

## Transnational/Queer: Narratives from the Contact Zone

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Back in the late 1980s, as a student teacher of English as a Second Language (ESL) to immigrants, refugees and international students in the United States, I was eager to read something, anything, to help me think through the intriguing teaching dilemmas that often arose when the topic of (homo)sexual identities became foregrounded in classroom interactions. But extensive searching through language education literature yielded almost no acknowledgment that a range of sexual identities even exists, either within or beyond the classroom; the world represented in the literature was one in which straight people—albeit from various national, cultural, and linguistic backgrounds—were interacting only with other straight people. Turning to the more general education literature, I found a handful of publications on lesbian/gay/bisexual matters, but little serious attention to addressing these matters in classrooms characterised by a mix of cultural perspectives and linguistic fluencies and disfluencies; this constructed world was one in which fluent (usually ‘native’) speakers (of English)—albeit lesbian, gay and bisexual, as well as straight—were interacting mostly with other fluent speakers, usually from the same (Western, English-speaking) country. The dearth of literature on teaching in a ‘contact zone’ environment<sup>1</sup> that was simultaneously transnational, transcultural, multilingual *and* multisexual spurred me to write about my own teaching experiences.

Three classroom narratives were published in the statewide newsletter of what was then my local teachers’ association.<sup>2</sup> Even though these narratives were written fifteen years ago—by a very inexperienced teacher—and were not intended as a form of narrative-inquiry research (Clandinin & Connelly, 2000), I re-present them here because it seems that gay or queer discourses still tend to be considered ‘foreign’ within teaching contexts that readily engage transnational themes or cohorts (and conversely, that transnational discourses and cohorts still tend to be considered ‘foreign’ within teaching contexts that readily engage gay or queer themes). The aim of this paper is to spark discussion and debate about two over-arching questions:

What might it look like to think queerly *and* transnationally—in tandem—about teaching, and what modes of inquiry can provoke new thinking on these sometimes contentious matters, among multiple audiences?

By ‘thinking queerly about teaching,’ I mean finding ways to acknowledge the range of sexual identities (lesbian, straight, gay, transgender, bisexual, and so on) that is circulating in public discourses beyond the classroom, and among teacher and student cohorts in the classroom. But I also mean finding ways of grappling with and interrogating sexual-identity discourses and their effects. Thus I am using the term ‘queer’ in two ways: to summarise the lengthy phrase ‘lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender,’ but also “to protest, or at least blur, clear-cut notions of sexual identity” (Nelson, 1999, p. 374, following Warner, 1993). Thinking queerly about teaching, then, means not just ‘including gay people’ but prompting inquiry about the cultural and linguistic production of sexual identities in day-to-day practices and discourses (Nelson, 1999, following Britzman, 1995). In *language* classes, given the emphasis on facilitating communication, interaction, and participation, it would seem particularly important to find ways of incorporating, and analysing, sexual identity discourses that are in wide circulation beyond the classroom (see Nelson, 2004a). But queer approaches to pedagogy will be of limited usefulness unless they take into account the changing demographics and identity theories accompanying wide-scale migrations (see Nelson, 2004b).

By ‘thinking transnationally about teaching,’ I mean recognising the “unprecedented levels of immigration and displacement” that are rapidly reconfiguring education contexts (Suárez-Orozco, 2001, p. 345), so that even ‘mainstream’ classes are coming to resemble second-language classes in terms of linguistic/cultural heterogeneity. But the point of thinking transnationally is not just to teach in ways that ‘include people from other countries’—it is to engage and question the ways in which foreignness gets constructed, and to recognise the dynamic mix of allegiances and affiliations that characterises cultural and national identifications and disidentifications in these times of globalisation (see, e.g., Mandaville, 2001). The pedagogic aim, in other words, is to “represent the diversity of postcolonial societies... whilst simultaneously challenging a fixed and essentialized view of culture and of cultural identities that characterized the colonial mind set” (Crossley & Tikly, 2004, p. 151; see also Mitchell, 2001; Gough, 1999).

