 2016), and as such they no longer paralyze me. In one example, I wrote: “I feel like no matter what I do, some of those students will not engage. It is hard not to feel like I have failed. And when a whole class is tipped in that direction, I feel powerless, at a loss, and that I am a bad teacher” (DS *In-class writing*, July 8). While these words do illustrate painful feelings, I now see them as emotions I should acknowledge and as a puzzle to be solved. It also allows me to view emotions as not dichotomous labels of good or bad (Benesch, 2018). This is an empowering concept, one which is instrumental in my current journey towards emancipation and for becoming an emancipatory teacher, addressed further below.

My analysis also allows me to see that my experience being othered as one of the most powerful forces driving my yearning for acceptance, and also to connect and uplift others being excluded based on their identity categories. With these newfound insights into emotion, I see my transnationality as the drive placing myself in the role of emotional emancipator through modeling my own vulnerability and attentiveness to emotions, an identity construction that is still very much in-progress.

Looking Forward: Embracing My Strengths in the Contact Zone as a Resource for Emancipatory Pedagogy

My data sources contain a great deal of forward-looking narratives, including imagined teacher (educator) identities or goals. This seems a sign that I am taking ownership of increasingly more purposeful LTIs, a goal towards which LTE programs ought to be oriented (Varghese et al., 2016b). My claimed and imagined identities as emancipator of myself and as emancipatory in my teaching practices are goals, and thus I place emancipatory pedagogy as my future. I am more acutely aware that this work of emancipation is the only work that really matters, because it is the key to social change. A key insight I have gained is my growing belief that by consciously exploring and recognizing my own strengths, particularly stemming from my transnationality, I can better draw on them in more purposeful ways to encourage social change. After all, if I don't embrace my own strengths, how can I encourage my students to embrace theirs?

As much as focusing on my strengths has been an uncomfortable process, it is also immensely empowering. I write: “I want to belong but I have to claim that belongingness for myself – not wait for it to be ascribed. And this is agency, advocacy” (DS *In-class writing*, July 1). By focusing on my strengths, I am claiming my own kind of (transnational) belongingness, as well as more ownership of my LTI trajectories. Thus, the remainder of this section is dedicated to celebrating my strengths as a transnational educator.

Challenger of Dichotomous Paradigms

Because I did not fully fit into the categories made available to me or being ascribed to me in various contexts throughout my life, such as ‘American’, ‘NES’, ‘foreigner’, ‘sex object’ and others, it has been easy for me to intuitively sense that binary, fixed categories are harmful and do not really fit anyone (Rudolph, Yazan, et al., 2019). What they do is divide people into *included-excluded*, *privileged-marginalized*, *right-wrong*, and they are strongly linked to how we value people based on constructs that are unearned and often only imagined.

As I note in the section on my past, I have come to realize that whether conferring unearned privilege or unearned marginalization, objectification makes us all *subaltern* (Kumaravadivelu, 2016), albeit to vastly varying degrees. It makes us subaltern because it dehumanizes us, reducing us to labels. Our work is to recognize this subalternity, interrogate it, and begin to re-orient our ways of valuing one another as human beings rather than based on socially ascribed categories. In other words, we need to engage in humanizing one another (Kinloch, 2018). Thus, I see myself as emancipating myself from this paradigm of dichotomous thinking.

