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Rural Latino High School Students Considering Identity and Belonging Through Comparative Study of Newcomer Youth in South Africa

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ABSTRACT

Precipitated by an arranged but unusual classroom activity – eight Latina immigrant high school students in the rural U.S. Midwest interviewing a visiting South African scholar of immigration and transnationalism – this study captures their deliberations as the consideration of youth immigration to South Africa compels their own autobiographic reflections on who they are, where they are 'of', and with what ethnic groups or nationalities they feel affiliation or welcome. For purposes of bracketing, it also juxtaposes the students' voices with those of the three coauthors: their classroom teacher of Spanish as a heritage language, the visiting scholar from South Africa, and a professor from the nearby university who is the teacher's doctoral chair and was host of the South African scholar's visit.

Keywords: *Immigrant Youth – Transnationalism – Latinos/as – Schooling and Identity – Social Justice – U.S. Midwest – South Africa*

Studenti di origine latino-americana di scuole superiori rurali considerano l'identità e l'appartenenza attraverso uno studio comparativo di giovani neo-arrivati in Sud Africa

Piombati in una organizzata quanto insolita attività scolastica – otto studenti immigrati di origine latino-americana di una scuola superiore nel Midwest rurale degli Stati Uniti che intervistano docenti di immigrazione e transnazionalismo provenienti dal Sud Africa in visita – questo studio coglie le loro riflessioni: la considerazione dell'immigrazione giovanile in Sud Africa impone loro riflessioni autobiografiche su chi sono, da dove provengono, e con quali gruppi etnici o nazionalità si sentono affiliati o accolti. Ai fini della sospensione di giudizio, si giustappongono anche le voci degli studenti con quelle dei tre coautori: il loro insegnante di spagnolo, loro lingua d'origine, lo studioso

in visita dal Sud Africa, e un professore della vicina università che è presidente del corso di dottorato ed è stato ospite della visita dello studioso sudafricano.

Parole chiave: *Giovani immigrati – Transnazionalismo – Latinos – Scolarizzazione e identità – Giustizia sociale – Midwest degli Stati Uniti – Sud Africa*

There is an old axiom in anthropology that it can be helpful to make the familiar strange and/or the strange familiar in order to better understand what is happening. The objective in this study was to encourage Latino youth in a “new Latino diaspora” community (Hamann & Harklau, 2010; Wortham, et al. 2002) in Nebraska (a rural state of 1.8 million inhabitants in the middle of America’s Great Plains) to articulate how they felt understood by their new community and, in turn, to describe how they sought to identify themselves and define what those identities meant.¹ To compel students to discuss this, we made the familiar (their experience) strange by prompting them to think about the experience of immigrant students 12,000 kilometers away, in South Africa, where one of us (Dr. Saloshna Vandeyar) lives and studies this topic.

Underlying this inquiry were assumptions of both phenomenology and social justice. Consistent with a hermeneutic phenomenology (van Manen, 1990), the intent was to have students interpret their own experiences in a new land at a social institution (school) that has long been associated with concurrently ‘welcoming’ and ‘not welcoming’ (Gitlin, et al. 2003) immigrant youth. Also consistent with phenomenology (Creswell, 2006), our goal was not mainly to capture individual accounts per se, but rather to gain insight into a larger phenomenon, the way immigrant youth experience transnational dis/relocation at school. So it was the common ground and larger themes that emerged from analyzing individual responses that were of interest.

Consistent with a social justice orientation, an implicit premise of the inquiry was that students, indeed all humans, have a right to feel *of* somewhere (even if ‘somewhere’ is plural) and to feel affinity with a larger group. That was a message echoed by the very organization of the environment where we encountered these students: a high school-level Spanish-for-Spanish-speakers class (also known as a Spanish-for-heritage-speakers class). In such an environment, a students’ language background from home and sending community are seen as assets that are acknowledged by the instructional design. With the students’ teacher as one of the three researchers,

students also knew that their responses were likely to be affirmed and built upon in future meetings of their class.

