Rethinking the Spatiality of Literacy Practices in Multicultural Conditions

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Abstract
Moving beyond the limitations of the ‘space-as-container’ ontology (Gotham, 2003), this paper offers Bakhtinian (dialogical) perspective on the use of cultural-semiotic spaces, in particular with regard to the production of new transcultural meanings and hybrid literacy practices as a result of interaction between differences. From this perspective cultural-semiotic space is not a neutral backdrop against which literacy practices unfold, but rather it is in the constant process of change due to the struggle between centrifugal and centripetal forces that operate on the level of spatial and textual politics – that is, between the processes of cultural and textual uniformization and local fragmentation. Given the dialogical nature of space and its relations to cultural identities of migrant and minority students and their literacy practices, the paper argues for rethinking literacy studies in multicultural conditions. This task becomes more urgent in the current educational era of standards, accountability and classroom pedagogies that are not attuned to the particularities of students’ intertextual practices and emergent transcultural places in which they live.

Introduction
The last two decades have witnessed a resurgence of interest in exploring the spatial contours of socio-cultural life. The renewed interest in the category of space reflects, to some extent, an attempt to delineate a more multifaceted approach to the studies of socio-cultural practices in conditions when the processes of globalization – transnational economic and cultural-semiotic flows – have challenged and changed the ways people use and perceive their local situationality. While the ‘spatial turn’ (Soja, 2000) in cultural studies has directed our attention to how spatial arrangements operate as a constitutive dimension of social activity, the implications of these studies for literacy research and pedagogical practices still remain largely underutilized. Even though spatial issues have been an important topic in ethnographic research into situated literacy practices (Barton & Hamilton, 1998; Heath, 1996), communal situationality has been predominantly conceived as static contexts and bounded places in which textual practices unfold in their multiple ethnic, social-economic, gendered, religious and other forms of particularity without giving a due account of overlapping social-semiotic spaces. However, the epistemological question of connecting places and spaces in literacy studies to take into account their overlap is a complicated issue which involves not only a perennial problem of relationships between the local/situated and the global/ extraterritorial; this is a matter of spatial-semiotic politics.

It might seem odd to suggest that literacy is about politics (many works have been written about this) but the relationship of spatiality to politics in literacy studies is less explored. Most literacy debates have coalesced around the issues of what counts as literacy, learning and literacy pedagogy. Political agendas and epistemologies of literacy seem to run in these debates together and their connection is pretty much familiar to many literacy researchers. Yet the political landscaping of literacy practices in these debates, to my mind, has limited rather than expanded our understanding of literacy as an inherently spatial practice. In current literacy debates it has almost become commonplace to talk about literacy as either centralised and
decontextualised or decentred and situated, and it becomes all too easy to miss their complex interplay as people engage in meaning-making events within multiple systems of spatial and social relations. As I see it from a spatial perspective, literacy is not something that radiates out from an identifiable central place neither it is simply particular to bounded sociocultural places. Rather, literacy is fluid and relational and, because of this spatial property, people can bridge the meaning-making gap between ‘here and now’ and ‘there and then’ by drawing on diverse mediating texts and, thereby creating a complex co-presence of different understandings that sit in relations of power.

To make this point more clear, let me briefly illustrate how spatial issues are implicit in the conservative and neo-liberal frameworks of literacy. The neo-liberal conception of situated literacies can be associated with the particularism and local places and runs in opposition to the conservative ideology of literacy associated with universalism and national space. While the conservative agenda in literacy education is driven by discourses of ‘cloning cultural homogeneity while talking diversity’ (Essed, 2002), the neo-liberals oppose this homogenising ideology by explicating the local diversity and particularity of textual practices. This tension reflects two quite distinct philosophies of space and place (Casey, 1997). The former stresses the abstract and uniform space that is prior to any local place, while the latter emphasizes the world of places that are seemingly independent from and prior to the uniform space (e.g. national, global).

