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Matters of the Heart and the Academy

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A Loving Translation for Abuelita: Matters of the Heart and the Academy
By Karla C. Pérez

> With each death, a part of that lived memory that connected every villager to a peasant past is erased, made unrecoverable (Behar 41)

In Marjorie Orellana's (forthcoming) work with children who translate she underscores a more global and far reaching social benefit of translation. She terms this a "transnational repertoire" or :

> an orientation towards and disposition to understand the perspective of people from backgrounds different from one's own, and the ability and willingness to adapt behavior, discursive practices and epistemological stances flexibly in interaction with others.

In this piece I will be interpreting my own method of translation, one cultivated through my many years as a child and, now, adult translator. I depart from this understanding that the most effective translation approximates the frame of reference of an audience. This, ultimately, requires a crafty balance and a sense of empathy between one's own experience and those of audience for which one is translating. I attempt to illuminate the powerful role of empathy in translation by exposing my own human experience with mourning. This attempt to unveil the process of translation is also a continued quest for transparency in research that allows the author to be a vulnerable and human alongside the once termed "subjects."

Divided in three parts, I first explain the text in translation, "A Pedagogy of Multiliteracies: Designing Social Futures" by the New London Group and then explain my own understanding of this text. Lastly, I evoke matters of the heart by translating the academic text to my dear *abuelita* who recently came to pass. This is a fictitious

conversation between us, translated through the memories of a mourning granddaughter. Ultimately, what this loving translation reveals is that behind translation work and academic work are vulnerable beings who to be considered viable researchers and academics must hide behind a veil of objectivity. The question I pose through my own experience as a vulnerable graduate student and researcher is: How can the great power of vulnerability transform and enrich the academy and the field of Education without shame? In Education we often speak of students as a vulnerable population without connecting our own vulnerability to that of our students. What would be gained if as researchers, academic writers, and translators we understood our own vulnerability as fundamental to empathizing with our audience or subject?

Ruth Behar's Vulnerable Observer represents a quest for a missing genre in anthropology, one that unlike the scientific report, but different from a work of fiction. Maria Casillas, my grandmother, passed away in 2010 as I undertook my coursework at UCLA. At the time I thought that leaving the academy to deal with the overwhelming pain and sorrow would be the only way to continue. But what of life and the fact that it goes on despite the breaking heart that Behar recalls in her work? I decided to stay, tears rolling down my cheeks as I read and wrote alone in my studio. It might be seen as selfish, but the only way to survive this depression and continue with my work as an Education researcher and graduate student was to merge my work intimately with the work of the heart. I discovered that to do this was painful, but this pain ignited a powerful creative impetus that moved me and my work in Education beyond a safe empathy. Instead, my work became more meaningful because it was personal as I merged my vulnerability with that of the students and schools I sought to serve.

This is a product of this creative impetus. This reflection on my role as a translator bought me to the loving translations I, many times as a child and adult, performed for my grandmother, a Mexican immigrant to the US. In this piece I attempt to translate "A Pedagogy of Multiliteracies: Designing Social Futures" by the New London Group. I first established a prior reference to help me concretize the meaning of the text according to my frames of reference. The first translation and the reflection will focus on this part of the translation process. The second translation will use the same text and through dialogue will attempt to translate by connecting my own concretized meaning to a second frame of reference, that of my grandmother. In other words, the translation will not be a word for word translation, but instead one that attempts to capture the ideas in the context of somebody else's lived experiences.

As Orellana argues, this type of translation requires a keen "transnational and transcultural repertoire," one acquired through my many years as a child translator and as an adult who continues to cross between what James Gee (1996) terms discourse communities. In this attempt to make lucid the process of translation I also seek to make this relevant to understanding sociocultural research as a method that "…[demonstrates] how children's opportunities to learn are both supported and constrained by the role of power in everyday interactions of students and teachers and by the system and structures that shape the institutions of schooling," (Lewis et al. 16). This discussion, I believe, is enriched by my role as a mourning granddaughter who recounts in this translation from memory the schooling experiences of a grandmother raised in the Mexican countryside where power shaped and continue to shape opportunity.

The Translated Text

For this translation I focused on a particular concept of the text, the concept of *Design* as defined by the New London Group to speak of New Literacies. The authors explain that *Design* as social actors, "…we are both inheritors of patterns and conventions of meaning and at the same time active designers of meaning," (65). The authors then elaborate on the six design: Linguistic Meaning, Visual Meaning, Audio Meaning, Gestural Meaning, Spatial Meaning, and the Multimodal pattern of meaning. The translation focuses on the meaning of Design and its three elements (Available Design, Designing, and Re-designing), foundational terms to the understanding of the text and the proposed transformation of pedagogical practices in a changing, Post-Fordist global order.

