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**On strangers, 'moral panics' and the neo-liberalization of teacher education**

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## On strangers, 'moral panics' and the neo-liberalization of teacher education

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### **Abstract**

This paper explores the convergence of neo-liberal managerialism with the neo-conservative technologies of creating 'moral panics' about teacher education, English language and literacy curriculum and traditional values that allegedly fail to address the issues of public safety and cultural integration in the post-September 11<sup>th</sup> world. It problematises the neo-conservative vision of managing 'strangers' and public risks through dominant cultural literacy. The paper counters the neo-conservative backlash with a framework that emphasizes dialogical ethics in teaching for difference and conceptualizes transcultural literacy as an alternative model of education in multicultural conditions. This model is presented both as a way of resisting the subliminal infiltration of neo-conservative thinking in teacher education today and as a way of imagining a 'cosmopolitan' professional.

### **Introduction**

Today universities in Australia are under enormous pressure to reinvent themselves. They operate in what Ulrich Beck (1992) once defined as a 'risk society' – a society that is characterised by increasing uncertainties and, related to these, social anxieties. While Beck (1992) connects risks to the process of late modernization and its side effects, I would like to connect risks in higher education to the processes of knowledge globalization and to the neo-liberal model of governmentality in education as its socio-political 'side effect'. Most of the universities in Australia, to a varying degree, have become global universities and, as such, their activities are no longer oriented exclusively towards the nation-state. The universities are encouraged to think and act globally. If previously they were positioned in a relatively predictable and controllable space between the state and the workforce, now they find themselves located at the crossroads between various transnational flows. A global knowledge market has become a major driver of higher education, influencing what knowledge(s) should be produced and taught and what competencies have values in the knowledge-based economy, thereby attracting human capital and 'customers' or 'consumers' from proximal and faraway places.

In the context of multiple and extensive mobilities (e.g. epistemological, cultural, semiotic, human, financial), globalized higher education triggers quite a number of socio-political 'side effects.' As the university becomes a nodal point of global flows, it can be perceived by various stake-holders as uncontrollable and less responsive to the national, or rather internal, interests. It turns into an object of scrutiny and criticism because the global flow of knowledge(s) and 'strangers' come to be perceived as the disordering of modern certainties about what and how to teach (e.g. anxieties about the curriculum that incorporates postmodern and new left ideas). As a result the university gets entangled into a process of so called 'reflexive modernisation' – i.e., the re-visioning of its activities at the institutional and individual levels through various accountability and performativity measures (cf. Beck, Giddens & Lash, 1994). In part these processes come to regulate a risky territory of 'academic capitalism' where the universities are squeezed between a highly competitive international market and declining government funding (Slaughter & Leslie, 1997). With this comes an increasing pressure to attract 'customers' and external

funding and to raise efficiency and quality. The current model of neo-liberal governmentality in higher education, as articulated for example in the Nelson Report (2003), incorporates some major characteristics of hyper-capitalism, particularly the preponderance of private interests and pursuits over the public sphere, the replacement of social agency and responsibility by market-forces and social Darwinist competition (cf. Apple, 2006). This has significant implications for how professionalism, for example teacher professionalism, is framed. One of these implications for English language teacher education is what kind of graduate attributes students need in order to operate in a globalized and multicultural environment. Accountability and performativity measures are in part responses to the heightened risk consciousness that teacher educators in a globalized university can fail to train pre-service teachers in what children of the nation need to know. As a result, the neo-liberal discourses of teacher professionalism tend to conjoin with neo-conservative discourse containing a strong moral dimension.

This paper explores the convergence of neo-liberal managerialism with the neo-conservative technologies of creating ‘moral panics’ about teacher education, English language and literacy curriculum and traditional values that allegedly fail to address the issues of public safety and cultural integration in the post-September 11<sup>th</sup> world. It problematises the neo-conservative vision of managing ‘strangers’ and public risks through cultural literacy education. The paper counters the neo-conservative backlash with a framework that emphasizes dialogical ethics in teaching for difference and conceptualizes transcultural literacy as an alternative model of education in multicultural conditions. And lastly, this model is presented both as a way of resisting the subliminal infiltration of corporate and neo-conservative thinking in teacher education today and as a way of imagining a ‘cosmopolitan’ professional.