Our method for getting youth to describe their experiences as immigrant students was unorthodox for more reasons than just the setting. Indeed, language education coursework designed to help a student further develop fluency and literacy in a home language is increasingly common in the U.S. (Hornberger & Wang, 2008). Rather, the most unorthodox part of our inquiry was to have the class prepare for and then host a visit by Dr. Saloshna Vandeyar, who has studied and written in depth about the lingering formal and informal means of racial/ethnic affiliation in her country, the ways newcomer students from elsewhere in Africa attempt to be included in their new host society, and her country's efforts to use schools as vehicles of post-apartheid social reconciliation (Vandeyar, 2006; 2010; 2011; Vandeyar & Jansen, 2008; Vandeyar & Vandeyar, 2011a; Vandeyar & Vandeyar, 2011b; Vandeyar & Vandeyar, in press). Our premise was not that immigrant Latino students' experiences in Nebraska matched those of immigrant South African youth per se (although there are overlaps which we discuss later), but rather that consideration of how the experiences were similar and how they differed would be generative for the Latino students to be more expansive regarding their own efforts and experiences.

This premise proved well founded. As part of introductions when she first met them, Dr. Vandeyar asked these students where they were from and how they self-identified. The young women (all in the class were female) variously identified that they and/or their parents had been born in Mexico, Guatemala, or Honduras. One clarified that she was from Oaxaca (Mexico) and that her mother and grandmother spoke an indigenous language at home (not Spanish). Yet none of these students felt fully comfortable saying they were Mexican, Guatemalan, or Honduran. Several had traveled (back) to these countries and had spent time there with extended family. They described being teased for their accented Spanish or occasional awkwardness with local mores. Saying that they were *of* those places seemed incomplete or misleading. Yet as they continued talking, saying that they were *of* the United States also seemed incomplete. Several identified 'being American' with 'being White' and speaking English as a first or only language. This too did not seem to quite encompass who they were.

Dr. Vandeyar then asked if they felt like they were Mexican-American,

Honduran-American, etc. Again they demurred, seeing these hyphenated identities perhaps as descriptors of assimilated peers; that was not quite how they saw themselves. Finally, one explained that “If I was in South Africa and had to explain who I was, I guess I would say that I am a Mexican who lives in Nebraska.” That thought proved temporarily sufficient and the conversation moved on, yet it was not the end of the topic. On Monday, after Dr. Vandeyar’s Friday visit, when they met for class, the students restarted the conversation and the consideration of just who they were.

Considering issues of students’ ethnic and/or national identities can be fascinating, as it concurrently indexes both patterns of migration and the negotiation of status hierarchies and character traits that are seen to be associated with various affiliations (Becker, 1990). Such consideration tells us what students find available and compelling in their efforts to assert who they propose to be. Furthermore, examining these considerations can play a small, but real role in correcting a historic bias in migration studies of focusing on adults (Orellana, 2009), while it also attends to the age-old interest of anthropology in processes of acculturation (Redfield, et al., 1967).

Considering issues of students’ ethnic and/or national identities also can raise issues of social justice. Why might students feel that identities, like ‘American’, are inaccessible, given that such a label is likely comfortably worn by their school’s most successful students? Justice is not only a school-based dynamic of course. Is it fair that they feel different and excluded when they return to their parents’ native country. Additionally, considering issues of students’ ethnic and/or national identities can shed light on prospective educational strategies that would best engage students like these. Invariably the learning process includes biography and students’ appraisal of what material before them is worth learning and what that learning will mean in terms of whom they propose to be/become. So knowing more about what students’ think of themselves and their circumstances makes possible more responsive teaching (Herrera, 2010).

Ultimately, however, although phenomenological inquiry may lend itself to anthropological or educational inquiries, its undergirding ontology emphasizes that there is an intrinsic value in better understanding for its own sake how a particular phenomena is experienced (Cohen, 2001; Cresswell, 2006). In other words, attending to the thinking of and identity work engaged in by these young women has value in its own right. Their cosmologies

and subjectivities deserve to be considered. Given that we too (the coauthors) were part of the same focal 45-minute interaction, it also makes sense to consider how we each experienced it.

45 Minutes with Dr. Vandeyar in Nebraska

Before depicting the classroom visit, let us first clarify how it came to be that in 2011 a South African scholar of Indian descent (who speaks three languages fluently: English, Tamil, and Afrikaans, and also knows some terminology in several of the indigenous languages of South Africa) was addressing a number of Latina young women in a rural Nebraska high school. Then we will recount the 45 minutes, followed by a brief description of the visit's lingering effects on the thinking of the young women and a longer consideration of how the three of us, in turn, experienced the visit. While juxtaposing our experiences with students may seem like the drafting of a second mini-phenomenological inquiry, albeit one recounted by the authors, it is better understood as bracketing (Creswell, 2006). Readers deserve to know who we were and what we did in relation to the collection and analysis of the students' understandings. Coauthors are referred to by their own names and titles (matching the terms the students used to refer to us), but the students are all named with pseudonyms.