It should be noted that this brief discussion of thinking queerly *and* transnationally about teaching is not meant to imply that the early teaching experiences recounted in my narratives did accomplish either or both of these things, or even attempted to do so. Rather, my intention is to invite readers to consider these issues as they read and engage with the narratives. Which leads to the second main question that frames this paper: What modes of inquiry can provoke new thinking about teaching in queer/transnational contact zones, among multiple audiences—that is, theorists and researchers, teacher educators and teachers, and students and interested others, across a range of geographic and institutional settings, lived

experiences and theoretical perspectives, and sexual and cultural identifications (Nelson, in press)?

With this aim in mind, I take the unusual step (in a theory journal such as this) of presenting only the narratives themselves—no commentary, no self-reflexive critique, no conclusions. I offer two justifications for this experiment in using narrative as a tool in theory building. The first is that narrative can be considered a form of inquiry or knowledge making. As Bruner (1996) puts it, the narrative form is “a mode of thinking... a structure for organizing... knowledge” (p. 119). More specifically, narratives recount events that ‘violate canonicity,’ that is, they tell something unexpected (Bruner, 1996). Highlighting the unexpected serves to clarify the expected, so narratives can serve to differentiate what is normative from what is not. Thus a case could be made that “[d]iscourse presented within a *narrative shape* would seem to be no less worthy or reflexive than material presented overtly as theory or criticism” (Perry, 1998, citing Byatt, 1991). Indeed, using narrative as a form of analysis is a well-established practice historically, as Perry (1998) points out: “if we consider the history of storytelling, it appears that what we usually think of as creative forms have been used to analyse cultural production for much longer than so-called scholarly forms.”<sup>3</sup> So narrative can constitute a form of inquiry in its own right.

The second point is that the narrative form does not simply transmit new knowledges from writer to reader, but invites readers to actively engage in knowledge making processes. In presenting my narratives without any follow-up analysis or self-critique, my aim in this paper is to invite readers to reflect on, engage with, query, or dispute the stories however they wish. Thus narratives can make the processes of inquiry more open-ended and less predictable—by “engaging complexities whose implications cannot be known in advance”—as well as more participatory and less transmissive—by provoking readers “to participate in thinking through those complexities and implications” (Talbot, 2004, p. 93). This open-ended approach may be especially pertinent when thinking transnationally, given the “preference for narrative and grounded forms of writing” in what Canagarajah (2002, p. 142) calls ‘local communities’ (located outside of the power centre of ‘Western academic communities’). A case could be made that narrative represents ‘situated thinking’ as opposed to ‘decontextualised thinking’—and as such is “as suitable a vehicle for knowledge as argumentation or analysis” (Canagarajah, 2002, p. 142). Thus narrative has the potential to engage multiple audiences in multiple and even dissenting readings.

Given the subject matter of this paper—unpacking competing discourses of sexual identity within transnational teaching contexts—narratives may be particularly effective because they make it possible to access ways of thinking that are difficult to surface, and, it is hoped, to engage readers with divergent levels of familiarity with the subject matter. Lastly, I should explain that the first two narratives are set at a community college and the third at a university, within ESL conversation classes comprising mostly young-adult international students from Japan and other countries in As

## Narrative I

## Invisible

Without pausing, Kanae is listing names I don't know. They roll off her tongue as if the list were infinite. After certain names, Akemi, or Mitsuko, or Nagako sighs, gasps, repeats the name and says "Really?" in a rising pitch. Hiromi leans over and fills me in. These are all famous people in Japan, many of them entertainers. One name elicits open-mouthed shock from nearly everyone.

Three students in this all-female class are leading a discussion about the articles they had selected on racism against African-Americans in the U.S. Kanae had been saying that Koreans in Japan, like Black people here, experience discrimination, when Akemi had exclaimed "Oh, maybe where you live, but in Tokyo there are no Koreans." This sparked the rapid-fire roll call of Koreans, or Japanese people of Korean descent. I recognise none of the names. I would, in fact, be hard-pressed to come up with a list this long of any famous people in Japan.

Akemi crosses her legs. She is wearing a black and white polka dot skirt and pink patent leather pumps. "Maybe it's better if we don't know," she says. "If I don't know, I don't discriminate." Kanae's gold earrings—little clown-with-pointed-hat pendants—are shaking as she talks. "But if you don't know, you're more likely to say something in front of the person." Michiko agrees, "It's better if you know."

