



Cartography of (Un)Intelligibility: A Migrant Intellectual's Tale of the Field

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“I am not a confused person” (Mohanty 2003). Articulating a location for myself, nevertheless, is always a mind-boggling task that I undertake reluctantly. To name myself as a “migrant intellectual” in this essay does not mean that there is an “authentically” migrant perspective and I make a perfect fit to its taxonomy. Rather, enunciating a location for myself is a deliberate act to initiate a process through which I examine my relationship to others in the geo-political, cultural and educational landscape of which I am a part.

Madan Sarup (1994) defines a migrant as “a person who has crossed the border. S/he seeks a place to make ‘a new beginning,’ to start again, to make a better life” (p. 94). The migrant, encountering both hostility and welcome, inclusion and exclusion, becomes a stranger as well as a historical and social actor in a forever strange, yet increasingly familiar land.

Like many of the “international” graduate students in America, I came to the States for advanced degrees after completing my undergraduate education in

my home country, Taiwan. I currently teach in Syracuse University at the department of Cultural Foundations of Education (CFE), from which I received my doctoral degree. CFE is an interdisciplinary department, which aims to examine the power relations embedded within the social institution of education. It encourages scholarships and pedagogies that explore the politics of knowledge through interrogating how educational practices, policies, and schooling experiences are constructed. Cultural Foundations, as a discipline, validates my pursuit of liberation as an intellectual mission, provides me with languages to name privilege and oppression, and guides me to make sense of, unlearn, and negotiate with, my upbringing. In many ways I do consider myself a “home-grown” Ph. D. in this teaching and research institution, but only to find out that I’m “always-already an outsider within” (Cervenak, et al., 2002, p. 342).

That is, my training in and appointment with this American institution of higher learning which prioritizes the promotion of “diversity” as one of its utmost official agendas, allows me to fashion intellectual, ideological, social, cultural, and emotional ties with the status quo who hires me, with my colleagues and friends with whom I work and learn, and with students who I interact with and deeply care about. While

this “insider relationship” is fulfilling and gratifying, my location as an exploited intellectual migrant worker in the political economy, and the fixation of the ascribed meanings attached to my visible and audible identity constantly remind me of the “strangeness” that my presence embodies and my position comprises. Patricia Hill Collins (1990) coins this “curious outsider-within stance” and articulates the epistemological and political potential of this peculiar marginality that can stimulate a “distinctive angle of vision” on social relations and institutional policies and practices. It is from this precarious location of an outsider within and insider without that I approach education with a social justice agenda as a discursive site



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marked by social and epistemological differentiation and openness to otherness and change.

I have witnessed teaching assistants from my department, both International and American-born, struggle in their teaching debut in American higher education. I do believe there is always room for improvement in our teaching, and the point of consideration involves how we should proceed with discussion of pedagogy in ways that challenge “habits of being” so that pedagogical deliberation enriches our personal and intellectual growth as well as shakes up the institution culturally and politically. As situated within a larger, on-going reflexive project on diversity pedagogy, this essay presumes that the TAs’ (in my department as well as those beyond) linguistic, conceptual, cultural, and psychological struggles can contribute to the making of collective pedagogical/institutional memories and texts that open up opportunities to deconstruct the engrained ways of looking and evaluating. Assuming “migrant intellectual” as “a location of critical practice” that enables specific modes of reading and knowing in American academia, this paper aims to demonstrate a way of thinking through what teaching from the location of a female migrant scholar offers to the re/thinking of liberatory education and the politics of

knowledge. To do so, I will unravel the complex entanglements underlying the social and educational spaces in which I interact with the institution and with my undergraduate students, who appear to be predominantly white, heterosexual, and from upper and middle class families from the northeast U.S.