More recently, some New Literacy researchers have attempted to overcome this space-place dichotomy by developing a thirdspace perspective on the interaction between institutionalised literacy (e.g. school) and local textual practices (e.g. home and community) to address social, cultural and political issues involved in the literacy education of migrant, minority and socially disadvantaged students (Erickson & Gutierrez, 2002; Kostogriz, 2004; Moje et al., 2004; Pahl, 2002). The idea of thirdspace (Bhabha, 1994; Soja, 1996) is being deployed in these studies to propel a socially critical project of literacy education in ‘new times’ characterised by the struggle between the monocultural conception of literacy and local sociocultural diversity. By emphasizing the recognition of ever growing diversity of sociocultural and textual practices, multiplicity of text forms and multimodality of meaning-making practices, these researchers conceive literacy in multicultural conditions as inherently postnational. Yet they are attempting also to overcome the limits of the local by exploring cultural-semiotic hybridity which occurs in relations of power between the dominant and the subjugated, disrupting both homogenic-nationalist and ethnocentrist discourses. In a sense, this is an attempt to transcend the place-space dichotomy by seeing their relationship dialectically. This perspective becomes increasingly important to formulate the principles of literacy pedagogy that would enable students to understand and negotiate differences, their connectedness and meaning dynamics in a dialogue of different consciousnesses and discourses. The thirdspace approach is not about celebrating a mixture of literacy practices, but rather it aims to emphasize the importance of interrelationship between the new emergent cultural identities, literacy practices and learning in order to foster a dialogue between differences in schools and beyond.

The main point of this paper is therefore to indicate that, even though literacy studies have emphasized the diverse situationality of textual practices, there is also a need to
accentuate new spatial features of these textual practices. These have to do with the
effects of semiotic (trans)border flows and the intrusion of ‘alien’ texts and people
into communal places that have been previously conceived as culturally pure. This
semiotic ‘contamination’ is now increasingly reducing the drag imposed by places
and locations on both school and situated literacies. Non-local texts and people move
across the boarders of the national and the local and, through the points of power,
extraterritorial convergence and mutual translation, contribute to the formation of
what we now call ‘new cultures and economies’ (see Luke & Carrington, 2002). This
is not to say that places of literacy practices in ‘new times’ do not matter anymore;
they continue to be a major player in cultural politics as the sites of solidarity and
resistance. And when we think about the current conservative backlash in the wake of
the global ‘war on terror’ and policing of the Other, places remain to be one medium
through which the social world is re-imagined and re-articulated. Yet, places are not a
mere backdrop of social life and their role in securing tradition, or in ranking people,
or in dealing with differences has been seriously destabilised by cultural-semiotic
processes that are beyond local control.

The tension between the local (stable) and the extraterritorial (fluid) has resulted in
the formation of new cultural spaces or ‘scapes’ (Appadurai, 1996) in which people
can escape their ‘metonymic freezing’ by anthropological discourse. These new
ethno-, media-, finance-, techno- and ideoscapes are spaces of historical mobility and
ongoing displacement; they are transnational scapes of cultural-semiotic innovations
unfolding in relations of power and struggles for meaning and recognition. Because
these discursive spaces are detached from any particular material place, they flow
through the local communities and segmented places (cf. Castells, 1996).

This raises therefore important points for literacy researchers and educators alike
concerning how local places, or more specifically people, respond to the spaces of
cultural-semiotic flow. And if people’s response to the flows results in some form of
restructuring then, as Massey (1994) observed, any spatial restructuring is
characterized by ‘power-geometry’. Relations of power are also involved in the
production of new literacy spaces as this occurs in tension between such censoring
regimes as national, ethnic, religious or other forms of social regulation and the new
political forms of cultural expression, social experience and meaning-making
opportunities. In the following sections I will discuss the concepts of transcultural
space and transcultural literacy which, in my view, not only reflect the issues of
power-geometry in the production of new semiotic spaces but also can be conceived
as a more adequate political strategy in restructuring literacy spaces that are produced
either by the ideology of single culture or by the liberal understanding of
multiculturality.