The series of events of which brought us together for the 45-minute conversation explored here began in 2009 when Dr. Vandeyar, a professor at Pretoria University in South Africa contacted Dr. Hamann regarding a paper in *Comparative Education Review* that he had co-authored with Victor Zúñiga about students encountered in Mexican schools who had previously lived and attended school in the United States (Zúñiga & Hamann, 2009). She invited them both to attend a conference in South Africa that she was hosting in March 2010. Although they were unable to attend, they did submit a paper that Dr. Vandeyar presented on their behalf and that paper later became a chapter (Hamann & Zúñiga, 2011) in a book called *Hyphenated Selves: Immigrant identities within education contexts* (Vandeyar, 2011) that she edited.

Despite the conference and the publishing collaboration, Dr. Hamann had never met Dr. Vandeyar in person. So, interested in furthering an intriguing professional conversation, in the spring of 2011 Dr. Hamann invited Dr. Vandeyar to join him in preparing a paper proposal to the American

Educational Research Association (AERA) on an international taxonomy of transnational students and identity. In anticipation of that proposal being accepted, that spring Dr. Hamann also applied for a small internal grant from the University of Nebraska that would support his visiting South Africa for the first time and would also support Dr. Vandeyar coming to Nebraska and offering the keynote address at the annual Student Research Conference.

In the summer, having already finished the initial AERA proposal and having already learned that the grant proposal for the reciprocal exchange visits had been accepted, Dr. Hamann was approached by long-time research collaborator Dr. Stanton Wortham about becoming part of a second AERA proposal. Specifically, Dr. Wortham asked if Dr. Hamann would be interested in drafting a paper on discursive construction *of* and *by* newcomer student populations in various parts of the United States. Hamann agreed if he could include Dr. Vandeyar and Ms. Eckerson (a teacher of AP Spanish and Spanish for heritage language speakers, as well as Dr. Hamann's doctoral student). That second AERA paper was the initial draft of the paper you are now reading.

Not yet knowing if either AERA proposal would be accepted, once the travel grant was funded and in anticipation of her pending visit, Dr. Hamann organized a faculty-and-graduate-student study group to consider Dr. Vandeyar's portrait study of a post-apartheid, previously all-white, Afrikaaner-speaking high school in Johannesburg called *Diversity High* (Vandeyar & Jensen, 2008). He also made steps to prepare for Dr. Vandeyar's keynote, including asking if Ms. Eckerson would offer a graduate student's response to Dr. Vandeyar's remarks. The possible AERA paper collaboration and the interaction related to Dr. Vandeyar's keynote meant that it was logical to include a visit to Ms. Eckerson's high school during Dr. Vandeyar's short visit. It was also logical for Ms. Eckerson to read *Diversity High* (Dr. Vandeyar's more directly relevant book *Hyphenated Selves* was still a month shy of being published.)

This may seem like exhaustive background before telling the main story (i.e., the students' perspectives), but it is crucial to review because it helps explain what Ms. Eckerson did and did not know about Dr. Vandeyar prior to Dr. Vandeyar's visit to her classroom and, in turn, what she could tell her students in preparation. While Dr. Hamann was the overall coordinator of Dr. Vandeyar's itinerary in Nebraska, for the half-day spent in the community where Ms. Eckerson works, Ms. Eckerson did the coordinating. That

meant she arranged for a visit that included a brief meeting with administrators, a large address to roughly 80 students of World History who had been studying South Africa (as part of regional study of Africa), and two 45-minute visits with small classes.

The conversation between the authors and eight Latina students chronicled here took place in an advanced Spanish-for-Spanish-speakers course. Those students were also involved with the production of the Spanish language section of the student newspaper. (The Spanish language section of the monthly student newspaper had been started under Ms. Eckerson's leadership a few years earlier.) Therefore it was anticipated that the students would gather information from Dr. Vandeyar in order to write an article about her visit and her work. The eight students, all female, were in their last or second to last year of high school and had lived in their present community for as little as five years to as many as twelve. All had been born in Latin America. In preparation for Dr. Vandeyar's visit, Ms. Eckerson had her students read and discuss the introduction to her book *Diversity High* and read from some internet sources about apartheid in South Africa. She also had them draft interview questions.