### **Moral panics and literacy education**

As Apple (2006, p. 21) argues, “many of the rightist policies now taking centre stage in education and nearly everything else embody a tension between a neoliberal emphasis on “market values” on the one hand and a neoconservative attachment to “traditional values” on the other.” Neo-liberal policies in Australian education have precipitated numerous efforts to delegitimise public education by highlighting, or rather constructing, deficiencies of public schools and universities. It is, therefore, interesting to observe how neoliberal politics in education justifies the necessity of market competition and the reduction of funding for public education by blaming schooling, teachers and teacher educators for the essential injustices and contradictions of hyper-capitalism. The subliminal message from the neo-liberals is that, unlike the private schools, government schools lack values. According to Julie Bishop, the curriculum should be nationalized to ensure both the quality of teacher training and the quality of curriculum in schools. These, as she puts it, should be protected from postmodern and left ideologues who have hijacked curriculum and are “experimenting with the education of our young people from a comfortable position of unaccountability” (Davidson, 2006, p. 15).

It is clear that without the attacks on teachers, on how and what they teach, any cuts in social spending and increasing inequality in education might be very unpopular with the public. Hence, neoliberal reforms are inseparable from building alliances with the neo-

conservative forces that blame teachers for failing to teach ‘traditional values’ and cultural literacy as well as teacher educators for failing to ‘train’ pre-service teachers in how to transfer the ‘correct’ knowledge better. This strategy of creating ‘moral panics’ is not new, of course, and has been widely used in Australia and elsewhere to represent teaching as a low trust profession, thereby justifying the introduction of accountability regimes to monitor educators’ performance and the curriculum.

To unravel current concerns with teaching quality and standards, it might be useful therefore to recall Stanley Cohen’s work *Folk Devils and Moral Panics* where he provided a generative sociological analysis of building up social anxieties:

Societies appear to be subject, every now and then, to periods of moral panics. A condition, episode, person or groups of persons emerges to become defined as a threat to social values and interests; its nature is presented in a stylized and stereotypical fashion by the mass media; the moral barricades are manned by editors, bishops, politicians and other right-thinking people; socially accredited experts pronounce their diagnosis and solutions; ways of coping are evolved or (more often) resorted to; the condition then disappears, submerges or deteriorates and becomes more visible. (Cohen, 1972, p. 9)

Of interest to us here is the structuring of the discourse of ‘moral panics’ as it currently unfolds in the Australian media with regard to English curriculum, condemning it as a postmodernist ‘gobbledygook’ and leftist ‘rubbish’ that induces low literacy standards (*The Australian*, 21-4-06, p.1; also *The Australian*, 25-7-05, p. 26). There can be little doubt that this ‘moral panic’ constitutes a significant historical moment in the neo-liberal and neo-conservative politics of education as it simultaneously establishes and legitimates new managerialist perspectives on teacher education.

Current moral panics are used to create effective alliances between neoconservative politicians, ‘claim makers’ and press in establishing the ‘context of influence’ in education. Two things are important in this regard; first, the role of the New Right alliances in influencing public opinion about teaching and in defining ‘problems’ in education and, second, the role of the media in accrediting the neoconservative claim makers as experts who know how and what teachers should teach. The expert advice is however rather simple; this is essentially a call for a ‘simpler’ and more basic approach to language and literacy that will insure the development of decoding/encoding skills and the transmission of literacy canon. Education is deemed by these experts successful when students come to identify with dominant social and cultural discourses and knowledge rather than critiquing them. The return to basics in language and literacy education is therefore about returning to the modern tradition in education that is arguably inseparable from a culture of normalization that is desperate for order and uncomfortable with difference and strangers.

Here lies the paradox; in times when classrooms become increasingly culturally diverse the university is urged to prepare teachers that would discourage difference, see it as polluting traditional values and beliefs and, hence, as something that should be positively repressed through ‘proper’ education. This neo-conservative vision of teacher education entails a typically modern design of dealing with difference through the nation(alist) order-making. As Bauman (1991, p. 63) once put it “the [modern] nation state is designed

primarily to deal with the problem of strangers.” It does this by using two strategies – anthropophagic (assimilation) and anthropoemic (exclusion). Both strategies are central to the process of nation-building described by Anderson (1991) as ‘imagining’ sameness by homogenising differences and expelling strangers beyond the borders of managed and manageable territory. Needless to say that education, particularly language and literacy education, can play a crucial role in managing differences for, if strangers are products of certain cultural or social upbringing, they are amenable to reshaping through some sort of explicitly normative curriculum.