At the same time, I do not want to imply that my positioning in privileged ways or in marginalized ways does not have consequences. As I note: “if we think about a very important point that [Kumaravadivelu (2016)] raises – the subaltern may have weak agency precisely because they have been marginalized. The marginalized voice is weakened both by hegemonic structure and because the marginalized person does not have the opportunity to develop that agency as much as others” (DS *In-class writing*, July 15). Thus, I am acutely aware that it is my powerful positionings combined with the access that these positionings have afforded me, that have allowed me to be engaging in this autoethnographic journey in the first place. I must also, therefore, acknowledge my great responsibility to use my privileged positionings to resist, to change how power works (Cummins, 2009), “to question, to have conversations, to try out new strategies, to give a chance to the voiceless to speak and strengthen their voices” (DS *In-class writing*, July 15). Thus, I recommit myself to finding ways to encourage myself and my students to critically identify, interrogate and challenge hegemonic forces in the world, pushing back against dominant discourses that tell us not only who is allowed to have power and who can be valued, but also against the dichotomous nature of such discourses: black/white; NES/NNES; monolingual/bilingual etc., upon which injustice is founded and finds a place to thrive. My transnationality is truly a resource to help my students consider their own identities and experiences, to provide opportunities through our work together for them to practice bridging divides themselves.

Empathizing with the Other: Listener, Encourager, Empowerer

“I think my unique experience has made me more sensitive to the ways that others are marginalized and the effects of this” (DS *Interrogating my privilege*, 2019). This sensitivity has been noted to be one of the strengths of transnationality (Gu & Canagarajah, 2018; Menard-Warwick, 2008). I believe that others often sense this sensitivity in me, and as a result feel safe to share their *secret stories* (Song, 2016) with me. I recall noticing sometime in my twenties just how many people, even complete strangers, would open up to me and pour out all their sufferings to me (DS *In-class writing*, July 23). I recall wondering what it was about me that attracted this type of emotional disclosure from others. I can now answer this question with more clarity. My ability to connect to others stems from my aspiration to bring people together, as well as my long years of practice in communicating with others, rooted in my transnationality, as I explain in the section focusing on my past. Because I so much yearned to gain entry into various in-groups, I learned to observe and listen, often sensing what others were feeling, noticing more nuance, and adapting myself to accommodate their needs and moods, as well as allowing them to take the lead. This positions me in an ideal place to raise awareness and create opportunities for my students to also develop some of the qualities that have helped me to become a good empathizer.

In addition, because of my own experience with marginality and living so much of my life on the periphery, I write: “As an educator I want to... do all in my power to uplift those who are considered unworthy in my class” (DS *In-class writing*, July 9). And as a teacher educator “I want to advocate and help them [teachers who do not feel respected] to also become advocates more and more” (DS *In-class writing*, July 10). What this means as an educator is that not only do I care very much about listening to my students, but I also provide opportunities to talk about the importance of listening and to intentionally engage in active listening practices, followed by reflection. In creating such spaces, it is also important to beware of simply inviting students to join the existing “table”—i.e., dominant western frameworks of what education can look like, but to rather allow my students spaces to create their own “tables” and/or build new ones together that we can all join (Kinloch, 2018; Sharkey & Peercy, 2018). To such ends, I have also recently begun to favor an asset-based approach to teaching (Woodward, 2015). For example, in giving feedback, I increasingly focus on the strengths of students’ writing, particularly innovative or alternative ways of writing, and on connecting personally to their writing in my comments, thus encouraging them in their writing abilities and helping them to feel valued as creative human beings. After having positive experiences with enacting this approach, I hope to help other teachers consider it as well.

Risk Taker and Bridge of Theory and Practice: Resisting, Blurring, Straddling Borders