Although it was planned that the students would interview Dr. Vandeyar, it quickly became apparent that her address to the World History classes had already answered many of their questions. So with less of a prepared script than anticipated and with some questions following what Dr. Vandeyar had already presented, the conversation developed somewhat more organically than had been planned and much more fruitfully.

To begin, students were asked to introduce themselves and at first there was some hesitation. "What should we say?" someone asked. "Whatever you want," was the reply, and so Elena began with, "My name is Elena, I am sixteen and I am from Mexico." The next three girls also offered their names and ages, at which point Dr. Vandeyar interjected and asked why the students were introducing themselves with their ages. Two students answered, "Because she started that way" and "that's just something you do when you meet new people." "Why did you not talk about your backgrounds, for example?" Dr. Vandeyar asked. The students seemed puzzled, "I don't know," someone said.

After the remaining introductions (all including countries of origin), a student asked Dr. Vandeyar about interesting moments in her research, referencing *Diversity High*. Dr. Vandeyar then described the context of her work

at Diversity High and her fascination with the school's total transformation from bastion of apartheid to overt and intentional advocates of diversity; why had that South African school taken that road when others had not?

Dr. Hamann then interjected that he considered Dr. Vandeyar's more recent work with the hyphenated identities of African immigrants in South Africa to be very interesting. Describing that work (as he understood it), he explained that some tensions have arisen between native South Africans and immigrants arriving from other African nations. He further pointed to the complexities in identifying as "African."

Seeing an opportunity to more directly relate the conversation to students' lives, Ms. Eckerson asked if differences were made among Latinos in their community, "Does it matter if you are Mexican or Guatemalan? More recently arrived or have been here longer?" Yesenia suggested that at school very few differences or conflicts arose, but in the community, groups of different nationalities were visible. Maria José, of Mexican origin, insisted that such differentiations were a function of generations, suggesting that adult immigrants, like her parents, consider nationality important. She shared the story of a cousin who was looked down upon by members of the family for living with a Guatemalan boyfriend, but said that she herself doesn't "see why it's such a big deal." Josefa confirmed, "we've just grown up with different races, so like, it doesn't matter to us."

Dr. Vandeyar asked how the students' own parents would react if they were to date someone from another race and the group erupted in nervous giggles and shaking heads. "No way," someone said.

The conversation turned to the construction of identity over generations, Dr. Vandeyar offering the case of her own children as examples. While she had grown up under apartheid, always identifying (and being identified) as "Indian," her children were being schooled in post-apartheid South Africa, were studying apartheid in history class, and unequivocally self-identified as South African before Indian. She shared a story of visiting India with her children when they were younger, and they had great difficulty coming to terms with the easily visible poverty in India. Her children were roundly grateful to return home to South Africa, with Vandeyar's daughter expressing her gratitude that their ancestors "had the intelligence to get on that boat and leave that place."

Several students nodded as they heard the story, which prompted Ms.

Eckerson to ask if they could identify with the story. Both Marisol and Maria José expressed their realization that the quality of life they enjoy in the United States makes it difficult to return to Honduras or Mexico, respectively. “Two weeks is enough,” said Maria José, “and then I want to come home.”

Marisol said she couldn’t imagine living in Honduras, unless she was “on the rich side.” “But you said you were Honduran when you introduced yourself,” Dr. Vandeyar commented, “Why not Honduran-American, a hyphenated identity?” Marisol did not seem satisfied with the suggestion, “but I’m like 100%, I was born there, both parents are from there.”

Beatriz described returning to Mexico and not feeling Mexican, nor being considered Mexican by her friends and relatives. “It’s like here we’re not American and there we’re not Mexican, so it’s just like [she paused] You’re in between.” The others nodded and verbally confirmed her statement.

Dr. Hamann offered the story of Mexican colleague who bristled at being identified as Latino or Hispanic in the United States, rather than Mexican (preferring a national identity to a pan-ethnic one), and asked the students how they felt about the use of these terms.

