

Multilingual Literacy Landscapes*

A curated exhibit from
the Digital Archive of Literacy Narratives (DALN)

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As I see it, the potential of the DALN...is in making visible the everyday life of ordinary people in a manner that shifts the ground of relations among people, institutions, and nation-states...When we read "Stories That Speak To Us"...we elevate the project and the people who speak through the project. They are no longer unruly individuals; it's an unruly history of ordinary people. –David Bloome

In this curated exhibit of literacy narratives, we reflect on the work that we invited five of our students to write, record, and/or compose for submission to the Digital Archive of Literacy Narratives (DALN). We do so because we agree with Cynthia Selfe and the DALN Consortium, who assert that literacy narratives "animate personal and family literacy values . . . [and] illuminate personal perspectives and multiple identifications." We find tremendous value in close consideration of the culturally-shaped linguistic and social processes that guide the autobiographical telling of literacy narratives. As Jerome Bruner argues, the telling of these stories "achieves the power to structure perceptual experience, to organize memory, to segment and purpose-build the very 'events' of a life" ("Life as Narrative" 15).

Indeed, whether they are audio, video, or text, the literacy narratives archived on the DALN offer the public a rich mosaic of stories that reflect cultural experience (Bruner "Self-Making"). We are particularly drawn to the submissions of students with home or heritage languages other than English, or, at least, we find that the presence of these multilingual students in the DALN, specifically in audio and visual submissions, offers a unique and instructive subset of literacy narratives to explore. As teachers who request literacy narratives and as researchers who analyze them, we are repeatedly surprised by the ways that our multilingual students, heard and seen in addition to being read, offer us rich and complex stories of their literacies. We are surprised that we most often hear the story of their coming to English (and not their home languages) as marking their literacy. And, then, we wonder at our own surprise at both of those things, noting that it marks us as aligned with the typical assumptions that undergird literacy and language teaching from positions of linguistic and cultural power in the United States (Horner; Canagarajah; Trimbur).

This kind of "a-ha" moment should not, admittedly, be such a big "a-ha," but our moments of surprise, followed by the dismay of what that surprise says about us, is a reflection of a wider process of recognition occurring in our disciplinary discourses. Scholars in rhetoric and composition have increasingly begun to question the adequacy of focusing on proficiency in Standard Written English (SWE) and to acknowledge the faults and the distortion of the monolingual and "deficit" model, which has historically underpinned our pedagogies and practices with multilingual writers (Canagarajah; Hawisher et al.; Horner). At the same time, researchers in Applied Linguistics are interrogating their own long-held monolingual perspectives, working to revise the assumption that native speaker proficiency is the standard by which language learners should be measured and instead acknowledging the hybridity of language and language systems and the rich rhetorical resources that multilingual speakers bring to transnational communication (Canagarajah; Kramsch and Whiteside).

The growing interest in the complex dynamics of multilingual literacies makes our investigation of the literacy narratives of multilingual contributors to the DALN a valuable resource for understanding and appreciating the linguistic and rhetorical versatility with which multilingual composers creatively navigate a variety of contexts, discourses, and modes of communication. Indeed, it is the linguistic versatility, the display of linguistic resources that can be tapped "to promote biliteracy and multilingualism" (Horner 572), available in the DALN that we hope to highlight in this exhibit.

We introduce Alix Escote, Medarka Murip, Keunho Shin, Sky (Tian Wei) Wang, and Sofia Gomez, all former students and current DALN contributors, and explore their literacy narratives as a means of illustrating what those narratives have to offer for our understanding of our multilingual students' work, of our own pedagogy, and of what scholars are increasingly articulating in regards to globalization and multilingualism in the composition classroom.

Given the exciting contemporary pedagogical conversations about multilingualism fueled by the work of Canagarajah, Horner, Trimbur, Pavlenko, and Hawisher et al, to name a few, this curated exhibit is guided by the following questions:

1. What can our sample of literacy narratives collectively tell us about multilingual and multimodal literacies and composing strategies?
2. What do the students' positions, topics, interests, and choices mean for multilingual literacy narrative production?
3. What do these things offer to teach instructors who assign such narratives?
4. What can they tell us about what the DALN might offer investigations of multilingual and multimodal composing?
5. Finally, what can composition teachers and scholars learn by attending to the local and global contexts of literacy narrative production?

Throughout this exhibit, then, we argue that exploration of both literacy narrative performances themselves, in print and multimodal form, as well as the context of the production of those narratives is essential work for instructors who believe that literacy narrative assignments are valuable and instructive.

Mapping the Landscape

For the purposes of this exhibit, we draw from the work of our own students' submissions to the DALN, not as a matter of convenience, but rather as a purposive or purposeful selection (Patton) of information-rich narratives, which allows us to reflect on various layers of meaning. Pavlenko argues through her research on autobiographical language learning narratives that: "autobiographical narratives are cultural institutions and social productions, they function as genre and reflect literary conventions, social norms, and structures of expectation of the place and time in which they are told" (175). As the teachers who requested or assigned these particular narratives, we are in large part responsible for the "expectations" of our students' responses. We are able to take advantage of this fact for the purposes of this exhibit as we make transparent the context of the production of pieces. We understand this is a perspective not available to all who utilize the DALN, but we feel we can best get at the kinds of questions we should be asking of that public space from a position in which we are most contextually aware. We know these particular students personally and have had the opportunity to discuss how the ways in which they position themselves in their narratives might reflect the social, cultural, and political contexts (or landscapes) of their lives. Additionally, as their teachers/ guides/interviewers/facilitators for their DALN submissions, we are keenly aware of the settings where these narratives were produced and the audiences for which they were produced.