The four quieter women turn their heads to face whoever is talking. They never join in when things get this rapid. The others swap the floor easily, directly challenging each other, while the quiet ones watch, speaking only if questioned. Sumire is leaning forward in her chair, her eyes following everything. In her journal, she had written, "Sometimes, I cannot say what I want to say, and I feel something heavy around my breast. As I feel it, it becomes heavier."

I myself am about to burst. I briefly wonder whether it's okay for me to contribute, then jump out of my seat and leap to the board, nearly tripping over the leg of my desk-chair. I have no idea what I'm about to say. I draw a big A, B and C.

"You've been talking about whether it's better, like A, to not know B is Korean, so A won't discriminate against B or treat her differently—OR whether it's better to be like C, and know, so that C can make sure she doesn't offend B." My need is looming. My voice is nearly choking. "What about B?" I cannot contain my passion. "How does B feel? What does B need?" There are three thick lines under the big B.

"Do you think B will feel more comfortable with A, knowing she doesn't know, having to measure and guard each word so the secret doesn't emerge, wondering how A would react if she found out—OR would C be a better friend, already knowing B's background? What is better for B?" My black cotton pants are covered in chalkdust.

I walk back to my seat in the circle of chairs. Rolling the stub of chalk in my fingers, I feel absurdly transparent, as if they can see each of my organs. I glance at their silent, thoughtful faces. Each woman is reading the message on my forehead. It says I AM

B in lavender letters. The discussion resumes. My deep yearning to be known curls up like a cat in my lap. I fold my arms.

They are talking, but I cannot hear them. I am holding my insides, smoothing my forehead, calming my face. It seems they are not discussing B. In another scenario, I see myself asking my question with an encouraging tone, eliciting their ideas with infinite teacher-patience. Instead I whipped out a tantrum-lecture I'm not even sure they followed. I have spoken from the gut before, but never with such desperation. Finally, the bell rings. I reach for my sweater.

A few days later Akemi asks our guest speaker, a second-generation Chinese-Japanese-American editor, what he thinks it will be like to be here during the anniversary of Pearl Harbor. "Very, very scary," he says. "And not just for Japanese people, but Filipinos, Vietnamese, Korean, Chinese, Japanese-Americans, everybody gets lumped together here, you know." "How can I prepare?" Hiromi asks. "Figure out now what you're going to say," he answers. "Don't wait until they ask you. Figure it out now."

On the final Monday of the term, I give another mini-speech, somewhat rehearsed this time. I tell them that we've been discussing various kinds of discrimination all term—against disabled people, Jews, people of color, women, poor people—and there is another group I want to at least mention. "That is, gay people—you know, homosexuals?" I scan for nods, then shift my weight from my left leg to my right. I'm standing up here all by myself. "Gay people experience violence, invisibility, all kinds of discrimination." Am I talking too fast? I am sure, by now, that they know, but it has never been spoken. I have no idea whether they know; it has never been spoken.

Akemi speaks up. Her pink lips match her shiny shoes. "There are many gay people living on Capitol Hill. I didn't know that when I lived there, but after I moved my friend told me that." Her conversational ease is a gift I gratefully accept. "So you couldn't tell just by looking at people." "No," she says. "That's one thing many people don't realize," I say. I wonder if they remember that I've told them I live on Capitol Hill.

I have never come so close to coming out in a classroom. It is hard to say exactly what stops me.

A few days later, I read Sumire's final journal entry: "This is the last time to write to you, so I want to say what I have wanted to say you. I (We) really like you very much. Your comment is very sharp, but you never hurt students' feelings. I can open eye to social problems. Maybe still now, I cannot say "I understand", but I can have careful eyes. I'm still shy, but I did not feel uncomfortable in your class."

Kanae writes, "I think we could learn not only English but also the importance of turning our eyes to minority and everything. It is really important to ask myself about these problems. I am very sorry that our class is ended."