In this essay, I employ the framework of “geographical imaginations” using theories of location, borders, and movement that seek to change power relations within educational spaces. Additionally, I foreground classroom relations and draw on queer pedagogy to trouble assumptions pertaining to appropriateness, legitimacy, and comprehensibility. Queer pedagogy, according to Deborah Britzman (1995), identifies two sets of questions essential to my investigation of “diversity pedagogy” that problematize “the conceptual geography of normalization” (p. 2). According to Britzman, any educational commitment to social equity has to engage “questions concerning what education, knowledge, and identity have to do with fashioning structures of thinkability and the limits of thought” (p. 13). In addition to analyzing education as a normalization process that refuses and/or appropriates “differences,” Queer Theory commits us to another, interrelated set of questions “concerning what

education has to do with the possibilities of proliferating identifications and critiques that exceed identity, yet still hold onto the understanding of identity as a state of emergency” (p. 13). In other words, Britzman cautions us about the inclination of pigeonholing the significance of social experiences into rigidly prescribed social categories, as she encourages us to consider education a paradoxical space where both oblivion and renunciation as well as imagination and acknowledgement of differences can occur.

In what follows I look at two related pedagogical moments to think through the relationship between social locations and habits and ways of thinking in concrete educational encounters. Through these accounts I intend to obscure the tendency in current diversity discourse that regards “alternative knowledge” simply as historical and lived experiences, “heritages,” and stories told by the “marginal” groups. This approach intends to “make room” to accommodate voices of

the under-represented groups, but falls short of interrogating how the dominant culture structures and regulates different ways of thinking and relating to the world in ways that naturalize the unequal social arrangement. In doing so, this popular practice of diversity pedagogy, intended to compensate those who have been previously denied visibility, protects the hegemony of dominant power, rather than produces and encourages critical perspectives and alternative accounts.

Though in crafting this essay I pay special attention not to distance myself from the material lives of American higher education students, I am acutely cognizant of the possible reading that constructs my teaching as a terrain of antagonism, positioning foreign-born instructors in opposition to predominantly American white undergraduates. Thus I invite you, in addition to seeing the educational locale discussed in this tale as a space of tension, to recognize it as a field that houses new subjects of criticism. That is, interpreting



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This directory includes descriptions and links to: Directories of College/University-based LGBT Scholars; Programs & Resources; Queer Studies Resources; LGBT Libraries and Archives; and more.

teaching from the location of migrant intellectual in the American educational context enables us to critically examine the relationship between (un) intelligibility [i.e., what is (in) comprehensible], social location, and the transnational politics of knowledge production. This account, examining the inscriptions that legitimate and inhibit pedagogical practices, is intended to push “diversity pedagogy” to address what is dismissed or cannot bear to be known in normative educational encounters.

I teach a course in which I invite pre-service teachers to grapple with the idea that teachers are “public intellectuals” whose work defines, concerns, and shapes public issues. Teaching, like any social endeavor, is a practice situated within its immediate and larger academic context. The first three semesters I taught this course, I received polite inquiries from students wondering why I didn’t ask them to do the traditional project of creating a blueprint for “multicultural schools.” This question reflected what they learned from those who previously took this course as a “good” practice that needed to be kept since students (about 90% of whom are white) were asked to interview their peers on campus who were from backgrounds different from their own (usually that meant students of color and occasionally students with disabilities and LGBT

students). In this project students incorporated the information they collected from interviews into their work of imagining new multicultural schools. For me, students without additional training in data analysis tended to take the comments they gathered at face value and rendered this assignment a “rainbow ensemble.” That is, these projects collected and presented “opinions” and “voices” as a “harmonious ensemble,” devoid of contested social, historical, and political inequalities and normative ideologies. Projects like these also tended to pride themselves for “objectively” portraying various groups’ schooling experiences, as if they were transparent and equally positioned.