Guiding our analysis of these five multilingual literacy narratives most globally is the concept of literacy landscapes, drawn from recent sociolinguistic research on "linguistic landscapes." We see multiple parallels between interrogation of linguistic landscapes, or "linguistic objects that mark the public space" and the multilingual markers of L2 literacy narratives (Ben-Rafael et al 7). As the metaphor of vision in our title implies, we broadly conceive that our analysis offers an illustration of what multilingual literacy narratives represent as a collective on the DALN. Just as scholars mapping linguistic landscapes look for linguistic markers in public spaces, we explore the common signs in the students' literacy narratives, noting how have they marked, in the public space of the DALN, their literacy and language learning experiences. We seek "common" patterns in multilingual contributions (or at least those of our students), but as well, by borrowing and evoking "landscapes," we draw on the ways a landscape is composed of a multiplicity of the parts – seeing the forest for the trees, as it were, as well as cataloging the trees that compose the landscape.

Scholars studying linguistic landscapes recognize the "elusivity" inherent in such research and, as such, carefully warn that their illustrations are not an accurate representation of the full range of the "linguistic repertoire" of a population but that they can illuminate the linguistic nature of a particular geographic space (Ben-Rafael et al 7). Likewise, we acknowledge the messiness and complexity inherent in the search for common patterns in these narratives while sifting through a multitude of overlapping factors, layers, and contexts of meaning. For the purposes of this exhibit, we are interested in our students' public—DALN—representations of their literacy stories, but we take care to stress that we are not conducting a study of language acquisition. Instead, like linguistic landscape scholars, we wish to analyze, highlight, and discuss what we find in the "landscape" of these narratives in order to analyze what our students can tell us about the nature of multilingual literacies. We approach our first layer of analysis through the identification of trends in content and production strategies across all five of the student-produced narratives.

Global and Local Contexts

We also recognize that it is not enough, in our analysis, to merely point out the common literacy markers of these multilingual narratives. We are guided by Aneta Pavlenko's critique of contemporary trends in the analysis of autobiographic language acquisition narratives, in which she stresses the importance of further analysis of "contextual influences" (175). Indeed, her assertion offers a comprehensive means of analysis:

The global or macro-level of analysis should attend to historic, political, economic, and cultural circumstances of narrative production. The local or micro-level should attend to the context of the interview or manuscript writing, and thus to the influence of language choice, audience, setting, modality, narrative functions, interactional concerns, and power relations on ways in which speakers and writers verbalize their experiences. (175)

To that end, we attempt to address both local and global contexts of production in the narratives, extending our discussion of the patterns, or landmarks, we observe across the narratives to an in-depth analysis of the global context of Medarka's literacy narrative interview and a detailed consideration of the local context of the production of Keunho's literacy narrative film.

As a final consideration, throughout the exhibit, we attend to Suresh Canagarajah's positioning of the multilingual competence as "always evolving and creative" ("Lingua Franca" 933). As Canagarajah and others persuasively argue, multilingualism is a bonus, not a deficit; it is the norm, not the exception. This framework allows us to explore the ways that our subset of second language, multilingual, and audio-visual literacy narratives, particularly when gathered together as they are in the DALN, offer rich diversity and an opportunity to put multiple narratives in conversation with one another and highlight the "practice-based, adaptive, emergent . . . multimodal, multisensory, multilateral, and therefore, multidimensional" aspects of literacy experiences (Canagarajah "Lingua Franca" 924).

Landmarks

the shaping of these sceneries and more particularly the linguistic landscapes which they illustrate, are contributed by a large variety of actors... These actors do not necessarily act harmoniously, nay even coherently but, on the other hand, whatever the resulting chaotic character of linguistic landscape, the picture that it comes to compose and which is familiar reality to many is most often perceived by passers-by as one structured space. We mean here a gestalt made of physical objects ... and above all, written words that make up their markers. These objects, indeed, are all topped with linguistic elements indicative of what they stand for. (Ben-Rafael et al. 8)

There are several striking patterns in the multilingual literacy narratives we have collected for this exhibit in terms of how students respond to the act of creating print and multimodal literacy narratives, how they position themselves in relation to language politics and schooling within their literacy narratives, and how they align their language and composing resources to fit the situation and the expectations of the DALN. As you move through our exhibit, we invite you to notice, as we did, the following patterns or landmarks in the multilingual literacy landscape:

- *the focus on English in the narratives of multilingual learners
- *the predisposition towards telling narratives of transcendence
- *the ways in which multimodality enriches the narrative experience

Focus on English

An important commonality amongst our students' narratives is the fact that each is a reference to the student's acquisition of English. Indeed, an exploratory search of the DALN, using a variety of search terms to find the narratives about language acquisition and literacy, reveals that the majority of bilingual and multilingual participants tell their stories of coming to written or spoken English, not to their home or heritage languages.

This pattern might seem obvious given that all of the contributions in the DALN that we have encountered are in English. Nevertheless, the specific attention to "English" literacy by our multilingual contributors is striking in comparison to the overall absence of references to "English" or language when discussing literacies by contributors who identify themselves as native speakers of English. The literacy narratives of English speakers tend to define and explore literacy without mentioning the language of a literacy at all.

For Suzanne's students, Keunho, Sky, and Sofia, in the context of a college-level writing class in the U.S specifically designed for non-native speakers of "English," perhaps the attention to English is not so surprising. Alanna's students, Alix and Medarka, were studying in the U.S specifically to learn all they could about English teaching methodologies, and thus, they specifically positioned themselves as "English" teachers. In their literacy interviews, Medarka reflects on the productive practices of her own English language education, and Alix asserts during his time in the U.S that he has learned that his own language pedagogies have been "somewhat wrong." Both make specific the connections between literacy and English for teachers.