The dialogical imagination of transcultural space
I would like to suggest that in the current situation of conservative backlash there is a
political need to disrupt the discourses of binarism in literacy studies by canvassing
the production of literacy spaces more carefully in order to escape the ideological
gridlock of essentialism, marginalisation and normalisation of the Other. This task
might draw fruitfully on Bakhtin’s analysis of the ‘dialogical’ in the production of
cultural-semiotic spatiality. Bakhtin explicitly challenged the ‘monological’ notion of
a nation space as fixed and homogeneous through his exploration of contradictory
tension between semiotic fixity and mobility.
For Bakhtin, dialogue is not just a mode of interaction but, rather, a way of communal existence in which people establish a multifaceted relationship of mutual interdependence. Yet this social unity is not a homogeneous cultural-semiotic space that is reducible to single authoritarian consciousness. The fondled myths of nationness and wholeness of the cultural-semiotic landscape are contested by the polyphonic opposition of social, cultural and linguistic differences. The semiotic sphere of a nation therefore is understood by Bakhtin (1981, p. 291) as ‘ideologically saturated’ heteroglossic space in which two distinct ideological forces – centripetal and centrifugal – are in constant tension.

The centripetal forces are ‘monoglossic’ in that they tend to centralise or standardise language and close meanings, while the centrifugal forces gravitate towards the cultural periphery, decentralise and diversify language, and resist closure by articulating unofficial world views. Heteroglossia, according to Bakhtin (1981, p.272), refers to the conflict between these two forces:

Alongside the centripetal forces, the centrifugal forces of language carry on their uninterrupted work; alongside verbal-ideological centralization and unification, the uninterrupted processes of decentralization and disunification go forward.

The ideological tension between the centripetal and centrifugal forces within the cultural-semiotic sphere of a nation can be central then to our understanding of the national space as a product of dialogised heteroglossia. This concept does not denote this space as fixed enclosure, but rather as the ongoing dialogue between differences which triggers a semiotic motion across real and imagined boundaries created within and between cultures, social groups and ethnic communities.

Cultural locations and places in this dialogue are essential products and determinants of meaning-making actions. Like Vygotskian ‘psychological tools’, places mediate the social lives, consciousnesses and identities of people. Because they contain social languages, collective memories, narratives of common experience and discourses of shared cultural attributes, people’s consciousness and identities are often spatially delimited. However, the local construction of consciousness and identity, like the discursive production of place, also needs the Other or other places as a means of self-definition. This would constitute a background against which our place and everything that we do inside its spatial boundaries become meaningful only ‘through the eyes of the Other’. In this respect, dialogised heteroglossia obscures to some extent the constructed borders between ‘us’ and ‘them’. The Other is always present, as it were, in our place. The semiotic process of double reference to the self and the Other within the cultural-semiotic space of a nation is characterized by the simultaneous enactment of two-fold spatiality in meaning-making (i.e., here-there). It is located within a particular cultural-semiotic place of self and, at the same time, directed towards the Other by establishing a wide variety of links and interrelationships to other places, discourses and languages.

While dialogised heteroglossia permits the coexistence of multiple social voices and identities in the same space, the monological imagination of national communities and identities (Anderson, 1991) results in the production of a singular national space, culture and identity. The centripetal model of the national space usually tends to downplay social, cultural and linguistic differences and, even though these differences
might be recognised, the ultimate goal is to fuse them into a single, dominant consciousness by either marginalisation or repressive silencing of the Other. Responding to the flattening of cultural surface by the centripetal nationalist discourses, Bakhtin proposed, what I call, a *transcultural* model of spatiality.

For Bakhtin (1986), to be in a dialogue with the Other would mean to the individual consciousness getting out of itself and, in the space of ‘outsidedness’, meeting another consciousness. The space between self and the Other becomes a space of in-between-ness produced by the very act of inner distancing and pushing “one’s consciousness to the limit of Otherness in order to meet the external, ‘alien’ Other” (Gurevitch, 2001, p. 90). This model of dialogical interaction acquires particular significance in multicultural conditions because it imagines transcultural space between cultural binaries as asymmetrical and, at the same time, as a possibility of constructing new meanings. That is to say, it arouses a new understanding of cultural difference through the critical reconstruction of self.