Furthermore, the idea of Design also helps elucidate important features of sociocultural research. In Reframing Sociocultural Research on Literacy the contributors agree that research in Education needs multiple lenses and rigorous methods that elucidate the nuanced relationship between sociocultural macro and micro context in the production of knowledge, learning and literacies. Brought to the forefront must be a conversation about identity, agency, and power. They argue, "At a time when the state views reading and writing as neutral skill-based behaviors, it is even more important to conduct research that reveals the roles that identity, agency, and power play in the production of knowledge about literacy," (Lewis et al. 2007). This translation of Design attempts to grapple with frames of reference that are also a product of sociocultural and sociohistoric interplays between identity, agency and power. Like translation, meaning

making is a complicated and hybrid production that involves text, mediators (e.g frames of reference) and multiple audiences.

The Mode of Translation

In this translation I employed a Power Point presentation embedded with pictures and videos. I made little use of written text. In making sense of the term *Design* the first frame of reference that surfaced was musical. I thought about songs that had been reworked by contemporary musicians. The one most intimately tied to my experience with music was one by Julieta Venegas, an alternative rock and pop singer from Tijuana, México. Her interpretation of *El Triste* in 1996 was a re-designed version of José, José's renowned performance of the same song in 1970. Through this metaphoric frame of reference I came to understand what the New London group meant by the three elements of design. I incorporated pictures into the Power Point from a Google search of the year and place that situate the musicians and their productions. Lastly, the videos of the same song, at the same festival, performed by different musicians who were also part of a unique period in time illustrated with more precision than words the sameness and difference of these musical renditions. My understanding of *Design* via this musical experience included also an understanding of global and macro processes that shaped these moments in time. In the way of pictures and videos I tried to include the complexities of historic experiences that in many ways are always at work as we attempt to decipher knowledge.

Translation #1

Three Elements

1) Available Design:

Old designs are understood by the New London Group as convention or old schemas that are inherited from our experiential histories. *El Triste* was a song originally written by Mexican composer, Roberto Cantoral. It was performed for the first time by Mexican legend, José José, also known as *El Principe de la Canción*, or the *Prince of Song* in March 25, 1970 at El Festival de la Canción Latina. Although, it received third place in the festival it went on to be part of the repertoire of favorite Mexican songs. México City in the 1970s was the unique setting for the unfolding of this epic artist and the performance. The Google images, while only a partial representation of place and time, is a powerful representation in an era of information technology and the reign of the search engine, in particular Google, as a source of knowledge. Captured by these images is an incomplete yet telling portrait of time and place.

José José Video

2) Designing:

The element of designing is an active and ongoing one, as suggested by the word itself. It is tied to past conventions, but brings to the forefront the agency of social actors to transform old paradigms and make them particular to another place, time and social reality. Julieta Venegas, born in 1970 and from the border town of Tijuana, México, interpreted *El Triste* at the same festival in 1996.

Julieta Venegas Video

3) Redesigning:

The final product re-produces vestiges of the past and combines these with the unique experiences of modern México, specifically the experience at the border. The New London Group recognized this process of redesigning as the act, “meaning making” that

involves “an active and dynamic process,” (74). It borrows and is shaped by historic and current processes. The border town experience of 1996, when the song re-emerged in the voice of Julieta Venegas, tells of a musical experience fundamentally tied to the México’s past. On the other hand, this musical rendition cannot be separated from the modern day context in which it is designed and re-designed. The Google search pictures serve to illustrate the vastly different sociohistoric condition under which the *same* song emerges. The performance of both songs in the form of video richly captures the new production of a classic musical genre.

Reflections on the Performance of Translation

The limitations of this part of the translation are that even with images and video it is difficult to capture the entire web of the sociocultural and the experiences that frame the understanding of this musical event. However, moving beyond words in academic context reminds us that that literacy is experienced in many ways and through different modalities in daily life and in an array of locations and points in time.

My interest in this particular translation arose from the implications that this concept of Design has for school practices and the writing of curriculum. The authors argue: “Curriculum now needs to mesh with different subjectivities, and with their attendant languages, discourses and registers, and use these as a resource for learning,” (72). In the next translation I want to shift my attention to how I would translate this concept of Design as it pertains to schooling to a different audience, using abuelita’s language and her frames of references to capture the wealth that underlies her lived experiences. I will then reflect on the implications that this may have for schools and research as sites where knowledge is constantly in transaction, negotiation and in

translation. Lastly, I will discuss what may be gained in Educational research as we allow vulnerability to guide and shape research and academic writing.