As teachers ourselves, we do not connect “literacy” specifically to English in our assignments or lessons. We feel we are careful to attend to the diversity of discourse communities. Our students read Mike Rose, Deborah Brandt, and a selection of DALN narratives by a diverse group of contributors, who, granted, are also published or presented in English, but who, we would argue, explicitly venerate diverse literacies. In our classrooms, we overtly discuss a very broad understanding of literacy and tell students directly that we don’t believe in Standard Written English as the only acceptable form of expression. The assignment that led to Keunho’s, Sky’s, and Sofia’s narratives explains that “a literacy narrative is a personal story about reading, writing, or composing in any form or context,” which Suzanne hopes leads students to invention strategies which consider all of their literacies as fair game. Despite this attitude and approach in our classrooms, the focus on coming to English in the multilingual students’ narratives is pervasive.

This pattern, or landmark, in our landscape of multilingual narratives is a reflection of both context and of the strategies of multilingual learners. After all, both Suzanne’s and Alanna’s classes are housed in English departments, conducted in English, and therefore, give off distinctly monolingual vibes. It would seem, then, that our students chose the most rhetorically savvy move they could possibly make—a public demonstration of their proficiency in that language and discourse in which the instructor expresses herself and her course goals.

The students’ abilities to adeptly respond to the unspoken and even unintended monolingual assumptions of our literacy narrative assignments speaks volumes for Canagarajah’s assertions about the synergy and serendipity with which multilingual communicators utilize their creative agency to respond to their interlocutors and create meaning:

Participants have to be radically other-centered. They have to be imaginative and alert to make on-the-spot decisions in relation to the forms and conventions employed by the other. It is clear that communication in multilingual communities involves a different mind-set and practices from the mind-set and practices in monolingual communities. . . . Multilingual communication works because competence does not constitute a form of knowledge, but rather, encompasses interaction strategies. ⁽⁹³¹⁾

The nimbleness of interaction strategies observed in multilingual communities seems to translate, then, to contexts in which multilingual communicators have to apply those same strategies to monolingual situations. This is both something we should look for and celebrate in the work of our multilingual students and something we should use as a caution when designing and explaining our assignments.

Narratives of Transcendence

The second pattern we noticed involves our students' choices for narrative form. Like many other scholars studying autobiographical accounts of literacy or lived lives, we note the ways in which our requests that students produce "literacy narratives" for us, or for the DALN, result in stories with a recurring narrative structure. Whether identified as a "progressive narrative" (Gergen and Gergen), a "literacy myth" (Graff), a culturally scripted "progress plot" (Branch 208), a "tropic of literacy" (Brodkey), a "theme" (Pavlenko), a "hero" narrative (Williams "Heroes"), or an aspect of the generic conventions of literacy narratives (Eldred and Mortensen 530), the literacy narrative assignment or interview request overwhelmingly creates a predisposition towards narratives of transcendence.

This repeated positioning of the narrator as a hero, working to achieve some form of social/cultural capital or power through literacy and winning the battle, is not evident only to scholars; it forms part of the landscape, the "familiar reality . . . most often perceived by passers-by as one structured space" (Ben-Rafael 8), of the DALN. As one of our students noted after completing a "listening/watching" analysis assignment with a series of DALN contributions:

Literacy is a struggle. The struggle is multifarious in terms of the multiplicity of conflicts and adventures for the various heroes who happen to experience them. A hero is someone who overcomes struggle with courage and determination. These heroes are encountering many different adventures where they struggle and use literacy to overcome their struggles in stories that I have found the chance to read, listen and watch in the Digital Archive of Literacy Narratives (DALN). The examples that I found on the DALN are not stories or descriptions of literacy, they are adventures, which consist of heroes and anti-heroes, where a lesson teaches and changes the author. (Gokan Ilbay, Writing and Rhetoric I, Fall 2009)

In the narratives in this exhibit, the students confidently share stories of individual effort and the resulting confidence in their own abilities to successfully and effectively acquire competence in English as a bilingual or multilingual speaker. The three undergraduate students in this exhibit suggest that the success occurs directly as the result of their efforts outside of, or even in spite of, a formal schooling environment, and in fact this pattern extends well beyond these three narratives: it is apparent in almost all of the "student" language-learning focused narratives in the DALN. Here, Sky, Keunho, and Sofia clearly invest themselves in the role of "hero/rebel" as they take advantages of life learning experiences in their literacy narratives, a role that Paterson describes as:

students who rebel against the established hierarchy or values of literacy. They portray themselves as bucking conventions . . . Yet they refuse to portray themselves as helpless victims. Instead, they choose to dismiss the values and assignments of mainstream education, while often displaying what they consider their true literacy talents. (qtd. in Williams 344)

All three students attribute their successes to the various ways in which they became personally interested in and invested in learning English: actively going outside of school, seeking their own ways to learn, using family and social connections, and rejecting the authority of school language instruction. Their literacy narratives subvert the dominant “language and literacy equals schooling” perspective. Instead, the students focus on the social scene, their experiences with family and friends, and the influence of popular media (e.g. “Lion King”), all things they find far more engaging than the educational scene.

Disney movies are wholeheartedly embraced by these three students, and, in fact, they serve as cornerstones for each of their experiences of coming to English. Sofia opens her print literacy narrative with these words:

I wish that I could memorize my class curriculum as easily as I memorized Timon and Pumba’s arguments, or Iago’s witty complaints, or Pocahontas’ explanation of her strange dream. I know these things (by heart) now because as a little girl, I used to watch Disney movies over and over. At the time it seemed like a great pastime, but looking back, I’m grateful to see that these movies did way more than just entertain me: they helped me learn English. ⁽¹⁾

Sky chooses to revise his personal history on screen so that *The Lion King* can become his first and most important exposure to English.