This model might be then a useful political strategy as it opposes national centripetalism, the subjugation of the Other, and also promotes a new understanding of self and the Other, beyond a mere celebration of differences and cultural multivoicedness. It is rooted in the post-Kantian philosophy of thirding; one that injects a third dimension into thinking about the possibility of crossing, erasure and ‘translation’ of the boundaries in the construction of identities and textual meanings. Transcultural thirding, however, can be possible only when both self and the Other are able to transcend their one-sidedness. This does not mean that one’s individuality is absorbed by the Other, otherwise “it would merely be duplication and would not entail anything new” (Bakhtin, 1986, p. 7). Talking about the recognition of the alien Other in the space of outsidedness, Bakhtin (ibid., emphasis in original) says that:

> In order to understand, it is immensely important for the person who understands to be *located outside* the object of his or her creative understanding – in time, in space, in culture. For one cannot even really see one’s own exterior and comprehend it as a whole, and no mirrors or photographs can help; our real exterior can be seen and understood by other people, because they are located outside us in space and because they are *others*.

Outsidedness in dialogical interaction between self and the Other is for Bakhtin the most powerful aspect in understanding. The third moment of mutual recognition is transculturally mediated and, therefore, is broader than the initial perspective of either self or the Other. This is for Bakhtin a moment of genuine transformation of perspectives that is realised in opening up a new semantic depth of meaning. Here one finds a new mode of dialogical consciousness, which surmounts the closedness and one-sidedness of each particular meaning or position. This however, as Bakhtin explains, does not mean merging of the two into some sort of unity. He understands this as an *open* totality in which self and the Other are conjoined through recognition. As a result, they can not go back to their initial perspectives because these positions are already unrecoverable. This is due to irreversible changes in self-understanding which occurred in their mutually enriching dialogue with each other. Participation in such an intercultural dialogue then implies a shift from fixed cultural meanings and towards the open space of in-between-ness in which the very fact of being located outside of monadic cultures and identities may result in the ‘surplus of vision’ and creative understanding of both self and the Other. Outsidedness is the “organizing centre” of meaning-making experience (Voloshinov, 1973, p. 93). Consequently, the
The application of relational dialectics in a dialogue between self and the Other becomes a cultural-semiotic space for analysing and understanding meaning-making dynamics in relation to the cultural and social identities of participants. For Bakhtin, this is a heteroglossic space of creative transculturality.

Transcultural literacy
The application of relational dialectics in a dialogue between self and the Other to literacy studies is premised on the assumption that the ongoing flux of centripetal and centrifugal cultural discourses requires a more serious attention to transcultural literacy practices. Transcultural literacy is a phenomenon of the “contact zone” which, according to Pratt (1992, pp. 5-6), refers to the space of cultural encounters and ongoing relations, “usually involving conditions of coercion, radical inequality, and intractable conflict”. Textual practices in this space are not constituted in separate cultural environments but rather in relations of cultural differences to each other – that is, in their “co-presence, interaction, interlocking understanding and … often within radically asymmetrical relations of power” (ibid.). Central in this process are the ways the Other is recognised; and these ways are implicit in existing literacy frameworks.

A conservative framework of cultural literacy, as conceived by Hirsch (1987, 1999) and subsequently developed by the cultural literacy movement, is premised on the unificatory idea of a single culture. Because the Other is misrecognised in this model, the rationale behind the concept of cultural literacy lies in the acquisition of unexamined, canonised and universally shared information, seen as needed for all competent speakers, readers and writers to function effectively in society. The transmission of canonical literacy in schools is then believed to play a key role in ensuring national development and communication among a diverse population divided by ethnic, political and social differences. While putting emphasis on cultural unity, this model of cultural literacy promotes the unconditional assimilation of ethnic and linguistic minorities to dominant cultural codes. In this view, there is no need for multicultural education because, as Hirsch (1987, p. 21) argues, it interferes with the primary focus of national education and school’s responsibility to ensure the children’s mastery of the common cultural literacy – that is, the literacy canon of “the most democratic culture”. Such a program of cultural literacy for a diverse populace therefore is not only descriptively unserviceable, but also normatively dangerous due to the subjugation of other cultural identities and knowledge(s) and maintenance of existing inequalities.