Having said that, my take on the assignment is not at issue here, rather it is that the students did not construct their inquiries as opportunities to engage in deliberation about diversity pedagogy with me. The students who approached me seemed attuned to the institutionally sanctioned power dynamic between teachers and students, i.e. they were courteous and diplomatic in questioning my pedagogy. Nonetheless, they failed to recognize that they already measured the way I, a foreign-accented/looking female instructor, teach the course against the claimed tradition created by a white, male, seasoned colleague. Their inquiries provide

evidence regarding how the hegemony of convention and the production of normalcy operate. That is, “what it has been” is conflated with “what it should be” unless there is a good explanation. Inquiries like this placed the responsibility on those whose thinking and bodies are marked as strangers to work harder to gain and prove their legitimacy. Conversely, part of being privileged is that you do have the luxury of just “being” and the credibility is granted to you by default. You don’t have to be defined, but get to define the “otherness” of the “other.”

A white male graduate student from the College of Arts and Sciences was concerned with my interpretation of student encounters like this. With apprehension, he asked, “How do you know what you know is right? Why couldn’t it just be considered an innocent inquiry about the rationales of two different assignments?” He raised the response that many of us come upon often and find ourselves defenseless against since we cannot “scientifically” defend our impressions of students’ responses. His question itself, however, alludes to the production of normalcy, ignorance, and knowledge—why is interpreting from the language of individual curiosity welcomed, while normalization as an interpretive framework feels far less comforting and easily gets avoided and dismissed? Neither he nor I

entered into this interpretive situation devoid of presumptions and stances. The way I made sense of the inquiry, nonetheless, was immediately read off as a view imbued with self-interest, bias, and subjectivities. He insisted on psychologizing the interaction, which ignored the power dynamic from which an inquiry is made. Hiding itself behind the pretense of objectivity and innocence, the acclaimed view from “nowhere” continued to situate itself as the center, the norm, by refusing the alternative accounts of the shared realities to inch into their consciousness (Delpit, 1988). The issue here is not about converting views, but pedagogically how a “diversity education” can/should bring the ordinary politics of everyday interaction and teaching to the forefront of discussion so that we get to reflexively study the differing locations, frames of references, codes and interests through and with which we read and interpret the world. As we should be cautious of not positioning various interpretations only in opposition to each other, the pedagogical endeavor of constructing them “dialogically” needs to interrogate the consequences of and the extents to which different readings interrupt and/or reinscribe normative social orders, in order to facilitate conditions that “proliferate” critical accounts and practices rather than naturalizing social relations.

For years I have been striving for greater clarity and interaction to enhance the effectiveness of how I communicate my thoughts to students through the teaching format of “lectures.” It is my belief that my struggling with producing “effective lectures” provides a fertile ground to excavate how normalization functions in relation to the politics of knowledge. Due to the size of my classes and other institutional constraints, lecture has been one of the few channels through which I communicate with my undergraduate students and it has become one of the most challenging aspects of teaching that demands physical, intellectual, and psychic deliberation and endurance. To start with, I am hesitant to lecture as a means of instruction. Like many “pedagogically-minded” lecturers, I learned from workshops, textbooks, and other model teachings to make the lecture space more engaging by incorporating visual aids, inviting students to participate, using topics and examples relevant to students’ lives, and so on. However, lectures still remain the least satisfactory and rewarding

teaching endeavor for me. Many times I have looked at my self-proclaimed “well thought-out lesson plans” and felt that a “successful” lecture was a mission impossible for me.

Confronted with the pedagogical moment of bewilderment, I resorted to feminist pedagogy literature for perspectives to make sense of this “communication” barrier.

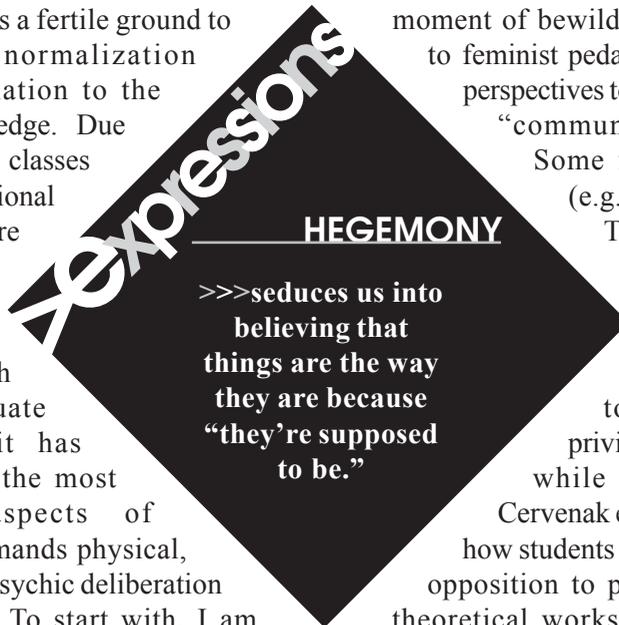
Some feminist teachers (e.g. Bell, Morrow, & Tastsoglou, 1999)