Keunho does not name the movies he watches in his literacy film or print narrative, but in conversations in class he explicitly noted Disney movies as language learning experiences. Perhaps access to Disney movies early in life, along with the exportation of American bootstrapping and rugged individualism mythologies, has something to do with the self-characterization in these students’ crafted, composed literacy narratives.

Alix and Medarka, on the other hand, as English language teachers in the Philippines, explicitly toe the line of schooling-and-value-of-education in their literacy narrative interviews. They both continue the pattern of the heroic/literacy myth narratives, but their heroism lies in their success navigating multiple languages while mastering English within the school setting.

Medarka does mention, after her lengthy explanation of learning to write and read in school, that her love of movies is an important factor in her English language and literacy acquisition.

Nevertheless, she clearly sees this as an addition to schooling, not as a replacement for the educational context and formal language instruction. More importantly, Alix and Medarka both envision a very tight connection between language and literacy acquisition and school in general and they both perceive orthographic instruction, the physical writing of the alphabet of English, as a crucial step in the beginning of literacy: for them orthography is literacy.

While we, as teachers and DALN researchers, found ourselves nodding and appreciating the students' "hero/rebel" narratives of learning outside of school because they do not challenge the typical narrative arc we are accustomed to, we furrowed our brows and said, "what?" when it came to considering literacy as "simply" orthography. The different subject positions of the students and students/teachers in these five narratives offer an easy answer to our response to the narratives themselves. After all, aren't teenagers notoriously rebellious? Don't language teachers have to accept teaching as a valuable method for learning language? Doesn't it make sense that the teachers say this? Well . . . no, because we, too, are teachers and it surprised us. A more nuanced interrogation, however, showcases how much of our bewilderment at the idea of physical transcription of the alphabet as writing, as literacy, is particularly revealing of the mythologies and organizing metaphors for what language and literacy acquisition is and should be for us. Notably, it clearly places us, literacy narrative readers/watchers/interlocutors/teachers, as native speakers of English for whom the orthographic system of our own language is, in essence, a no-brainer. Recognizing these deeply ingrained monolingual assumptions about language and literacy embedded in our response, then, helps us to get to the point that Canagarajah suggests is so necessary: "acknowledging the heterogeneity of language and communication would force us to develop more democratic and egalitarian models of community and communication ("Lingua Franca" 934).

Despite the different rationales for success, whether following the hero/rebel path or actively advocating formal instruction, all five of the narratives and interviews position language and literacy acquisition as an active process of personal effort and achievement. In the landscape of the whole of the DALN then, the "gestalt made of physical objects" (Ben-Rafael et al. 8) formed by autobiographical literacy narratives is one of transcendence, a transcendence that is both culturally conforming and individuating at the same time. As Bruner points out, this tension is something inherent in our human autobiographical storytelling, fitting in and standing out as we co-create ourselves and our cultures ("Self-Making" 71). Certainly, these tensions hold true as a pattern across the multilingual literacy narratives in this exhibit, but the patterns within that pattern offer a vision of some of the most interesting aspects of the multilingual literacy landscape as a whole.

Multimodal Matters

Linguistic meaning is created in relation to diverse symbol systems (icons, space, color, gesture, or other representational systems) and modalities of communication (writing, sound, visuals, touch, and body), not to speak of diverse languages. If we need a grammar or rules for this mode of communication, it will be a grammar of multimodality—that is, it will contain rules that account for how language meshes with diverse symbol systems, modalities of communication, and ecological resources to create meaning. (Canagarajah “Lingua Franca” 932)

We note the similarities between Canagarajah’s compelling argument about multilingual literacies and the current understanding of the productive affordances of multimodal composing. In our examination of our students’ multilingual literacy narratives, we assert that modality matters. We can’t help but notice the richness of the narratives as a result of access to voice, gesture, tone, especially when compared to the print literacy narratives our students have produced. We argue that in multimodal form, these texts “carry meaning across geo-political, linguistic, and cultural borders, and . . . take advantage of multiple semiotic channels” (Takayoshi and Selfe 2). Multimodal L² literacy narratives offer important layers of meaning, both as students produce the texts and as we read/experience them in the DALN.

As one example of this richness in the multimodal pieces, we offer a paragraph from Sky’s print literacy narrative in conjunction with a clip from his multimodal piece. To fully appreciate the expression of all five students in various modes, we highly recommend viewing the full DALN entries for each student:

- Escote, Alix. “Literacy Narrative Interview.” 13 May 2010. Digital Archives of Literacy Narratives. <http://hdl.handle.net/2374.DALN/2014> MOV file. 14 June 2010
- Gomez, Sofia. “Early Language Education.” 18 December 2009. Digital Archives of Literacy Narratives. <http://hdl.handle.net/2374.DALN/915> MOV file. 14 June 2010
- Murip, Medarka. “Literacy Narrative Interview.” 13 May 2010. Digital Archives of Literacy Narratives. <http://hdl.handle.net/2374.DALN/2013> MOV file. 13 May 2010
- Shin, Keunho. “Studying with TV.” 17 December 2009. Digital Archives of Literacy Narratives. <http://hdl.handle.net/2374.DALN/920> WMV file. 14 June 2010.
- Wang, Tian Wei (Sky). “Learn English as I Travel.” 18 December 2009. Digital Archives of Literacy Narratives. <http://hdl.handle.net/2374.DALN/933> MOV file. 14 June 2010.