Are then, perhaps, neo-liberal concepts of multiliteracies more able to provide an appropriate literacy education in today’s multicultural societies? They are apparently trying to overcome some serious flaws of the concept of single cultural literacy by advocating the recognition of cultural differences and increasing saliency of linguistic diversity. Yet, they are almost as inappropriate as the dominant cultural literacy model, because they conceptually and politically presuppose it. While the conception of multicultural literacies seeks pedagogical ways in which differences could get on with one another, it drags along with it the essentialised and static notion of cultural difference (e.g. monadic identities, distinct ways of thinking, learning and perceiving the world). If cultural differences were in fact static and constituted within isolated social-semiotic places, then one could not operate across the boundaries nor solve the problems of cultural coexistence. For this to happen cultures should be seen as new formations characterised by heterogeneity and border-crossing dynamics. The
diversity of cultural and textual practices is then not a natural condition of cultural coexistence, but rather is the effect of an enunciation of difference that constitutes asymmetries of power in interethnic relations (Luke & Luke, 1999). As a result, relations of power are central in our understanding the nature of border-crossings and textual-semiotic flows and, consequently, new transcultural literacies through which people seek to articulate new identities and meanings relevant to their altering cultural circumstances. These textual practices are features of transcultural becoming and semiotic innovation; they are not English literacy but literacies in English.

In this sense, the concept of literacy in multicultural conditions needs to be re-defined as transcultural literacy. The rethinking of literacy practices within ethnic communal places can be commenced by situating them in a networked space of sociocultural and semiotic relations. Transcultural literacy then is constituted and practised in these relations. It can not be merely tied to geographical or physical places. Transcultural literacy is a cultural-semiotic practice happening in contact zones between ‘us’ and ‘them’, at different temporal scales and has different speed, depending on cultural macro and micro politics, the degree of openness by ethnic communities to cultural changes, social mobility of their members and a variety of counter-strategies used by community leaders and media to resist these changes. And if the spatial production of ethnic communities is defined by the ratio between change and resistance, we can analyse how the semiotic landscaping of ethnic communities operates and how transcultural literacies are evolving, challenging and changing these cartographies. To illustrate this briefly I would like to take Greek community in Melbourne as an example.

**Transcultural dialectics of urban literacies**

Melbourne is often imagined as a colorful mosaic of ethnic cultures that are visible in the urban semiotic landscape of signs and billboards, media and traditional fashion, shops and restaurants, schools, public spaces and religious institutions. This imagination is about representing and celebrating the city’s multicultural and cosmopolitan spirit which promotes a variety of lifestyles, making it exotic and ‘the most livable’ place. This style of cosmopolitan multiculturalism also encourages cultural and linguistic vitality to sustain identities and literacy practices of minority groups. For instance, Greek diaspora in Melbourne has been noted not only for souvlaki but also for its success in language maintenance and children’s socialisation to Greek heritage and customs both in family and school settings. Most members of the community identify themselves with their own culture and Greek Orthodox Church and are proud to have Greek background. The multi-city in this sense is an aesthetic space in which diversity is valued, vivid and to some extent supported.

Yet, there is another form of imagination in Melbourne which captures the urban production of ethnic minority places as pathological, disadvantaged and poverty-stricken ghettos. This type of semiotic landscaping is based on the bipolar asymmetry of ‘us’ and ‘them’ which are the building blocks of constructing communal places of domination and resistance. One the one hand, ethnic communities emerge historically as a permanent source of protection from fears of insecurity, isolation, estrangement and the intrusion of aliens. On the other hand, this urban landscaping can reify a politics of difference that favours ‘us’ (identities, meanings and practices of dominant cultural groups), while marginalising and excluding ‘them’ (practices, knowledges and identities of the Other). Obviously, in the production of cultural-semiotic places
and political locations, identities and meanings become consolidated and generalised. To use Artiles' (2000) words, ‘us’ comes to define a particular collective identity – homogeneous, hard-working, speaking proper English, etc. In contrast, ‘them’ are wogs who are lazy, dirty, heterogeneous, often misuse English and take advantage of the welfare system (Tsolidis, 2001).