Thinking about the possibility of a normative curriculum, neo-conservative politicians mobilise and draw upon the metanarratives of a particular kind. Ten years ago there was a relative consent between the warring parties in defining the national space of Australia as a culturally diverse, tolerant and open society. Continuing Keatings’s orientation of Australian politics towards Asia-Pacific region, both Howard and Beazley reaffirmed that “Australian nationality was no longer defined by racial exclusion” (*The Australian*, 15-9-2006, p.16). Subsequently, there was the time of renegade MP Pauline Hanson and her One Nation Party, Tampa crisis, September 11<sup>th</sup> and Bali that put the issues of public safety, multiculturalism and strangers at the forefront of political debates. As a result, we are witnessing the resurgence of old metanarratives that evoke an idea of original cultural purity that is perceived to be ‘under attack’ and, hence, must be protected and preserved. Integration and assurances over shared values are seen as the key to national cohesion. However, there has been no serious attempt to define what these values are in media debates, with the exception of Donnelly’s (2006a, p. 8) references “to a long and proud history of democratic freedom based on the Westminster parliamentary system and English common law,” cultural canon and language that are Anglo-Celtic in origin and “an industrial and economic system that guarantees a fair go for all.” This heritage, as Donnelly (ibid.) argues, has been denied by the ‘cultural Left’ that infiltrated the curriculum, and students are taught that “Australian culture and society are characterized by inequality, social injustice, diversity and difference.” He continues that “instead of celebrating Australia’s Western tradition, students are told we have always been multicultural and that all cultures are of equal value. Feel guilty about the sins of the past, students are told.”

To rectify this cultural literacy crisis, Donnelly (2006b) suggests a return to literary classics as a basis for education in multicultural society. This is seen as a telos of educating the nation for cultural canon can serve as a protective shield from the imagined odds of the political Left, pop culture, strangers and their multiliteracies. Donnelly’s comments are symptomatic of ‘recovered memory’ syndrome described in psychotherapy as an apparent recollection of something that one did not actually experience (Colman, 2001). The only difference is that psychotherapeutic sessions extend through the media to the whole nation, making people believe that before multiculturalism everything was perfectly ordered, controlled and, most importantly, fair. Selectively recovered (or false) memories become equivalent to ‘spectral evidence’ in psychotherapeutic sessions and form the basis for various accusations. In our case, too, the accusation of multicultural education and critical pedagogy in failing the students forms a body of evidence, whereby particular metanarratives are being mobilized for the production of order and to

extinguish existential uncertainties. Re-imagining the curriculum from this position, therefore, becomes one of the strategies in managing the perceived cultural risks of living in a polyvocal and heterogeneous society. Donnelly's (2006b) recipe for managing such risks is to instill 'classic consciousness' into the strangers' heads.

This in itself is not a new approach to cultural 'order-making'. The production of order through dominant cultural literacy – as a recipe for managing differences – reflects an unresolved contradiction in the nation-building project. More specifically, this has to do with the idea of cultural purity in establishing community founded on the principles of mutual understanding and unity. This project is inherently exclusive as the idea of cultural purity (and cultural literacy) both establishes the limits to incorporation and triggers a search for ever new strangers who do not fit within an image of community sought. It is for this reason that modern nation-states, as Bauman (1997) argues, are in a context process of purification. And this explains why the process of nation-building remains inherently incomplete. If previously the specter of Asian 'invasion' attracted much of social anxiety and (b)order-protecting efforts in Australia, in current post 9/11 conditions the Muslims are at the forefront of the national security agenda. In the context of an unfinished nation-building project and globalization, educating the nation becomes more elusive than ever before. Framing the curriculum around dominant cultural literacy and establishing communal homogeneity, whilst de-legitimizing the Other and announcing ever new strangers, is not feasible in these circumstances. This is because the category of the stranger stands in opposition to the modern framework of education that presupposes a unified 'we-horizon' (Husserl, 1970). We need a shift towards a framework that is more response-able to the life of strangers in a late-modern, globalized society.