Maria José said that she had grown up hearing the terms and so thought they made sense. Yesenia suggested that Latino is a term that one accepts over time and confessed that when she first arrived in the U.S. she considered herself Mexican before Latino. “But you come to rely on other people, because you don’t know the language and you have the Spanish and so you have that in common” she explained, “and then you’re like, yeah, I’m Latino, and it doesn’t matter anymore.”

With the conversation having turned to language and identity, Ms. Eckerson shared that her husband, a Spanish-speaking Argentine who is European by descent and phenotypically ‘white’ by appearance, has been puzzled at being considered a member of a minority group in the United States.

In response students brought up their experiences as volunteers in the 1st grade Spanish classes at the nearby elementary school. (Primary school students in this community receive 25 minutes of instruction in Spanish every third day.) Yesenia described her and her fellow volunteers’ surprise when they spoke in Spanish to some of the Latino first-grade students, but the students did not understand. “We were basing it on what they looked like, like they looked like they could speak Spanish, but some of them couldn’t.” When asked if peers who “looked Latino” but didn’t speak Spanish were still

accepted as Latino, Beatriz offered that it depended on their interests. As an example, she offered that playing soccer is more Latino than American football and if you are a non-Spanish speaking, things like playing soccer help you to be considered Latino.

Yesenia returned the conversation to language and asked Dr. Vandeyar about language preservation in South Africa, she wanted to know what to do so that languages “don’t get lost.” Dr. Vandeyar shared that she also speaks Tamil, a South Indian language descended from Sanskrit. She noted that although it is remarkable that it is spoken at all, being so ancient, it is getting lost in younger generations (at least in the Indian community of South Africa) because of the predominance of English.²

Lupe, who had been listening quietly to this point, explained that her family, originally from Oaxaca, spoke an indigenous language, Chinanteco, although her younger brothers no longer remember it and she has difficulty speaking it without mixing in Spanish. Dr. Hamann asked if Lupe had attended a bilingual school in Mexico, but she said she had not. When Dr. Vandeyar asked why Lupe had been schooled in Spanish in Mexico, Dr. Hamann explained how Spanish became a part of the nationalizing project in post-revolutionary Mexico and how, alternately, pioneering bilingual education efforts have also been undertaken in Mexico on behalf of some of Mexico’s indigenous languages, but not all.

Lupe’s answer was more personal. She offered her family as an example of the process of disappearance of a language: her grandmother was a monolingual speaker of Chinanteco, her mother, bilingual in Spanish and Chinanteco, Lupe bilingual in Spanish and English with some knowledge of Chinanteco, and her younger brothers, bilingual Spanish and English, with little knowledge of Chinanteco. Even in her home village in Oaxaca, she described, one can hear more and more Spanish mixed into the Chinanteco.

Bringing up one of the previously prepared questions, Yesenia asked Dr. Vandeyar why she had specifically come to visit their small town in Nebraska. Dr. Vandeyar explained that she had visited the United States before and seen schools in large urban areas like Los Angeles and that on this visit she had also visited other larger high schools in nearby Lincoln (the capital of Nebraska with a population of 240,000). In contrast, Yesenia’s community offered the opportunity to see a unique social context, concurrently rural and diverse.

Dr. Vandeyar continued that she was struck by the apparently rich re-

sources available in public schools in Lincoln, compared with schools in South Africa. Several students nodded and Elena remarked that she had felt the same way when she first arrived from Mexico. As if struck by this comment, Maria José confessed that she did not remember anything about Mexico before she first returned to visit. “The moment I crossed the border, it was like it all came back” she explained, referencing the memories of primary school and her grandparents that she had believed she had forgotten.

“I remember too much,” Yesenia added without further elaboration.

Lupe explained that she remembered everything, having immigrated at age 11. “I would like to go back,” she said, “but there’s not a lot of opportunity for poor people there, [there are] no jobs.”

Dr. Hamann then asked students to imagine that they were to travel to South Africa and, “since you don’t look very South African,” you would need to respond to the question, where are you from? What are you?

The students looked at one another. “Mexico, I would say,” claimed Lupe, not referencing her indigenous background in this comment.

“I would ask for clarification,” said Josefa.

“Like do you mean where I was born or where I live?” another added.