In different ways, these representations bear upon the significant role of urban place in representing and managing cultural and linguistic differences in multi-cities. However, as the days of signs on restaurants reading ‘No dogs or Greeks allowed’ have passed, the challenge for Greek community is not so much to overcome racial discrimination, but rather to come to terms that communal place becomes a less critical factor for the maintenance of cultural, social, linguistic and textual practices. As Zangilis (2004) argues, this should be recognized by community leaders:

The historical boundaries of the community – “paroikia” has evolved in the greater part of the last century, from small isolated groups to large communities of migrants, have long ago ceased to hold the overflow of the Australian born and raised Greeks into the wider community. The notion that these people have been lost in the wilderness and the agonizing about what can be done to “bring them back into the fold” that torments so many of the first generation, and some policy makers with blinkers on, is not only futile but extremely counter-productive.

Ethnic communal places need to be reconceptualised as urban spaces that are complexly networked and transacted by multiple social and cultural boundaries. Hybrid diasporic identities in Greek community emerge in the nodal points of this network. Because here one faces and ‘translates’ the Other, meaning and identity can no longer be the same (Papastergiadis, 2000, p. 145). Hence, even though Melbourne Greek diaspora has been represented as more or less monolithic, it is a community, as Tsolidis (2003) has noted, with a strong sense of itself as both Greek and Australian:

It functions as more than a Greek outpost and there is interest within it to reflect on diaspora culture as a fluid, creative and playful space. There is also a great deal of difference within this space. Differences between generations, genders, communities of origin and settlement, class difference, elements with various lengths of residency and causes of migration as well as political views. There is also variation of opinion related to how the community holds itself together (if at all) how it represents itself and responds to how it perceives it is being perceived by mainstream Australian society.

Such a notion of urban diasporic space is in line with Lefebvre’s (1991) concept of space as ‘networks’ and ‘pathways’ through which other spaces overlap, interpenetrate and intertwine. In spaces of flow identities shuttle, as it were, between and across constructed boundaries, producing the elements of Thirdness – new meanings and new trans-border textual practices. The urban space of Greek diasporic community is the space of sociocultural intersemiosis. This is a terrain of radicalisation, transformation and change of meaning, which is formed not only in competitive cultural-semiotic locations but also in sociocultural dynamics, inevitably involving dis-locations and border-crossings (e.g. relocation to other suburbs, mixed marriages, job mobility, social networks, etc).

Hence, the transcultural model of literacy attempts to address textual practices in multicultural conditions by connecting them to the construction of hybrid identities and by recognising them in their own right. The relationship between identity hybridization and the spatial category of dispersion or multi-locality acquires a paramount
significance for studying textual-semiotic practices of transculturality in diaspora. The members of diasporic communities are caught in a double bind between ‘here and there’, between Australian culture and home-land. Gilroy (1993) reveals this paradoxical nature of transnational communities in the notion of ‘double consciousness’ – with regard to diasporic individuals’ awareness of centred attachments, of being simultaneously ‘home away from home’, or American-, British-, Australian- and something else.

According to Clifford (1994) and Hall (1990), the empowering paradox of multi-locality is that this stimulates the semiotic activity of a diaspora to construct ever-changing textual representations which provide a set of malleable identities. The semiotic activity of the diaspora no longer has to be cemented by exclusive territorial claims. Rather, the diaspora can be held together through cultural-semiotic artefacts and, in the age of cyberspace, by the new technologies of communication. In this way, identification with the diaspora serves to bridge the gap between essentialised ethnic locations and identities, between the global and the local. The diaspora becomes a material-semiotic space in which transcultural literacies are practised through interlocking histories and cultures and by belonging at the same time to several sociocultural places – and thus to no particular place. A diasporic urban space is a new sphere of semiotic practice which, due to its dialogical nature, in intercultural communication and translation, involves a political strategy of radical cultural creativity. It is disruptive of the cultural stereotyping which usually involves the polarisation of essentialised cultural identities and practices.

Conclusion
As policy makers, academics and the general public struggle against Anglo-fundamentalist policies in language and literacy education, there is also a need to recognise the limitations of liberal essentialism and multiculturalism. As Papastergiadis (2000, p.157) argues:

The pluralistic model that dominates the politics of multiculturalism has done a great deal to identify new constituencies within the structures of society. It has empowered new subjects to make different claims about the priorities and trajectory of social change. However, this model has not challenged the very structures by which we see the process of identity as being formed across differences.

What we need then is to grasp the possibility of identity being formed through the interconnection of partial languages and fragmented cultures – that is, in and through transcultural literacy.

References