### **From a community of insiders to a community of strangers**

To the extent that the pursuit of common cultural literacy rests on the premise of purity and essentialism, the attainment of community remains questionable. We need, as Hannerz (1996) argues, an image of community that is cosmopolitan in its orientation and is open to divergent cultural, intellectual and aesthetic experiences. While such a community should be willing to engage with alterity, communication between self and the other should not assume the existence of uniform cultural literacy. Rather different systems of meaning-making can be seen to constitute a new vision of literacy – practices of meaning-making that involve brokering and bringing together different perspectives across cultural-semiotic borders. This is a utopian vision of cosmopolitan community which requires learning how to live with strangers. Wenger (1998, p. 215) captures this idea of learning across boundaries by relating it to identity:

Because learning transforms who we are and what we do, it is an experience of identity. It is not just accumulation of skills and information, but also a process of becoming – to become a certain person ...

In this regard, any vision of building a community of difference implies opening up new learning possibilities through becoming a person who is hospitable to strangers.

There have been many attempts to understand the effects of difference on the sociability of people. The sociology of stranger formulated by Georg Simmel a century ago was probably one of the first productive attempts to explore the problem of strangeness by opening a vista on relations of hospitality and hostility in urban conditions. The urban phenomenon – the emergence of global cities – has changed the very conception of how people live and communicate with others. Simmel (1971) problematised the idea of *Gemeinschaft* (universal community) by exploring the spatial configuration of the metropolis where dialogical relations with others are not based on the idea of essential sameness. He argued that strangeness becomes an inseparable feature of the everyday life in urban conditions where space is scarce and places are crowded. It matters little whether one is the stranger or not for in these conditions of spatial proximity all people are atomized and alienated. The city provides a context where people are simultaneously close and yet distant. They live in and share the same space, and yet they are not close enough to fall within the imagined construct of sameness.

Yet, Simmel's conception of the stranger was situated within a relatively uncomplicated vision of a nation as an ethnic community, corresponding to what Bauman (2000) calls 'heavy' modernity. If perilously a community-building project was supported by the whole system of economic, cultural and linguistic centripetalism, in conditions of 'fluid' modernity, as Bauman (2000) argues, the state contain multiple and fragmented communities that operate both within and across its boundaries. Therefore, he takes the sociology of the stranger a step further, exploring how social and cultural practices produce and (in)validate strangers in the late modern project of revitalized community-building, which is not universal in its nature. In this process, as Bauman (2000, p. 180) argues, the dream of purity has been "deregulated and privatized." He connects the individualization and privatization of life to the collapse of ethnic-centred communities and, with this, of one's communal identity. Deregulation means an increased volume of individual responsibilities and decreased supplies of security provisions by the state. In conditions of manufactured social uncertainties related to the incessant presence of strangers on the horizon of one's private life, security becomes the primary motive of community-building.

The development of new relations with alterity in this process acquires a particular significance for now everyone needs to deal with different kinds of strangers. In doing so, new communities explode to reconcile the old and the new as they try to produce spaces of security and learn how to live with strangers in their neighbourhoods. If modern nation-state communities were obsessed with preserving their cultural and political body sterile from 'alien viruses' now, confronted with universal estrangement, this task is often performed on a local level. Bauman (2000) defines the formation of local communities as an explosion to the perceived danger of strangers. Hence, the most challenging part of community-building today is probably learning how to separate the good from the evil without succumbing to over hasty acts of binary exclusion. If previously most ideas of communal identity have been constructed in relation to the exteriority of otherness, now, when the Other is proximal and boundaries are not clear, the members of fragmented communities need to transcend the 'ontology of Sameness' by learning how to read their own identities through the eyes of the Other. Their encounters with Otherness come to

constitute spaces of everyday life where one is impelled to arrive at the ethical appreciation of alterity and transcendence.

Everyday encounters with the Other is a primary theme in the dialogical ethics of Levinas and Bakhtin. Their view of dialogical ethics can be located outside traditional moral frameworks in relations between self and the Other (e.g., the Hegelian philosophy of rights or Kantian content-ethics). The ethical in Bakhtin's and Levinas' scholarship embraces the eventness of such encounters rather than drawing on abstract concepts that mediate social relations (cf. Bakhtin, 1993). Even though there are some significant differences between Bakhtin and Levinas, what unites them is the idea that ethics is not something that is imposed from outside. Rather, it is inseparable from the dialogical nature of the life itself and hence is unavoidable in any encounter with difference. Before politics and before ontology, there is proximity and responsibility for the Other (Levinas, 1991). It is through dialogical relations that the Otherness of the Other can be experienced as an immediate alterity. In the space opened up by dialogue, this alterity is not an apprehension of the Other by an *I*. Both Levinas and Bakhtin are critical of rational philosophy which elevates the *I* as the locus of subjective understanding of the Other. Instead, they argue the primacy of the first philosophy in which the *I* finds itself standing before the face of the Other, which is both our accusation (for we may have oppressed or marginalized the Other) and a source of our ethical responsibility. As Levinas (1989, p. 48) puts it:

The Other as Other is not only an alter ego; the Other is what I myself am not. The Other is this, not because of the Other's character, or physiognomy, or psychology, but because of the Other's very alterity... The Other is, for example, the weak, the poor, "the widow and the orphan," whereas I am the rich or the powerful.

In a dialogue, self is vulnerable to the unknowable Other whose Otherness comes into being as uncertainty, arising from the very tension between sameness and difference. The dialogical synergy of this relationship can not be fully understood on the basis of rational logic (cf. Bakhtin, 1993). The only thing is certain that the self should respond to the Other in one way or another. Thus, dialogical ethics starts with a call for action and with the examination of response-ability in performing this act.

The call for action is a demand that comes from the Other. It is for this reason that Levinas (1969) presents the Other as someone who puts me into question and makes me responsible. Paradoxically, the marginalized Other for him is always higher for as people who are suffering or are oppressed present themselves to us, we are obliged not to harm them. The dialogical encounters in this respect are not symmetrical. It is not an exchange of two equals conjoined in the dialogical event and exchanging utterances. On the contrary, Levinas' understanding of ethical responsibility as asymmetry is to posit oneself as always-already answerable to and for the Other:

The being that presents himself in the face comes from a dimension of height, a dimension of transcendence whereby he can present himself as a stranger without opposing me as obstacle or enemy. More, for my position as *I* consists in being able to respond to this essential destitution of the Other, finding resources for myself. The Other ... dominates me in his transcendence ... (Levinas 1969, p. 215)

To engage in dialogue is to listen and to be open to the Other; it is to be immersed in the discursive space where the self becomes response-able and answerable when face to face with alterity. The Other therefore is the origin of our experience for we enter the world, as Bakhtin (1981) put it, that has been already populated with the words of others. Because the words precede us we can only respond to what has been already said by appropriating these words and through this developing our understanding of self and the Other. To respond to the Other, however, is not evoke some abstract meanings but rather is the act of saying while being positioned here and now, in the center of the dialogue between being-for-the Other and language. This is the 'naked' immediacy of dialogical experience, "the molten lava of events as they happen ... before the magma of such experience cools, hardening into igneous theories, or accounts of what has happened" (Holquist, 1993, p. X). Thus, both Levinas and Bakhtin move the foundational basis of morality from the realm of abstract social construction to the proximity of the Other, to the eventness of intersubjective encounters in which "the Other measures me with a gaze incomparable to the gaze by which I discover him" (Levinas, 1969, p. 87). It is in this sense that ethical response-ability for Levinas and Bakhtin is primal, rather than something that emanates from ethical systems already developed in society. It originates in the face-to-face relationship where the Other paralyzes one's 'impetuous freedom' to violence.

Returning to the question of building a community of difference, dialogical ethics of Levinas and Bakhtin injects a moral dimension into how we relate to the Other; before this becomes a political project informed by laws, rights or highly abstract principles of tolerance. The key issue here is shifting the focus from politically meditated ways of relating to and recognizing others to the acknowledgment of and responsibility for the Other in everyday encounters. This is a question of shifting from living side-by-side with strangers and to learning how to live with them face-to-face. Needless to say that the possibility of interrupting the cultural, linguistic or epistemological violence towards the Other will depend on the possibility of dialogical learning from and with difference, particularly through restoring a sense of the agency of those 'others' who have been excluded, marginalised or demonized in the process of cultural purification. This brings into view a set of question about literacy education that will be responsive to the Other's appeal. Developing this critical agenda requires laying aside both the orthodoxies of the normative curriculum and dominant cultural literacy as an impediment to responsible teaching in multicultural conditions.