In his print literacy narrative, Sky relates the story of his arrival in England and his initial dismay at not being able to understand the language around him:

See, even though I am constantly writing about how I was bad in English, I was not aware of this before I departed for England. Actually, I thought I was pretty decent at it, and I even told myself not to worry, that soon enough, my genius in English would be in good use. Oh, I wish I hadn’t thought like that! Because not only did my skills not shine in anything, I could barely understand anybody when I got there. I remember that there was this moment when the cab driver that was picking me up from the airport said something like, “Where ya going mate?” and all I heard was “mehmehmehmeh, meh?” If that’s not torture, what is? (Tian Wei Wang)

He shares the same story in his film:

In all five of the literacy narratives in this exhibit -- the three crafted stories and the two interviews -- the audio, visual, and multimodal narratives offer layered data about the symbolic practices that give shape to literacy and linguistic spaces and experiences. While each of these contributors is certainly capable of offering autobiographical literacy information in print form, in the crafted, multimodally composed contributions more so than in their print pieces, we find the presence of the students, the voices of the students, and the vision of the students much more vibrant and more effective at conveying who they are choosing to be and what they are thinking.

There are several caveats that must accompany this statement. First, we are not suggesting in any way that it is not possible for a bilingual or multilingual student, or any student for that matter, to share an autobiographical literacy narrative in a very compelling way in print. There are many, many contributions in the DALN, including some from these students, and out in the world that provide evocative and provocative print literacy narratives. Second, we are certainly not the first to notice the power of visual and audio elements of storytelling. Nevertheless, we argue that in the multilingual literacy landscape, audio, visual, and multimodal material make it almost impossible to fall back on standard labels (ESL, L2, foreign, other) that might come easily to mind when reading an "imperfect" print text. The voicing of these stories, the performance of narrative identity, even in image, brings the interesting person, the living being, to the fore and combats the very human urge to "other" and to apply easily accessible stereotypes. Again, this is probably true in of all of the DALN audio, visual, or multimodal contributions, but these elements carry an important weight for the storytelling of those our dominant culture typically others.

Panorama

Panorama

Our analysis of the most striking patterns in our five sample literacy narratives works because it begins to articulate a positioning of those students who choose to connect their literacy narrative with English language acquisition and with the progressive narrative. Understanding these patterns can shape and reshape how instructors assign the literacy narrative. Indeed, there are few tasks more scholarly in nature than seeking patterns and making generalizations. And yet, and here we stress, the tensions inherent when theorizing any “category” of the DALN population are present at all times. We argue that these tensions—between the import and immediacy of the “noticing” of categories and the glossing and omissions required to name those categories—are productive, but they do require methodologies and theories that don’t rely on a fixed meaning. As Kathleen Stewart stresses, there is weight in repetition but also value in nuance. Or as she asserts referring to the meaning of any given pattern “it’s a composition . . . and one that literally can’t be seen as a simple repository of systemic effects imposed on an innocent world but has to be traced through generative modalities of impulses, daydreams, ways of relating, distractions, strategies, failures, encounters, and worldings of all kinds” (“Weak Theory”⁷³). Further, as Aneta Pavlenko insists, “content cannot be analyzed in separation from context and form, and that thematization is a preliminary analytic step and cannot be confused with analysis”⁽¹⁶⁷⁾.

What we argue is important, then, is a more comprehensive understanding of individual literacy narratives. To that end, in this section we offer a more nuanced look at two students, Medarka and Keunho, in which we pay attention specifically to what their literacy narratives offer and further “mean” in light of the global and local conditions under which they were constructed. In order to do so, we pay attention, again, to Pavlenko’s methodology, for which she extols research to analyze the context of narrative production.

Medarka: A Macro-Level Analysis

When Medarka recorded her literacy narrative with Alanna Frost, she was in the United States studying as a fellow in the International Leaders in Education Program (ILEP). Sponsored by the U.S. State Department, the ILEP program’s goal is to educate international teachers in “the latest advancements in educational methodology and policy, and . . . the leadership skills necessary to implement and promote change within their schools and home communities” (“International Leader”). As teachers of English in their own countries, ILEP fellows had passed the competitive application to come to the United States and study for one semester. While she interned, Medarka lived on the campus of the southern state school, with ¹⁵ other fellows. The southern state school that hosted the fellows worked with campus instructors and local high schools to fulfill the State Department’s requirements for the students’ tenure. These requirements are extensive, and her internship kept her very busy. The ILEP fellows were expected to attend two elective graduate classes, two weekly ILEP-specific classes in media technologies and curriculum development (to support the unit plan their cohort was required to produce for presentation at the State Department at the outset of their tenure), and observe and teach in local high school classes. Medarka and her cohort, although students in many classes while in the U.S., were also colleagues in their professional attention to their own pedagogical concerns and interest in learning all they could about the teaching of English.

As we have noted, Medarka's narrative is the story of schooled literacy. In her literacy narrative when I (Alanna) ask about "the first thing that came to mind" regarding her literacy, she responds quickly, explaining, "I immediately thought of the first time I learn how to write." Her writing story is descriptive, and she carefully explains the steps in her process. Medarka recalls a "workbook where there is a guided way of writing it, so you just have to trace it first, and at the end you'll have to write on your own with the three lines on that." Her memory is so vivid that she scribes in the air with her right hand while she is explaining the tracing and the writing. Medarka's schooled literacy is also a success story; she reveals herself as a scholar who is reflecting on both her own memories and her own memories through the lens of her pedagogical knowledge. Her reasons for connecting her early literacy to writing are pedagogical:

Yeah, I thought immediately about [writing] because I thought it's one of the best ways to teach young children in writing to have a very good, um, cursive writing or penmanship because I saw that some students now they have like not so legible writing so I guess it's a very good start.