Translation #2

The next translation is a fictitious conversation between my grandmother and I where I explain to her the text from the first translation. The translation is a narration pieced together from the memories of similar discussions. Abuelita passed away a couple of months before I started writing this paper. As a graduate student I struggled to find purpose in my own writing and research during this time of mourning. However, I realized that my abuelita's school experience had not yet been writing. In fact I realized that the educational history of Mexican women from the countryside who came to the US and become a part of the urban working class continues to be obscure. This narrative emerges as a, maybe selfish, bridge where I as a vulnerable author could find meaning in my writing, my research, my work as a graduate student. At the same time, I realized as I wrote about my grandmother into the academic text I was also giving voice to a woman whose schooling experience escapes the field. Much can be gained from listening to the heart in the field of Education. The fictitious narration below is what I remember of my grandmother and her schooling experience.

Conversación entre abuela y nieta.
[Conversation between grandmother and granddaughter]

A: Oye mijita, ¿por qué no vas a ver a la niña el fin de semana?

[Hey dear, why don't you go see the baby this weekend?]

K: No puedo *Agüe*. Tengo mucho que hacer para la escuela.

[I can't Grannie. I have a lot of school work.]

A: Aah! Pero un ratito, mija.

[Aah! But just for a little while, dear.]

K: Estoy leyendo algunas cosas que estoy tratando de entender.

[I am reading some things that I am trying to understand.]

A: Mmm…Tú sabes que yo no sé de esas cosas.

[Mmm…You know that I don't know about those things.]

K: Mire, mucha gente piensa que los estudiantes *se hacen guaje* y no quieren aprender.

[Look, many people think that students are (culturally specific saying—to pretend not to know) and that they just don't want to learn.]

A: Jaja…Hay muchacha…

[Haha….Oh girl…]

K: Pero la verdad es que cada persona viene a la escuela con sus propias experiencias.

[The truth is that each person comes to school with their own experiences.]

A: No pos' si. Me acuerdo que a mí no me gustaba nada la escuela. Nada.

[True. I remember that I didn't like school at all. Not at all.]

K: ¿Y por qué?

[Why was that?]

A: Yo era muy tonta para eso. Me la pasaba atrás de las otras niñas peinándolas pa' que no me viera la maestra. Yo me escondía.

[I was very dumb when it came to those things. I would be behind the other girls combing their hair so that the teacher would not see me. I would hide.]

K: ¿Y nunca la encontraban?

[And you were never found?]

A: No. Había un chamacal.

[No. There were so many kids.]

K: Pues según lo que estoy leyendo es tiempo de traer las experiencias de los niños a la clase. Es decir… ¿qué le gustaba hacer mucho a usted de niña?

[Well according to what I am reading it is about time that the experiences of children enter the classroom. In other words…what did you like to do as a kid?]

A: Pues jugar…correr, armar relajo, jugar lotería…puras cosas que no sirven para nada. Pues entonces éramos tan pobres que ni dinero teníamos para juguetes. Pero de todos modos se la pasaba bien uno.

[Well I liked to play…to run, to raise havoc, to play bingo…just things that don't have any purpose. Well back then we were so poor that we did not have money for toys. But still we had fun.]

K: Pero lo que dicen estas personas es que hay que traer el mundo de los niños a la clase. Por ejemplo, ustedes que jugaban tanto a la lotería…era una parte importante de cómo se relacionaban entre familia, amigos…Entonces, ¿que tal que la maestra al aprender más de la comunidad viniera a la clase con un juego de lotería de donde ustedes aprendieran como leer?

[But what these people are saying is that we must try to bring the world of children into the classroom. For example, you that played bingo so much…it was an important part of how you related to your family, friends…Then, what if the teacher, in learning about the community, would come to class with a bingo game to help you learn to read.]

A: ¿Pero apoco tú crees que eso es aprender? El chiroteo y la escuela son diferente…

[But do you really believe that is learning? Fooling around and school are different…]

K: Fíjese, que hay un autor de nombre Gee que nos dice que el juego es una forma de aprender. Es decir, cuando uno se divierte es cuando aprende mejor.

[Would you believe that there is an author by the name of Gee that tells us that games are a way to learn. In other words, when one has fun, one learns better.]