In reflecting on my transnational experiences, it has become clearer to me that my identity as border dweller means that I can more easily accept that there are multiple ways of doing things and that I can more easily resist, blur and straddle borders. As a teacher I find myself operating on the borders of what is normal in education, but until engaging in the present research, I had not identified this strength in myself, or where it stems from. I am not afraid of operating around the borders in my teaching, since I have lived on the borders for most of my life. I search for alternatives, I take risks, even when this causes me great discomfort. In fact I have realized that I even *embrace* discomfort. For example, I write that “Arts based inquiry [(Chappell & Chappell, 2016; Ewing & Hughes, 2008)] is one of those uncomfortable, new things... It is scary and maybe it will be anxiety-inducing. But I know I have to do it” (DS *In-class writing*, July 2). I do it because I am so enamored with the philosophy behind it, and I have become more cognizant through this study that discomfort can often signal a potential area for pushing the envelope, especially towards humanizing and decolonial approaches to education (Kinloch, 2018). For example, in my choice to become a teacher in the first place, I write: “Because I so much wanted to make a difference as a teacher, I pushed myself to become more outgoing, to overcome my fear that students might not like me or might not think I am a good teacher” (DS *Interrogating my privilege*, 2019). In this way, I dwell on the borders of what marks conventional from alternative ways of teaching, which finds resonance with other transnational teachers (Gu & Canagarajah, 2018). The more I dwell on these borders in my teaching, the more “it gives me confidence to push the envelope more” (DS *In-class writing*, July 2). Even though I acknowledge that “I have had many times where activities I have tried to do did not go as planned and fell flat. Still, the more I push the envelope, the better I feel myself becoming as a teacher and the more I am seeing that I am reaching more students than I used to reach” (DS *In-class writing*, July 2).

One major example of pushing the envelope is my aspiration towards an egalitarian student-teacher relationship. The teacher has often been privileged in terms of being the

authority of knowledge, the disciplinarian, classroom behavior manager, curriculum designer, material chooser, assignment selector, and assessment evaluator. These privileges are so embedded in the bedrock of educational and societal discourse at the macro level, that they may remain invisible or go unchallenged (Freire, 2018; Kasun & Saavedra, 2016; Kinloch, 2018). As a transnational educator concerned with issues of justice, equity and access, I wonder how we can promote social justice in the classroom when the teacher-student relationship is more often one of coercive rather than collaborative power (Cummins, 2009). I write “How can I create a classroom where students feel they are being privileged by me and by each other? Valued and valuable?” (DS *In-class writing*, July 1). As I continue to search for answers to these questions, I ask these questions of my students as well. As I push the envelope, I become more comfortable doing so, and this will help me as a teacher educator to assist my students to explore other ways of teaching and learning as well.

In analyzing the data sources for this study, the theme of connecting theory and experience to practice has emerged as another prevalent theme. As long as I have been a teacher, I ask myself *What does that look like in my classroom? How can I adapt or implement that idea or assignment in my own context? What does this theory mean about how I should position myself in the classroom?* For example, I write: “what would it mean to write my diversity narrative? I love this idea and am thinking about how I could write my own in preparation for having my students write theirs” (DS *In-class writing*, July 1). I keep coming back to what I can do as a teacher educator, how what I am learning about my own transnational LTIs can translate into assignments, practices, activities, for an emancipatory approach to teaching. For example, I consider how we can engage students in LTE programs in applying the concepts of micro, meso, macro levels of power and influence mentioned by Barkhuizen (2016a) and De Costa and Norton (2017a). In so doing, I see myself as an advocate of bridging theory and practice.

FURTHERING THE CONVERSATIONS

The insights into transnationality emerging from this study contribute to two important conversations currently taking place in the areas of social justice in education and autoethnography as a transformative research methodology. I summarize these insights below, not in an attempt to make definitive conclusions, but rather to invite introspection and creativity as we continue to further these conversations.

Transnationality and Social Justice in Education

Dismantling Binaries

At its heart, transnationality problematizes binaries and binary thinking because it involves the crossing and blurring of borders between those binaries (Gallardo, 2019; Gu & Canagarajah, 2018; Rudolph, Yazan, et al., 2019). My own confusion over belonging led to a series of identity crises because I, as well as others, struggled to identify which social identity categories I belonged to. In feeling at first that I had to choose which labels to belong to, I was trapped in binary thinking myself, perhaps because I did not see any other option. But once I realized that I did not and could not fully belong to any one group, I found myself free to choose from the many identity options presented to me—in effect fashioning my own identities that do not fit with binary categories, but are rather a kind of amalgamation of them. By blurring the boundaries between binaries, and by being so adept at connecting with people from across

various communities, two characteristics of transnationality (Gallardo, 2019; Gu & Canagarajah, 2018; Menard-Warwick, 2008), I problematize binaries. Thus, transnationality can problematize binaries and binary thinking for those who identify as transnational, but more importantly, it also may do so for others who come into contact with such individuals, thus working towards dismantling harmful binaries in general.