“I don’t think I’m ready to be American, or even that hyphenated identity,” Yesenia explained, while adding that her younger sister considers herself American because she immigrated at a much younger age. “She can’t make that connection [to Mexico].”

Maria José expressed her fascination with accents, contrasting Yesenia’s English pronunciation with a classmate who has been in the United States for much longer, suggesting that Yesenia’s accent was much less pronounced.

Ms. Eckerson explained that her husband, who speaks a heavily accented English, enjoyed confounding those who asked where he was from, preferring to answer “Nebraska,” knowing that his accent did not sound very Nebraskan (at least to those who associate regional identity and the dominant English of Nebraska’s native English speakers).

Yesenia explained that her older sister, still living in Mexico, would often correct her Spanish when they were speaking via video chat and monitor her speech for interference from English. “What do you do?” Yesenia continued, “When you have an accent in one language and you’re developing an accent in the other? It’s like you don’t belong with either?”

Sometimes, the students said, one doesn’t even know that they are mi-

xing in English in their Spanish. Marisol described the way her Spanish revealed to people in Honduras that she was living in the United States, “I’d slip in a word in English, and they’d be like, ‘Oh, you’re from over there.’”

Josefa confirmed, “Yeah, if you’re in El Salvador and you say ‘OK’ they’re like, what? And they know.”

“Here, you get angry when people are like, ‘Speak English,’ like what, I can’t speak my native language?” Maria José explained, “But then I go to Mexico and I’m speaking English and they’re like, ‘Speak Spanish, this is Mexico!’”

The students laughed sympathetically. “Yeah,” Beatriz added, “Sometimes when they say ‘Speak Spanish!’ I think I am speaking Spanish!”

Dr. Hamann asked students if many of them kept in touch with family members via video chat, as Yesenia had described. The students explained that the majority communicated via telephone, but “the teenagers use Facebook and stuff.”

How different from twenty or thirty years ago, Dr. Hamann observed, when it was so much harder to keep in touch. Not surprisingly with a younger audience, that observation yielded little further comment.

Ms. Eckerson then asked a final question of Dr. Vandeyar about how she came to choose her career. Becoming a teacher, Dr. Vandeyar explained, was an expectation established by her family, while her decision to advocate for social justice came from a longtime personal sense of fairness. She described her childhood and academic competition with her older brother, her first teaching positions, participation in marches and protests, and finally her vegetarianism.

At that point, the bell to change periods had already rung and Ms. Eckerson distributed passes to excuse the students who needed them for their late arrivals at their next classroom.

Reflections on the Phenomenology of transnational students’ sense of place

The following segment is intentionally replicated in numbered lists so that individual coauthor voices are preserved, an important point as we switch to our considerations of the 45-minute class period. Because Ms. Eckerson’s comments include reference to follow-up comments made by the students, they are positioned first, followed by Dr. Vandeyar’s and then Dr. Hamann’s.

Ms. Eckerson's interpretive comments:

1) As an unanticipated curricular event, this was remarkably rich – it lived (and continues to live) in the imaginations of the students and our classroom. Identity has become a curricular topic for some students... particularly for Beatriz who has developed a sustained interest the construction of identity.

2) Dr. Vandeyar's visit (and her biography) seemed to legitimize, or at least call to the surface some issues/ideas/experiences that students wanted to talk about and perhaps had not considered part of a larger narrative of hyphenated identities. The idea that other people, in other countries, experience the "from neither *here* nor *there*" feelings that these students experience was a sort of galvanizing moment. It actually makes me think of the claims of the "third culture kids" authors, (Pollock & Van Reken, 2009) who suggest that kids who grow up as "third culture kids" identify more with each other as a group, than with any of their home cultures. In this sense, the Salvadoran-American child and the Guatemalan-American child identify with one another more than with either their birth country or the dominant "American" cultural identity. (And I am aware that in writing 'Salvadoran-American' and Guatemalan-American that I am using hyphenated descriptors that my students were not fully sure of, although they were not particularly convinced by various substitutes either.)

3) Authenticity in conversations with adolescents: I know that's not where we're going with this, but as a discursive thing... How often do students get to talk with interested adults about things they all care about? Not often enough. How often to we allow children to have unscripted conversation with powerful adults? I think the girls felt good that someone cared that they were dealing with these identity issues.