Further, after explaining the way her teacher taught her to read, by "guiding" the class through words and sentences "on the board," she offers an analysis of why that particular method is so productive: "I learn it now that it's like an audio-lingual way of teaching like you have the sound and you have the writing and then there is also repetition and practice, so I think it's effective." Indeed, Medarka is so concerned about connecting her literacy to good instruction that after we are finished with the first narrative, she asks to do a second to clarify some points. In her second narrative, she again stresses the importance of learning the English alphabet and learning to read and write simultaneously.

Medarka's literacy narrative thus reflects her immediate preoccupation; as a teacher immersed in the teaching of English and, more interestingly, as one who has dislocated herself for 5 months of intense study of English, her story is both about her education as a child and her assessment of that education as a teacher of English. But the discussion of English that takes place in the narrative between me, her composition instructor, and Medarka, the English teacher, gets very complicated. In her first narrative, Medarka explains her writing as tracing and her reading as repeating. What I am repeatedly interested in, during the interview, is what language she is referring to when she remembers letter tracing and word repeating. For me, and I will guess for her, when she begins with her tracing story, although she doesn't clearly state it, she is speaking of learning English. Or at least, for me, because I specifically share that same "three-lined" tracing memory, I assumed that we were speaking of English. Medarka seems to think so too, or at least when I ask her directly "would you say that that experience with copying out the letters and reading them off of the board was like one of your first experiences with English?" she answers with only "yeah" and then immediately analyzes her teacher's "audio-lingual" method. But then, shortly thereafter, Medarka speaks of Filipino as her second language, and when I ask her if she learned it the same way she learned to write English, she says "yes" and also that there was equal time spent on English and Filipino.

Most interestingly, in the second video, I ask Medarka directly, “When I first started talking to you about literacy narratives and literacy, did you automatically think of first language or second language or is it all the same to you because you were immersed?” Her response confirms the sense I had throughout the interview—that we are mostly speaking of English-language learning, as she answers “what comes to my mind is English immediately because of the abc, that’s the first one that I remember.” So regardless of the fact that she learned Filipino in school and before she learned English, Medarka’s literacy narrative is about how she learned English.

Fascinatingly, English is Medarka’s third language. Her first is Tausug, which she speaks very little about. When I press her about her Tausug literacy, she does offer that Tausug is “distinctive in our place” and that “there’s a book on [Tausug],” but she can’t recall its name. The remainder of our nearly nine-minute interview is about her English and Filipino literacy. Also interesting is the fact that English is by no means the dominant language in her community. Medarka makes this clear to me when I ask about the language most prominently displayed in her community; she very quickly explains that approximately equal space is given to Filipino and English in public spaces.

A more global understanding of the educational conditions in which Medarka learned to read and write offers an even more fascinating and complex narrative. For the story of language policy in the Philippines itself is a tale of colonialism and power. Smolicz and Nical, in their analysis of high school students’ use of and attitudes towards home and school languages, describe the complexity of educational policy in a country with a “linguistic mosaic of . . . eighty major and minor languages and another two hundred dialects” (511). Colonized first by Spain in 1564 and then by the United States 300 years later, as Smolicz and Nical review, Filipinos have been embroiled in language contentions for hundreds of years. Most recently and most relevant to Alix’s and Medarka’s literacy, are the language policies legislated in the twentieth century. In 1898, after helping the Philippines drive out the Spanish and then overpowering a Filipino republic, the U.S. instituted compulsory education “for all Filipinos in English” (511). There were penalties for student caught speaking home languages at school, but the richly varied “indigenous languages continued to thrive in the home and hearts of the people” (511). Since the Philippines gained independence in 1946, language policy has consistently involved debates amongst advocates for, foremost, the declaration of an official language but also a frenetic list of options: an official language that that is any other than English, or a composite language fusing as many dialects as possible, or Tagalog as the official language (512). In 1974, it became official education policy to offer instruction in Tagalog (now called officially “Filipino”) and English. And in 1987, Filipino and English were written into the constitution as the official languages of the Philippines. But Tagalog itself remains controversial. Originally a minority language, it “won” because it was the historic language of Manila, thus not the language of the majority, but the language of a powerful and urban minority.

Medarka’s casual discussion of this remarkable fact, that she speaks three languages, that English literacy dominated our conversation but does not necessarily dominate her home life, her education, or even her classroom, coheres with the findings of Smolicz and Nical, who surveyed Filipino students from three different home language communities to determine their frequency of language use (indigenous language or school language—Filipino and English) and their attitudes toward all three.

Their findings indicate that students use and appreciate their “triglossia” quite readily; indeed, they “generalize that . . . the majority [of students] activate the three languages in different domains, and recognize the respective benefits of each” (Smolcicz and Nical⁵²³). But what remains remarkable in a “macro-level” analysis of Medarka’s narrative is that she was schooled in her national language. It is difficult to imagine spending pre-school years immersed in the language of your parents and community and then going to school to learn the more privileged minority language in your own country as well as the language of one of your former colonizers. It would be a fantastic proposition to us English speakers in our mostly monolingual culture.

So, we argue, one powerful lesson that Medarka’s literacy narrative reveals has to do with the interaction between the interviewer and the narrator. In her narrative, there is a teacher (Medarka) telling her literacy narrative about what she feels are the most pedagogically sound ways to teach a language, speaking about the learning of two languages, neither of which are her first, and neither of which are the dominant languages of her country’s citizens. And there is her teacher, who at the time of the interview had only an inkling of the complexity of language policy in the Philippines, trying to understand what language she is most interested in. At its most basic interpretation, this complexity speaks to a need to continually narrate, interrogate, and interpret literacy narratives collaboratively. In this instance, I was hearing a mostly English literacy narrative, and Medarka was reflecting on the schooled literacy of Filipino and English but asserting that story as an “English” memory, even while she was recalling speaking only Tausug, her first language, on the playground and at home. In my own and Medarka’s stressing of English literacy, we are both seeking answers. In her memory, which language wins when she remember her little girl self tracing the letter her teacher asks for? What alphabet dominated? I wondered: “how does it feel to pulled by so many complex languages?”