I am too. I have never felt so myself in a class. In fact, I tell them this on our last day, as we go around the circle and each say what we will remember about this class. Passing

handkerchiefs and pats on the arm, they are eloquent through tears and sobs. The dozen cameras appear, including mine. Mayumi pushes the yellow desk-chairs out of the way and the women group together against the wall. Sumire refolds her white ankle socks, adjusts her headband and wipes her eyes. Nagako's fingers form a peace sign.

I flash on the very first day of my very first ESL class, facing ten Japanese women whose names I stumbled over, afraid I would never distinguish Kazue from Kazuo. Even scarier, three women had straight shiny hair of identical length. I remember staring and blinking, worried I'd never be able to see them clearly enough to learn each of their names.

Peering through the tiny rectangle of light, I wish for careful eyes.

## Narrative 2

### India Cotton

"Do you want to get married?" Yayoi asks me, her cherry-caked lips parted over bright teeth, her pen poised expectantly over her paper. "No," I say. Megumi's head snaps back. Everyone seems to think they've heard wrong, as a chorus of mouths round in a disbelieving "NO?" A sudden cluster of students surrounds Yayoi, their eyes as wide as if I'd said I have no mother or I hate traveling.

Megumi manages a complete question, "You don't WANT to get married?" I half laugh and scrunch up my nose. I feel like a kid being asked if she likes boys. I want to say "Yuk, they have cooties!" "No, I don't want to," I say. Their eyes are still fixed on me like I'm a mutant.

"Why not?" someone asks. I glance around the room, hearing a mixture of Japanese and English from the various groups. Their task is to write down something they have in common with each person in the room. That's what Yayoi's after, but her search has been diverted.

"I just never wanted to." I picture myself at seven, serious and skinny. I had told my mother then that I would never get married. I wanted to give her plenty of time to get used to the idea. "Even as a child..." I smile, amused by the sudden temptation to explain my childhood feelings to these college students. I switch to eccentric adult. "I just don't understand why it's so popular," I say, raising my eyebrows like a clown. Nobody answers that. I grin, feeling triumphant.

"I'm a lesbian" just doesn't seem to fall from my mouth. Still, I suppose it's a triumph of sorts, to feel this loose and free when this question is fired at me, to no longer tremble, clench my jaw, feel my tongue dry up, watch a parade of answers march by, all impossible. I suppose it is a triumph to be flip, to tell the truth—well, part of it—to refuse to glamorize an institution that neither permits nor attracts me.

Yayoi straightens the papers she is holding. Divorced herself, she came to this country with her four-year-old son. She had told me about him in class, asking me to keep her secret. "Too much stigma from other Japanese students," she had explained.

"Do you believe in God?" She tries another question, looking squarely at me. I feel like a guest on an absurd talk show. I got the idea for this activity from a book that said, "Be sure to include yourself." Ha. "Yes... and no," I say, striving for honesty. "I mean, no, not in the traditional sense, but yes..."—these are beginners, I must keep my syntax in check—"gods, goddesses," I gesture vaguely, "I believe in many of them, you know," I say, as if I thought she did. Her pen is no longer poised. "Do you?" I am beginning to long for the sound of her voice rather than mine. "Yes." Her face is an anchor. Mine is a kite.

Determined to fulfil the task I assigned, she tries again. "Do you like cotton?" "YES." Next to my name, she writes 'likes cotton.' Now we're really getting somewhere. Several surrounding pens gratefully copy 'cotton.' "India cotton?" she asks, as if eager to strengthen our new-found bond. "Oh yes," I say, "YES!"

## Narrative 3

### Tour Guide

Our nearly full bus is crossing the bridge to Capitol Hill. My seatmate, Wataru, without lowering his voice in the slightest, says "I hear there are many gays on Capitol Hill." I smile, having suspected this was the attraction. When I had asked this all-male class where they wanted to take their field trip, Capitol Hill was nominated and easily won the most votes. When I reported their choice at the teachers' meeting, Ralph said "Oh come on, Cynthia, that had to be your doing." I stammered, "No, it was their idea." Instead, outings to the shopping mall and the zoo were planned for all the classes. Because my class was so disappointed, I promised them our own field trip.