A: Mmm…Pues si pero si no la pasamos jugando lotería cuando vamos aprender las matemáticas. El juego es para la casa y la escuela para aprender.

[Mmm…Well yes, but if we are playing bingo all the time when are we going to learn math. Games are for home and learning is for school.]

K: Le voy a terminar de platicar porque ya me tengo que ir. Lo que dicen ellos es que cada uno de nosotros tiene un marco de experiencias o nuestro diseño. Como usted que tenía una historia muy bonita en su pueblo, con las leyendas del pasado y los juegos que ustedes diseñaron desde hace muchos años. Pero que la escuela debería de ser un lugar donde, basado en estas experiencias, se construyan mundos de aprendizaje…por ejemplo basado en sus tradiciones y lo que a ustedes les llama la atención pues! Y a esto se le llama el rediseño a donde se moldea el mundo de afuera para fines educativos en la clase.

[I am going to wrap it up because I have to run. What they are saying is that each one of us has an experiential frame or our designs. Like you with the beautiful stories about your town, with its legends about the past and the games that you all designed many years ago. But schools should be a place where, based on these experiences, learning worlds are built…For example, based on your traditions and whatever might be engaging to you. And that is what is called a re-design where the outside world is molded inside the classroom towards education purposes.]

A: Ya mijita que se te hace tarde.

[That's enough. You are going to be late.]

K: Ya la enfade.

[I bored you.]

A: Tú sabes que yo no entiendo de esas cosas. Pero vete que luego se te hace tarde.

[You know that I don't really understand those things. But go because you are going to be late.]

Reflections on the Re-Framing in Translation Work

This dialogue arises from an intimate relationship between grandmother and translator. It is this closeness that allows the translator to connect the academic text to the character's frames of reference. It is also my experience with translation for this audience (grandmother, parents etc.) as a child that facilitates the translation efforts. I incorporated key features into this translation to draw in my grandmother as audience and to weave her experiences into the explanation of the academic text so that her frames of references remained central to the translation.

Key Features:

1. *Culturally relevant frames of reference:*

In translating I thought about how I could engage my audience, or my grandmother. I used some key culturally relevant phrases that fundamentally linked her to the dialogue. “Hacerse guaje” is an expression very unique to small, rural towns in México. In using it I attempted to engage her as my equal in interpreting the academic text. At the same time, I am trying to use a familiar register, the language of rural México to make the conversation relevant and of interest. In “Examining Opportunities to Learn Literacy: The Role of Critical Sociocultural Literacy Research,” the authors, Elizabeth Moje and Cynthia Lewis, define key precursors to learning. One of these being, “…one’s subjectivity and the identities one enacts be recognized and accepted as valid and worthwhile, even when they may be in conflict with those subjectivities and identities typically built in the learning space,” (Lewis et al. 20). In the dialogue my grandmother finds this amusing, but I interpret this amusement also as the pleasure that comes with feeling validated and worthwhile as your own knowledge and forms of speaking are engaged in the translation of academic writing.

2. *Experiential frames of reference:*

At the same time these cultural frames of reference facilitate the sharing of experiential frames of references by grandmother. My grandmother understands that I am making an effort to engage her in a meaningful way in this discussion. Thus, her experiences are more readily available for me in this dialogue than would be for someone approaching her with deficit ideas about Mexican working class.

3. *Appreciation of past experience :*

Not only am I using her own experiences in my translation, but I make every effort to let my reader know that these are meaningful to me and that she is a central part to this discussion. Historically the experiences of the certain groups (e.g. people from rural México) have been neglected and/or rejected as valuable sources of knowledge. The ways in which groups of people have been constructed as inferior must surface in a discussion of the translation text. It is this sociohistoric undervaluing of the working class produces a tension in this text. This is also a clear illustration of what happens at the micro level, in the day to day lives of people who have been relegated to inferior positions in society. It is clear that my grandmother will never understand in the way I would like her to the vast source of knowledge she posses and has transmitted in the course of her life. The work of debunking notions about people based on sociohistoric constructs is one fraught with contradictions as is the text of translation. This conversation becomes truncated at many points by a continued belief that the audience does not possess knowledge even as translator frames the discussion in manners that privilege her as a site of knowledge.

What is gained?