Keunho: Contexts of Narrative Production

Keunho’s multimodal literacy narrative, “Studying English with TV,” is, according to Cindy Selfe, DALN co-founder, the “first stop-motion film DALN entry!” (personal communication Dec 16, 2009). His work is of considerable interest in general because of how he chose to mediate his literacy narrative and what that choice indicates about emerging genres and modes in the landscape of the DALN. But even more compelling is the story behind the production of his multimodal narrative and what the local context reveals about what Canagarajah argues is the “rhetorical creativity” of multilinguals. Indeed, Keunho’s work artistically illustrates Canagarajah’s finding that multilinguals utilize “mysterious ‘double vision’ that enables them to understand the possibilities and constraints of competing traditions of writing, and carve out a space for themselves within conflicting discourses” (“Toward a Writing Pedagogy” 602).

Unlike Medarka’s video-taped literacy narrative interview, where a investigation of the social, political, historical, and cultural contexts of her literacy acquisition in the Philippines is somewhat possible without additional information about the local or micro contexts of the production of the narrative, in Keunho’s case those micro-contexts provide an important view into institutional and classroom learning contexts and what happens with multilingual and, dare we say, multimodal students in our classrooms when those spaces are guided by the assumptions and mythologies of idealized “native” writers and the supremacy of print.

Keunho arrived at a Midwest liberal arts college with a focus on arts and media as a “conditionally accepted” student in a transitional intensive English language program. Because of a glitch in the admissions process, he entered with lower TOEFL score than what was usually required for acceptance, even conditional acceptance. In his fall first-year writing class with Suzanne as his instructor, he participated in a sequence of assignments for producing a literacy narrative and contributing it to the DALN. He was first asked to research narratives in the DALN, to write a print literacy narrative, and then to create a multimodal work that reflected what he felt was the most important concept, metaphor, or story from his print literacy narrative. Keunho’s print narrative (also submitted to the DALN) was arduous work. His first draft consisted of three sentences:

When I was high school student, I watched many, many Japanese and American dramas and movies. I watched drams and movies almost every day after school. I should have been studying for university entrance, but I almost completely focused on watching dramas or movies because watching movies was fun and I felt like a hero while I was watching dramas.

He worked diligently for two weeks to continue to try to develop his narrative in print, adding that his preference for watching movies to learn language was a point of contention with his parents and that he had learned aspects of American culture from watching the show “Friends” specifically that he figured out what a “rain check” was. With the print narrative coming along so slowly, he needed to begin work on his multimodal piece while still completing the print piece.

Keunho’s written proposal for the multimodal literacy narrative was one sentence: “I will go to Toy’s –R–Us and buy a doll house.” As his instructor, I, Suzanne, tried every teacher trick I knew to elicit more information and more of a proposal, but Keunho chose not to say more. On the day he was supposed to submit a storyboard and conceptual metaphor for his multimodal piece, Keunho arrived with a rough cut of his stop-motion film.

I was floored, and I got it. I understood his three-sentence literacy narrative in a way that I had refused to understand it on the page. I also realized that I had given up on him; I had written him off because he was not conforming to my expectations for his performance as a college-level writing student and he was not conforming to MY sequence of assignments. I purposefully wanted students to write a print narrative and then compose a multimodal piece as a means of exploring the power of mediating their ideas. I wanted them to do so in MY preferred order, the way I would do it: print to multimodal. I had not left room for that exploration to occur from multimodal to print. By only seeing composing from my mono-lingual and monomodal perspective, by assuming a print-to-multimodal path, I had silenced Keunho and reduced him feeling only capable of composing only three sentences.

After making the stop-motion film, Keunho was able to return to the print narrative and to develop his story and argument about his alternative path to learning English and Japanese. He was able to do so with far more "success" in Standard Written English than he was prior to making the film, prior to using his multilingual and multimodal, ever evolving and creative, competencies, to create meaning.

Conclusions

Conclusions

Our interrogation of several narratives from the public space of the DALN reveals important pedagogical and scholarly implications as answers to the questions we posed at the outset of this chapter. In what remains, we offer a summary of that which we gleaned from our investigation.

What do the students' positions, topics, interests, and choices mean for multilingual literacy narrative production?

Multilingual students consistently produce, in text and multimodal formats, literacy narratives in English. We argue that this choice speaks directly to students' positions in our classrooms as both bound by the dominant language of classroom and instruction and agentic in their attention to the language that they may sense offers them the maximum classroom capital. This sense of agency is further exemplified in the ubiquity of students' narratives of transcendence, in which they, to varying degrees, reject schooled literacy as the predominant means of acquiring English capital. We find further, that those students who produce multi-media literacy narratives demonstrate, if not a fluency in SWE, then compelling proof of fluency in those Englishes necessary for both academic and social negotiations.

What do these things offer to teach instructors who assign such narratives?

Our analysis demonstrates, most importantly, that there is more to assigning the literacy narratives than the assignment. The fact that our bilingual and multilingual students consistently offer us literacy narratives specifically about coming to English, although they are never asked explicitly to do so, is pedagogically very revealing. It speaks, we believe, to a disconnect between what we ask for and what our students believe we are asking for. This evidence of "all English/all the time" would indicate that we are looking for narratives that demonstrate English proficiency, or, at least, that our students are doing a good job of working towards that goal, when our goal is quite different. We suggest that instructors pay much more attention to the context of the asking. As Branch argues:

When these [literacy] narratives are written by (and we suggest requested by/assigned by) teachers, they have the power to reinscribe the "great divide" theory of literacy, in which teachers, the "literate," are endowed with more cultural, psychological, and critical understanding than students, the "illiterate." (208)

This also holds true for a great divide theory of the domination of English as the lingua franca of the world. Instructors need to be very careful, as we examine both the literacy landscape of the DALN as a whole and as we delve into the analysis of individual literacy narrative selections, that context, even messy and chaotic context, and issues of language and power, even messy and chaotic issues of language and power, are not lost in the quest for identifying features.