Problematizing Unjust Power Dynamics as a Tool of Objectification

Transnational individuals may be positioned very differently depending on the contexts in which they are living and working (Kocabaş-Gedik & Ortaçtepe Hart, 2020; Rudolph, Yazan, et al., 2019). For example, in Egypt, my whiteness is often equated with foreignness, and I find myself positioned as an outsider who doesn't really understand the culture, even though I have lived in this country for over two decades—longer than in any other country, have been married to an Egyptian, and have worked with and befriended Egyptians throughout this time. In contrast, in the US, I believe my whiteness grants me access as an insider with greater privilege than others, even though I have lived very few years in that country and do not identify as an insider there myself. At the same time, in Egypt, my whiteness also positions me as a NEST in my work context, which I believe has sometimes led to me being offered opportunities that I might not have been as a NNEST (Aneja, 2016; Rudolph, Selvi, et al., 2019). These examples illustrate how transnationality can expand the ways in which one is positioned based on a particular social category. Experiencing such contradictory ways of being positioned allowed me to identify more clearly how strongly we are affected by those positionings, and ultimately how such positionings, whether as privileging or marginalizing, act as a tool of objectification.

Promoting Alternative Ways of Knowing, Being and Doing

Perhaps the most valuable insight I gained through this research is how transnationality might encourage alternative ways of knowing, being and doing. Through reflecting on my experience as a transnational dwelling in and around the borders of countries, cultures and languages for most of my life, I realized a connection to my comfort levels with operating around the borders of what is considered established, normal or expected in educational contexts. In fact, I have even realized that my discomfort when faced with a new approach to teaching can be a signal that this new approach is precisely what I should try out. Experimenting with new approaches is especially important for decolonizing education from western dominant ideologies, and making space for alternative, humanizing approaches that celebrate ideologies of the indigenous and other communities of the Global South (Kasun & Saavedra, 2016; Kinloch, 2018). Combined with a commitment to breaking down dichotomies and problematizing harmful power dynamics, discussed above, this willingness to consider the unconventional could be one of the most important characteristics that transnationality can bring to promoting social justice in education. Experimenting with unconventional approaches can take the aspiration towards social justice from conversation into action, which has been identified as sorely needed in the ELT field (Kubota & Miller, 2017; Kumaravadivelu, 2016).

Autoethnography as Transformative Research Methodology

Engaging in this autoethnographic research has been immensely empowering for me on the personal level, and I have felt myself growing as a teacher (educator), which I attempt to demonstrate in this article. Through *doing*, I join other scholars in making a case for autoethnography as a transformative research methodology (Bishop, 2021; Custer, 2014), well suited for exploring LTI (Yazan, 2019). I also make the case for treating transnationality as a form of diversity and important social category worthy of exploration (Aneja, 2016; Gu & Canagarajah, 2018). In exploring and understanding my transnational LTIs through this methodology, I feel empowered to more intentionally construct my LTIs towards future goals that are grounded in more informed beliefs and purpose (Fairley, 2020). I hope that the insights gained through this research may also be helpful for others as they engage in and/or promote similar LTI explorations.

In this article, I also join other scholars in making a case for centering LTI in LTE (Varghese et al., 2016b), particularly for its potential in encouraging critical transformation, which is vital for realizing social justice in education. I end with these questions: “How can we study the outcomes of pedagogical efforts of language teacher educators who are trying to privilege LTI in language teacher education programs?” and “How can these [pedagogies] be adapted and used in different contexts?” (DS *In-class writing*, July 3). Future research will hopefully continue to consider these questions in an effort to better serve teachers in LTE programs and their future students (Varghese et al., 2016b; Yazan et al., 2023).

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