"Yes, there are gays and lesbians in every neighborhood of Seattle, of course, but many live, work or shop here on Capitol Hill," I say in a tour guide voice. They snicker. A passenger with slicked back hair raises his eyebrows ever so subtly. I do the same to him. Yasuhiro, Wataru's best friend, squints behind gold-rimmed glasses. Everybody calls him John Lennon. "Ugh, I hate gays," Yasu says, bunching up his lips into a sour frown. I am not entirely surprised, having had a very strong feeling that both he and Wataru might be gay. Among his peers, Yasu's declaration of hatred seems sadly predictable.

I glance at the other passengers—the woman in a brown blazer and flat pumps, the bald guys with gold crosses in their ears, the clean-shaven men in leather jackets—we're all over this bus. In fact, nobody looks definitively hetero. I hope the students don't get their faces bashed in for talking this way, then realize that that is never what happens.

"Why?" I ask. They chat in Japanese—I am lost. "Why?" I interrupt, pushing. "Why do you say you don't like gay people?" I say this like it's the strangest thing I've ever heard. They make signs with their fingers, locking them together, something about man-man, woman-man, and giggle and slap each other. "In Japan..." Gen,

behind me, stops and thumbs through his dictionary, "In Japan... underground, go to bars, private. No many gay people. No talk." I get the idea. We are now on the main drag of Capitol Hill, the place where my shoulders drop and my breathing slows, the most peaceful neighborhood for me to return to after a day's work. I live here.

"Do you know any gays?" Yasuhiro asks. "Of course," I smile warmly. "I know many gay people." They are transfixed. A few students behind and across from them have fallen silent, their young ears absorbing this strange American teacher. "What are they like?" This is one brave man. The guy with the slicked back hair gives me a barely perceptible wink. "Well, the gay people I know are kind, smart, beautiful, brave, loving—just wonderful people." I sound like Pollyanna. I hastily reach over Wataru to pull the buzzer for our stop.

Gathered on the busy sidewalk, each pair picks a folded slip of paper from my hand. There is a different question on each slip. To answer them, they have to interview pedestrians or shopkeepers—a little English practice to keep the field trip legit. I had struggled with guilt the night before, worrying that I was sending lambs to the slaughter, but finally concluded that this last question was as much about 'American culture' as any other; besides, it wouldn't actually kill them. "Find out what the banners over the lampposts mean and why they are there."

Entering the classroom the next morning, the usual chatty greetings have been replaced by odd shuffling. Even the air feels rearranged. Each pair reports on yesterday's questions, but nobody mentions the banners. Two students with nothing to report say they never were given any slip of paper. Standing there in my glasses, I suddenly feel especially tall. Turning to the board I draw a triangle with rainbow strips. I explain that the colorful banners decorating the lampposts are from the Lesbian/Gay Pride Day March that drew 50,000 people the month before. Nobody is breathing. "Any questions?" I ask. They study the tops of their desks.

At the end-of-the-term party, after many photographs, Yasuhiro shakes my hand, then Wataru. All three of us are smiling. They are both flying home the next morning. We keep trying to say goodbye, but we are no longer talking. I shake their hands again, trying to send a message from my heart to theirs with outstretched arms. The words form inside my mouth, behind my smiling teeth: It's okay to be gay. I try to make the message tough enough to endure the ocean crossing. The little English words slip through my palm. The ocean creeps into our eyes. We blink and let go.

## Notes

<sup>1</sup> The metaphor of a contact zone, borrowed from Pratt (1991), refers to "social spaces where cultures meet, clash, and grapple with each other" (p. 34).

<sup>2</sup> Earlier versions of these narratives were featured in the *WAESOL Newsletter*, the statewide newsletter of the Washington Association of Educators to Speakers of Other Languages. Reprinted with permission, these three narratives first appeared in 1991 and 1992 in the following volumes and issues—16(4), 17(1) and 17(2).

<sup>3</sup> Furthermore, narratives do not necessarily need to be elaborated upon, since they have their own internal logic and integrity. As novelist Jeanette Winterson has put it: "The question 'What is your book about?' has always puzzled me. It is about itself and if I could condense it into other words I should not have taken such care to choose the words I did" (Winterson 1995, p. 165 as quoted in Perry, 1998).

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