Further, we argue that our analysis reveals important considerations for instructors who ask students to analyze and compose literacy narratives. Most broadly, we feel it necessary that instructors and students understand that analysis of the DALN and of literacy narratives offers an opportunity for multiple and layered interpretations of a literacy narrative. Clearly, not all of the information we have shared here is available to those who explore DALN archives. But the dates of their production and the participants' coding of their own narratives are also accessible, and, in many cases different forms of the narratives themselves as well as supplemental materials are included in the full DALN record. In all of these cases, students and instructors can discuss and analyze the historical, cultural, and political climate that potentially lead to the particular choices of DALN participants.

What can they tell us about what the DALN might offer investigations of multilingual and multimodal composing?

We have come to understand a particular phrase from linguistic landscapes scholars as an exciting and apt descriptor of the public space of the DALN. Rodriguez argues for a methodology of studying writing in public spaces that can determine a community's "ethnolinguistic vitality" ⁽¹⁾. It is, indeed, this vitality that we feel best describes the multilingual compositions found on the DALN. We see multiple parallels between the interrogation of multilingual and multimodal literacy narratives and the ways in which those narratives can contribute to both an in-depth investigation of individual signs and symbols as well as broad view of an overall literacy landscape. We position the DALN itself, then, as a literacy landscape, as a space in which "ethnolinguistic vitality" (Rodriguez ¹) is accessible to researchers, teachers, and students. The variety and complexity of multilingual literacy narratives, each of which illustrates what Canagarajah describes as composers' "negotiat[ion of] competing literacy conventions on their own terms" ⁽⁶⁰⁰⁾, offers a public space in which productive community members repeatedly, even unknowingly, challenge global understanding of what it means to communicate richly and complexly in "English."

Finally, we feel that Canagarajah's specific assertions regarding Lingua Franca English (LFE) are essential to developing schemata of the exigencies of requests to participants for their literacy narratives. Although we would make clear that "proficiency in English" has never been a requirement for DALN submissions nor (surely not) the primary goal of any literacy narrative assignment, without repeatedly making clear the reasons why literacy narratives are compelling and important assignments, we instructors risk perpetuating rich and complex but repeatedly monolingual narratives. If we assume that our bi and multilingual students are, as Canagarajah demonstrates, proficient in the transnationally relevant and fluid LFE, then we begin discussion of "literacy" from a paradigm that has the potential to open up students' invention to endless possibilities for representations of a multiplicity of literacies. If we also encourage and provide the opportunity for students to consider multimodal affordances as an integral part of their LFE repertoire and composing strategies, we make room for the production of a literacy landscape with the most ethnolinguistic vitality possible.

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“Multilingual Literacy Landscapes” can be read and experienced in multiple ways, including the along the lines of the traditional text argument that David Bloome points out as a standard reading in the introduction to this digital collection. If you are using the online exhibit, you can click the “continue reading” links at the bottom of each page to move through the text following the traditional structure of a critical inquiry — introduction, methodology (“Mapping”), results (“Landmarks” and “Panorama”), and conclusion. The hyperlinks throughout the exhibit are internal and either connect you to other sections of the exhibit or to additional materials that may be of interest. We also invite you to be a bit “unruly” in your process of experiencing these literacy narratives and to engage with the exhibit according to your interests by using the tabs on the top of the page to wander around.

As designers of this exhibit of multilingual and multimodal literacy narratives and interviews, we attempted to build according to our two guiding principles: to ensure that the richness of the voices and storytelling of our multilingual students could be experienced through the video and audio presentation of their materials and to convey the feel of landscape, with its continual tension between bordered constraints and unruly freedoms, as the conceptual metaphor undergirding the piece. In addition to including the full video literacy narratives and interviews as raw data, we chose to excerpt pieces of the video for students quotes throughout the text, rather than to simply retell their words in print, thereby losing the nuance of voice and gesture in the process. In the interest of accessibility, the videos are captioned, but our decision to use the captions was complicated by a desire to not detract the attention of viewers from the sounds, tones, movements, and expressions of the students in their videos, having been reminded through this work of the communicative power of those elements.

In the process of composing a digital text, we found ourselves reminded of how tied we are, as teachers and writers, to print text. We continually had our literacy landscapes conceptual metaphor in mind and attempted to reinforce it through our selection of images for the page headers, but as is probably evident in this piece, we could not escape our need to “write” the argument in print text or escape the limitations of our design and coding skills. We are continually learning from the students whose work is shared here and the students in our writing classes today about how to envision and understand digital composing in new ways.

This exhibit of selections from the Digital Archive of Literacy Narratives would not have been possible without the collaboration and wonderful work of all of the students showcased here. We offer our heartfelt gratitude to Keunho Shin, Sofia Gomez, TianWei (Sky) Wang, Alex Escote, and Medarka Murip. It is to Medarka's memory, however, that we dedicate this work. Shortly after we interviewed Medarka, she successfully completed the ILEP program and returned to the Philippines. Sadly, soon after she arrived home and began teaching again Medarka was diagnosed with cancer. She died within months of her diagnosis. This chapter would not have been possible without her curiosity, generosity, and humor. Medarka was an excellent student and a dedicated and smart teacher. We respectfully dedicate this chapter to her and to her loving family.