Dr. Vandeyar's Interpretive Comments:

1) I was struck by the openness and ease with which these students spoke about themselves and their identities with a total stranger in a very conversational manner. I sensed an aura of trust and a genuine sharing of experiences. There seemed to be no fear of the so-called authoritative figures (Janet, Ted, myself). I could also sense a yearning of them wanting to know more about global experiences... youth in a 'global village'.

2) Immigrant students did not readily identify with the racial categories

of the host country. They identified in terms of their name, age and country of origin. They did not identify in terms of a continental identity either, e.g., “I am South American”. In contrast Black immigrants in my studies identified as “I am African...like my South African brother, I come from the continent of Africa.”

3) Some students did not see identity as something fixed, but rather as liquid and forming and context dependent, e.g., “I don’t think I am ready to be American.”

4) Students’ affirmation of living in a third space (consistent with Homi Bhabha’s [1985] ideas of hybridity) ”It’s like here we’re not American... you’re in-between.”

5) Remarkable: shared similar experiences with that of Black immigrants in my studies. For example:

- Going back to home country to visit, not to stay
- Being plugged into a racial category of the host country i.e. ‘Latino’ (USA); ‘Black’ (South Africa), depending on the political order of the day and issues of power
- Soccer was a sport associated with Black Africans (SA); Latino (USA). Accents were a visible marker of immigrant students

6) Despite the USA being an old democracy, it was striking to hear articulations of conservative family values, like against inter-marriages, for example.

Dr. Hamann’s Interpretive Perspectives:

1) This was a fun and funny class visit to be part of. I was concurrently host (of Dr. Vandeyar) and guest (of Ms. Eckerson and her students). I felt acutely like an intermediary. Having been to South Africa I felt an impulse to trouble-shoot if I sensed that there was a point that Dr. Vandeyar was raising in passing that would be of interest if it was emphasized. Having studied ‘education in the new Latino diaspora’ for 20 years (e.g., Wortham, et al., 2002; Hamann & Harklau, 2010) I constantly wanted to interject things I had learned and thought about, but concurrently I knew that it was more important to keep the primary interaction between the young women and Dr. Vandeyar. Having studied students in Mexico with previous experience in U.S. schools (e.g., Hamann & Zúñiga, 2011; Zúñiga & Hamann, 2009), I also wanted to interject when the young women referenced their

experiences 'going back' to Mexico and Central America, but again it was better if I tried mainly to refrain from doing so. When Lupe mentioned her and her family's experiences transitioning from Chinanteco to Spanish, yet again I found myself wanting to reference something I had previously studied (in that case Mexico's varied history of educational responses to its indigenous populations). In each of these cases my task was not to be fully quiet, but I did need to consciously try not to be leading the conversation.

2) While I agree with Dr. Vandeyar that the students were clearly not intimidated by us (and I am glad that they were not), they clearly did see us as authority figures of a sort. Although they were ostensibly supposed to be interviewing Dr. Vandeyar, I think students leading adults was a very unfamiliar role (even in Ms. Eckerson's classroom where initiative and originality are clearly celebrated). The conversation clearly became more comfortable and more generative when the discourse pattern switched from the awkward pattern of eight students attempting to interview one adult to a pattern where all three of us coauthors could occasionally take on the 'teacher role' and offer a leading prompt for the students to consider.

3) I need to reflect on the reasons Dr. Vandeyar was in that classroom. The simplest answer is quite literally 'because I brought her', but I did so with multiple hopes and calculations (and it required Dr. Vandeyar's and Ms. Eckerson's volition, not just my own). I knew that I had been fascinated by this community and others like it and, given the overlaps in my scholarly interests and hers, I was pretty confident that Dr. Vandeyar would find it interesting too. Additionally, I knew that Ms. Eckerson was a particularly accomplished educator (I am proud and lucky that as a doctoral student she has opted to study with me, even as she continues her full-time work as a teacher). So I knew a visit to her classroom would likely be successful in a 'showing off' kind of way. Finally, I wanted to hear both what the young women had to say and how Dr. Vandeyar would respond. I knew I was setting up an event that I would want to witness. Not 100% sure of how it would go, I nonetheless was confident that it would go well, that it would be generative and provocative for its very different participants.

4) Ultimately, although it would be misleading to label a short school visit an act of social justice (that seems dramatic or even pompous), it is fair to claim that social justice considerations lurked in my mind during the 45 minutes, but also in setting that opportunity up and thinking about it since.