explore students’ resistance to courses that

encourage them to interrogate the privileges they embody, while others (e.g.,

Cervenak et al., 2002) discuss how students construct theory in opposition to practice and resist theoretical works through silence.

Certainly let’s not underestimate how my public speaking skills and personae might have factored into the delivery and effectiveness of the lecture, and I realize that working on ways to improve my lecture teaching is a constant and consistent effort for professional development. While all issues aforementioned offer useful angles to look at the communicativeness of lectures, here



my focus is on the politics and terms of “reception.”

A student wrote last year in the course evaluation, “The lectures have interesting material in them. But I feel Professor Lin tends to ‘dance around’ the topic. It is much clearer to the class when the idea being taught is simply and clearly stated and then elaborated on afterwards.” I singled this comment out because the message is telling. For one, I optimistically read the language of “dancing around” as indicative of the possibility that the student came to see my conception of lecture and instruction as choreography or orchestration. Even if that reading might be somewhat of a stretch, this student noted that my communication style reflects a spiral and metaphorical way of thinking. This was not the first time that students have asked me to “get to the point.” Very often these reminders were presented to me in the form of, what I call, “the rhetoric of confusion,” i.e., “I am confused (by you)”. It is important to understand the “to the point” requests intertextually. That means, coupled with comments like “Tell me what I’m supposed to get out of this,” and “What do you want us to do?”, some more thoughtful students would suggest ways that I could engage them better. For example, it was recommended I use bullet points to break down short narratives in handouts so that it would be easy to follow

and understand.

The first time I shared this story with a group of graduate students, one white female student responded with the intention to console me, “Oh, I babble all the time.” However, I do make a distinction between making a point in a circular manner from babbling (although the line is not always clear). The evaluation cited above is one of a handful of cases in which students were actually able to see the effort to make a point by covering a wider landscape. What matters here is that “a structure of intelligibility” is subtly, firmly, yet invisibly at work regulating what is and is not intelligible, even when patterns of communication were identified. Though I am considered an American trained intellectual at “home,” my twelve-years of public schooling and four years of college education in Taiwan paved a foundation for my spherical, meandering, and conceptual approach to communication. Simultaneously, my intellectual training in CFE offers me a language of critique that troubles the view of education as accumulation of disciplinary knowledge. In a profound manner it challenges me to practice the philosophical understanding of knowledge as socially and politically constructed. Thus, what I consider an aesthetic and sophisticated way of thinking and communicating was pointed out, in evaluations, as a block that reduced and

stalled comprehensibility and rendered my remarks unintelligible to my students, who I consider to be part of a “diversity” generation. By diversity generation, I mean a cohort that has grown up in the U.S. social and formal educational era that is landmarked by the motto of valuing “what diversity can offer.” These students did not seem to appreciate an approach to teaching that differed from the norm.