In her work All about Love, bell hooks argues that love is under-theorized in the work of academia. I argue that this is even more so in a field modeled after the "hard" sciences where, no matter how much one would like to see all ways of knowing as equal, we continue to be judged on the power of our chi squares and the objectivity of our language. However, good literature and writing require a keen sense of empathy, care and love for ones' characters. Tara J. Yasso (2006) uses counterstorytelling to "present academic

research creatively, but serve the purpose of critically examining theoretical concepts and humanizing empirical data," (12). What I find most engaging about her writing are not the "hard" facts, but instead the development of the characters in her narratives. In this particular instance of translation, the dialogue text arose from an often neglected source of knowledge and the profound lived experiences of the heart.

I wrote this dialogue after the passing of my grandmother, earlier this year. Like with love, there is no place to theorize mourning in academia or what I have come to know as a painful, powerful and transformational experience. There are moments of optimism where I realize that my relationship with her has evolved and transformed into something that only her and I will know. However, there are those moments when a wave of sorrow drowns out all optimism. These similar feelings of hope and despair reside in academia when what we do is not just write a journal article or find salient codes in our observations. When our work is entrenched in the personal, in those we love, in the lived experiences of injustice, then the stakes are much higher and the implications more powerful.

The strength of this translation is that it merges the voice to the academic and a mourning granddaughter. The labor of this translation has been, in part, an arduous confrontation with emotion. It is a translation formulated from the knowledge of love and sorrow as well as academic writings. The power of this translation also resides in the voice it gives a working class immigrant woman whose life will never be fully captured, but is partially told here. I cannot bring my grandmother back in material presence, nor can a change her story to reflect a more just experience. These are hard facts. However, I can lovingly bring her into my research as my way of knowing. There must be a place in

Educational research for this type of writing. I suggest that this be more than a marginal space and instead a fundamental form of literature that creatively informs practice and policy. I cannot imagine more powerful experience than loving and mourning. The energy and ways of knowing generated by these sources, if we allow them to be, may be transformational to individuals, institutions and society.

What is still missing?

This conversation, while based on some had conversations between granddaughter and grandmother, is also one that emerges as pieced together by my imagination and memory. Thus, the inclusion of my grandmother's voice is my depiction and I am the author of this text, a place of privilege that limits the voice and true representation of my grandmother. I used my best knowledge of her and my best understanding of her to arrive at this dialogue. However, I am conscious that she could and does at many points of the dialogue resist a unilateral dialogue, one in which universal understanding would triumph over the conflict and friction evident in this conversation. The last quote speaks of this triumpth. (A: *Tú sabes que yo no entiendo de esas cosas. Pero vete que luego se te hace tarde.*). The ambiguity in the last line was intentional so that the reader could take from this interpretation as many as are imaginable because those are the limitation of works of fiction. My character has a voice and agency because I have written her into text, but the real voice, the real thoughts of the character are outside of the text and belong only to her. The limitations found in translation of text also bring to bare the many challenges in sociocultural research as we bring identity, agency and power to the forefront of analysis. While sociocultural theory is a power tool towards demonstrating how opportunity to learn is profoundly shaped outside and then inside the classroom by larger sociocultural

and sociohistoric forces, there are very ingrained notions of what knowledge, literacy and schooling ought to be in academia and in the day to day, that neither grandma nor I can escape in this dialogue. This is important in considering the limitations of our own work as we engage sociocultural theory and Educational research in general.

Conclusions

The value of writing ourselves as vulnerable research in our own work is one that requires much courage and labor not of the traditional academic sort. Further, there is much to uncover about this type of work and the insights gained from what bell hooks terms the forces of eros in our research and in the classroom. In her work, Teaching to Transgress, hooks argues that this labor of self-actualization actually provides researcher, teachers and students with an epistemological grounding that emerges from a powerful source. She states:

> Understanding that eros is a force that enhances our overall effort to be self-actualized, that it can provide an epistemological grounding informing how we know what we know, enables both professors and students to use such energy in a classroom setting in ways that invigorates discussion and excites the critical imagination," (hooks 195)

Works continue to emerge in the field of Education that appeal to this ways of knowing (Yosso 2006; Valenzuela 1999; Delgado Bernal 1998) and begin to define the methodological contributions of this type of research (Málagon et al. In Press). However, the self-actualizing of the researcher, educator and students through a writing that liberates the heart also continues to be at the margins of traditional social science methods. I don't know how much impact this reflection on translation and mourning will have on future policy, but I do know that as I write I heal and this can only invigorate or bring new energy to my work and the field of Education. Further, as we humanize the

labor of research, including the author and the methods, we also bring to the forefront the humanity in Educational research. This is my exercise at becoming human alongside those students, students and schools I seek to serve.

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