Young women like these are often invisible in American society or viewed as “objects of information, but [almost] never subjects of communication” (Foucault 1977, 200). Their sense of being incompletely welcome in both the society that hosts them (i.e., the U.S.) and the societies that they and/or their parents come from is expressed eloquently and poignantly here. It suggests the society I am part of is not quite as fair or welcoming as it likes to think it is. I like the idea that just as I helped a South African colleague know of these students in a tangible if brief sense, she helped them (and me) to become aware of young adults 10,000 kilometers away, in South Africa with some similar experiences, aspirations, and concerns. The Nebraska students expressed that they were not fully sure how or where they fit in. Presumably it was comforting (in however minor a way) to know that their classmates share some of the same questions and so too do students they have never met, who live halfway around the world.

Final thoughts

From the beginning, this planned 45-minute interaction had multiple purposes. It was to be a teaching and learning moment for all involved. It was ambassadorial, putting South Africa within the ken of a number of Latina high school students in the U.S. and, in turn, helping concretize how North American youth transnationalism is experienced (in at least one of its manifestations) for a colleague who could bring those impressions and learnings back to South Africa. It was a research opportunity to document ‘who am I’ and ‘where do I belong deliberations’ of several young women. But most resoundingly it was a hybrid mix of inquiry and expression, as not only the eight students, but your three educator coauthors all were able to participate in considering schooling, geo-national affiliation(s), and how we experience the world. Our direct and joint interaction lasted a mere 45 minutes, but those minutes are proving to resonate across the months.

If, consistent with the themes of this special issue, we draw our attention just to what the young women said of their experience between cultures and countries, we see that international migration is an ongoing dynamic in their lives. All were geographically stable in that they knew one day to the next that they would come to the school where we encountered them; all claimed to “live in” Nebraska. But their migration was not over pheno-

menologically, even if it was over, or dormant, physically. ‘Somewhere else’ continued to resonate in their sense of who they were, what they were capable of (they were in a select, advanced Spanish class for heritage speakers), and who they were to be. ‘Somewhere else’ was not home, but it was salient enough (coupled with reception of their White peers) that it inhibited them from seeing themselves as ‘American’.

It would overstate the case to say that they felt affinity for their South African immigrant peers described to them by Dr. Vandeyar (as South Africa was still far away and hard to imagine), but clearly they were able to react empathetically to her accounts. Ideas that language could include and exclude, that school was supposedly a vehicle of upward mobility and inclusion, but that it did not always function that way resonated. Dr. Vandeyar’s accounts (and the comfortableness of being in Ms. Eckerson’s classroom) enabled a sustained and nuanced inward gaze about affinities and rights to place, considerations dialectical with social justice concerns.

Notes

¹ Latino is a pan-national ethnic identity in the U.S. that encompasses the fast-growing population of persons who immigrated from and/or trace descent from Latin America and the Caribbean, particularly the Spanish-speaking portions of this region (Oboler, 1995); historically and contemporarily, Latinos have been targets of discrimination and marginalization, with poor school outcomes one manifestation of such practices (Gándara & Contreras, 2010).

² South Africa is a language rich country. There are eleven official languages in South Africa. Nine languages of indigenous descent such as isiZulu, Xhosa, Ndebele, Tswana, Sepedi, Siswati, and English and Afrikaans (a derivative of Nederlands origin). These exclude what is called the protected languages, for example, (Tamil, Arabic, Gujerati, Urdu, Hebrew and other Anglophone languages such as German, Spanish, French etc. During the apartheid era the different racial groups were divided into the following categories: Whites, Indians, Coloured and Africans. The latter three being classified by the collective term “Black”. English and Afrikaans were the two official languages of the country and were offered as compulsory subjects in South African public schools. White students had the option of choosing to learn through the medium of English or Afrikaans as these were official public schools for White children. Indian and Coloured children learnt through the medium of English but took Afrikaans as a compulsory second language subject. African children were taught through their mother tongue in the first three grades and switched to English as a medium of instruction in Grade 4. The majority of African children are fluent in at least 3-4 of the indigenous languages of South Africa. However, 18 years into democracy the official languages in the public schooling system in South Africa is still

English and Afrikaans with the majority of schools opting to use English as the medium of instruction.

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