We certainly could stop here and frame this educational tale as a successful/failed learning and teaching experience or about liking/disliking the course. Nonetheless, queer pedagogy and location theories won’t allow us to take this easy way out, and here is how this intersectional framework insists on and contributes to making “diversity pedagogy” a more substantive and engaging endeavor. Deborah Britzman (1995) argues that knowledge and ignorance are not necessarily binaries, but “mutually implicate each other, structuring and enforcing particular forms of knowledge and forms of ignorance” (p. 3). In other words, ignorance should be analyzed “as an effect of knowledge, indeed as its limit, and not as an originary or innocent state” (p. 3). Therefore, ignorance is less about “not knowing,” but more about “in/comprehensibility” or “un/intelligibility,” i.e., what “normalcy can and cannot bear to know” (p. 3-4). While this student’s evaluation was observant and

did take note of two different patterns of communication, her/his insistence on valuing the linear and the procedural attests to how differences are structured and evaluated through the dialectic of knowledge and ignorance. The “knowledge” that the evaluator already possesses serves “as an entitlement to [his/her] ignorance” of the “knowledge” that disrupts, rather than conforms to, the familiar, the norm.

Investigating the grounds of the thinkable is important to pedagogy. In the process of writing this essay, I became more mindful not only of how I thought, but also how my thinking informed my classroom pedagogy and how different and seemingly innocent pedagogical preferences were regulated by the structure of knowledge. I realized that I preferred to direct students’ discussion more like a patch work and avoided an antagonistic model of communicating and conclusive, dichotomous debates in class discussions. I found myself struggling with my tolerance and appreciation of ambiguities and uncertainties, when students frequently asked for finite definitions, clear-cut answers, and technical and procedural instructions. These epistemological differences have consequences, and at the same time, they are the consequences of educational, cultural, and political processes. Britzman postulates, “Queer

Theory is an attempt to move away from psychological explanations like homophobia, which individualizes heterosexual fear of and loathing toward gay and lesbian subjects at the expense of examining how heterosexuality becomes normalized and natural” (p. 3). It offers a method of critique and an analytical tool to “mark the repetitions of normalcy as a structure and as a pedagogy” (p. 3).

In this essay, I use biographical encounters as evidential inquiry in the hope of going beyond the particularities of personal experiences. In a concrete and minute manner, I intend to expose norms to inquiry and consider them problematic. Drawing from Queer Theory which attends the reproductive and productive power of education, I strive, with this writing, to understand diversity work as an epistemic operation, not simply the “right thing to do,” by using narratives to engage emergent identity as a possible access to multiple understandings of our shared social, educational realities. As a migrant intellectual worker in a prestigious, private, research university, I constantly find myself engulfed, yet awakened by the intertwined senses of empowerment, privilege, marginalization and injustice. These feelings and awareness, intimately felt, yet culturally, intellectually, and professionally mediated, serve as a critical lens to (re)read the complexity, subtlety,



Getting to know my LGBT peers and instructors, talking with them, taking classes with them, and having many discussions on LGBT issues has made me think and change.

>SU undergraduate student

and entrenchment of normativity as it is embedded within social, educational, and institutional encounters. They also function as a pedagogical and political site for struggle, engagement, and action.

I certainly hope my audiences are sophisticated enough not to dismiss or pigeonhole this account simply based on my deliberate act of foregrounding “migrant intellectual” as a material subject of personal and institutional histories and experiences. The normalizing regimes pertaining to race, class, gender, sexuality, ability, and geopolitical spatialization shape not only my subject location and movement, but actually inform how all of us are differentially positioned by, and position ourselves within, the conceptual,

economic, and geopolitical webs of the global and local relations. This essay serves as one of many points of contact, alongside other disjunctures, between us. My narrative is not located in a “separate space” from your agencies. Here, as I think through how the way that I theorize diversity-linked pedagogical experience and subjectivity in relation to institutional practices, power relations, and the politics of knowledge frames the stories I told, I invite you to construct your own pedagogical experiences. Pedagogical narratives are central to diversity pedagogy

which is intended to promote critical and political thinking and action. They have the potential to situate differing readings and versions of realities within the complexities and contradictions of educational and historical lives. They are the “tales of the field” (VanMaanen, 1988) that connect a historical and contextual understanding of our social locations to the theorization of the politics of knowledge, and to classroom practices that bare and re-configure the structure of meanings and intelligibility informing an uncritical pedagogy.

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