### **Towards transculturation and 'cosmopolitan' teachers**

Dialogical ethics is a blow to normative curriculum frameworks in which the dominant cultural literacy is aggrandized over the literacies of others. It is critical of cultural monologism inherent in such frameworks. While the neo-conservative view of teaching cultural literacy to strangers recognizes difference as liability, this logocentric ideology presents a pedagogical responsibility for the Other as a moral obligation to teach 'proper' knowledge. This leads, as a result, to the annihilation of Otherness, in particular through the practices of standardization and assessment that provide no space for appreciating the value of difference. In this regard, the moral side of teaching the Other is backed up by the law of conditional hospitality, whereby the Other vanishes in the political space of

professional obligation to the nation. It is in this space that a singular responsibility for generalised others harbours injustice to a concrete Other. In contradistinction to this approach, dialogical ethics starts with something that is before and beyond the law of conditional hospitality, namely with justice that demands an infinite responsibility for the Other. The ethical question in English language and literacy education is thus becomes an issues of political position in education – one’s ability to respond to a call from the Other by acknowledging its Otherness. This pedagogical position is centrally about the events of learning with and from the Other; an ethical position through which we can transcend the logocentrism of the normative curriculum.

In this respect, a focus on dialogical ethics of the everyday is an imperative in preparing teachers for work in communities of difference for this approach presents the very act of annihilating the Other as an ethical impossibility. Fundamental to this is the idea that the power of the Other “exceeds my powers infinitely” (Levinas, 1969, p. 198). While the Other introduces me to what was not in me, its alterity overflows my self by affecting and transforming my consciousness and, in turn, fosters new meanings and understandings to emerge. For instance, Bakhtin’s (1990) idea of the ‘surplus of vision’ that the Other provides to me emphasises a recognition of my limitations. We can of course ignore these limitations, but to do so would be tragic for we will erase any chance to see the world and ourselves through the eyes of the Other, expending the horizon of seeing and transforming our selves (i.e., our self-centredness). Dialogical ethics springs from a recognition of the fact that the Other has *power* to shape my consciousness of self and my worldview. Therefore, the Other is both my reason and my obligation (Levinas, 1969).

Recognizing the transformative power of the Other is perhaps the most challenging task in preparing teachers. We should question first whether teachers can push back against the powerful constructs of neo-colonialism, neo-nationalism and neo-liberalism that are sedimented in the curriculum and pedagogical practice and develop tools necessary for the re-imagining of pedagogy beyond cultural borders and between self and the Other. To transcend the current policies of assimilating differences in and through education, as Luke (2004, p.1438) argues, we need to re-envision a teacher in a globalized society as “a teacher with the capacity to shunt between the local and the global, to explicate and engage with the broad flows of knowledge and information, technologies and populations, artefacts and practices that characterise the present historical moment.” In a word, we need a vision of a new professional that can work on and between cultural borders and take responsibility for the future of alterity by drawing upon the events of transculturation in textual meaning-making – that is, *transcultural literacy*.

Transcultural literacy is a phenomenon of the “contact zone” which, according to Pratt (1998, p. 173), refers to the space “where cultures meet, clash, and grapple with each other, often in contexts of highly asymmetrical relations of power.” Her idea of the contact zone contrasts with the idea of logocentric communities. Textual practices in the contact zone are not constituted in separate communities but rather in relations of cultural differences to each other – that is, in their co-presence and dialogical interaction. Central to this pedagogical process of transculturation are the ways the Other is acknowledged. While dialogical interaction can start initially from locations that are outside the contact

zone, power relations between self and the Other can intervene so that this zone becomes an are(n)a of conflict and struggle for meaning. This, according to Bakhtin (1984), represents a clash of the extreme forms of monologism because both self and the Other do not transcend their preoccupation with self-consciousness, enclosed within itself and completely finalized. However, even though there is a clash of different meanings, the self cannot negate the Other completely because alterity *is* the main source of self-understanding. To engage in a pedagogical dialogue is to listen and to be open to the Other; it is to be immersed in the discursive space where the self (e.g. the teacher) becomes responsive and answerable when face-to-face with alterity. The Other, therefore, is the origin of our everyday experience, and we become conscious of our answerability as educators only while revealing ourselves to another, through another and with the help of another (cf. Bakhtin, 1984).

Besides this ethical dimension, transculturation implies a recognition of pedagogical 'contact zones' as relational. The Bakhtinian perspective on meaning-making is helpful in this respect as it explains the interdependence of self and the Other in spatial-temporal terms, in particular through the concept of chronotope (time/space). During interaction participants occupy or find themselves in the same time-space dimension (e.g., here and now) and this allows them to reveal their sameness to a certain extent (e.g., common goals or reasons to be here and now). Yet, both self and Other occupy this chronotope differently because their "concrete, actually experienced horizons do not coincide" (Bakhtin, 1990, p. 23). Due to these differences, as Bakhtin clarifies further, one can always see and know something that the Other can not see: "parts of his [sic] body that are inaccessible to his own gaze (his head, his face and its expression), the world behind his back, and a whole series of objects and relations, which in any of our mutual relations are accessible to me but not to him" (ibid, p. 23). This unique "excess of seeing" by participants in a dialogical mode of meaning-making may provide teachers and students with a more complete understanding of their selves and is fundamental to transcultural literacy events. Again, self is dependent for its existence on the Other who provides a source of new meanings and a new semiotic basis for becoming, or enabling new selves to become.

Transcultural literacy is inseparable, therefore, from this complex identity work in dialogical encounters between self and the Other, between two cultures and two systems of meaning-making. The space in-between, also known as thirdspace (Bhabha, 1994), is exactly a location where identity hybridization and the syncretism of cultural literacies transpires. A pedagogical focus on such events acquires a paramount significance for teachers working in multicultural classrooms. Because members of these communities of difference are caught in a double bind between 'here and there', between dominant culture and other cultures, the paradoxical nature of transcultural literacy is that it can never be understood as a 'pure' or fixed system of meanings. It evolves as a distinctly new cultural-semiotic way of making sense of multicultural complexity in and beyond classrooms.

Recognizing the relational nature of literacy in multicultural societies, some researchers have started to develop a thirdspace perspective on literacy learning and teaching as

nested within inter-actions between institutionalized 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, 2005a, b; Moje *et al.*, 2004; Pahl, 2002). In different ways, these studies argue that ‘thirding’ and transculturation are similarly relevant to the members of the cultural mainstream as these features of literacy events are characteristic of multicultural conditions, in general, rather just of literacy practices in migrant or minority communities. Transculturation is a central process of cultural transformation itself. For this reason, the focus on thirdspace between ‘us’ and ‘them’ becomes increasingly important in order to imagine the principles of literacy pedagogy that would enable students to understand and negotiate differences, their connectedness and meaning dynamics in a dialogue of acknowledged differences, at cultural crossroads. This, in turn, can further inform the re-visioning of teaching ‘as a cosmopolitan form of work’ in a globalized society (Luke, 2004). As Pratt (1998, p. 184) has emphasized, “our job ... remains to figure out how to make that crossroads the best site for learning that it can be,” looking for the “pedagogical arts of the contact zone” in order to foster a dialogue between differences in schools and beyond. What we are witnessing now, however, is that cultural contact zones become again more visible as a bitterly contested space. This prompts us to increase our scholarly and political efforts in conceptualizing a pedagogy of transcultural literacy that is still to come. Today, we need, more than ever before, to posit some key questions in thinking about literacy education for cultural difference – what is ultimately at stake and being struggled over, in these times of major cultural and spatial transformations.

### **Concluding remarks**

The injection of ethical dimension into debates about literacy has significant implications for how we imagine the future of teacher education in a multicultural, global society and, indeed, the future of multiculturalism. While current neo-conservative boundary politics in literacy education are central to the project of nation-building, they are also a means of purifying national spaces by representing them as homogeneous and uniform. The maintenance of strong cultural boundaries is a strategy to construct ever new ‘strangers’ as polluting elements (Bauman, 2000). The production of a literacy crisis by neo-conservative governments assumes therefore the logic of purification. Rather than reinscribing binary distinctions between self and the Other, we need to situate the politics of literacy in relation to the ethics and politics of building communities of difference. This requires a shift in focus from boundary maintenance to boundary crossings and flows. Looking at pedagogical sites as meeting points would mean accepting the enriching potential of difference rather than fixating on boundary control and surveillance. This would also suggest more numerous and more fluid relationships between people using literacies in multiple ways and contributing to the production of new meanings that in turn can mediate the construction of new communal spaces. We need to imagine a new spatiality of literacy, referred to here as transcultural literacy occurring in cultural ‘contact zones’. While transcultural literacy enables people to operate effectively at and across cultural borders and by doing so contributes to the messiness of becoming, it might be a starting point in rethinking teacher education for new times.

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