TELLING OUR TRUTHS: EXPLORING ISSUES OF IMMIGRATION, IDENTITY, AND LITERACY WITH ADULT LANGUAGE LEARNERS

by

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Abstract

This thesis explores the issues of immigration and identity that inform the experiences of adult English language learners and which can be addressed within a classroom context. Using practitioner research and an explicitly critical approach to literacy and learning, I conducted a six week workshop at a community English language school in New York City, working with eleven adult learners to discuss their lives in their native countries, decisions to move to the United States, and experiences living in a new country and learning English in an attempt to understand how those factors shape their learning and could be incorporated into the curriculum. This workshop used poetry as a means for students’ self-expression and demonstrated the importance of inviting adult immigrant students into collaborative, co-constructive learning environments where their lived experiences are at the core of their language learning process in order to allow for an inclusive negotiation of identity.
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Chapter 1
Introduction

I arrive here motivated
Gradually found darkness
It’s not easy
No friends, no family, isolation
Big challenge!

Happy, hopeful, colorful, strong
Meaningful, shine, success, beauty
Sometimes I wonder…
--Ariana
“Exploring Our Immigration Stories” Participant

The above poem was written by a participant in the workshop “Exploring our Immigration Stories” that I conducted at the New York Center for Language and Learning in May and June 2013. The goal of this workshop was to open up the space for adult immigrant students to share their experiences coming to a new country, learning a new language, and finding new communities. I hoped that this workshop, which serves as the basis for this study, would be a vehicle for the kinds of self-expression and reflection that are often lacking within traditional language learning environments.

In her TED talk “The Danger of a Single Story,” the author Chimamanda Adichie (2009) states:

Stories matter. Many stories matter. Stories have been used to dispossess and to malign, but stories can also be used to empower and to humanize. Stories can break the dignity of a people, but stories can also repair that broken dignity.
That was the hope for this workshop; to provide a space where students could explore their voice in a new language and could use that voice to tell the stories of what had brought them into a new context and what it is like to live in that new context. The stories here are not told in a narrative, linear fashion, many of them are not done in prose, they are the collective piecing together of conversations, poetry, and anecdotes through which students were invited to tell their truths. In the following thesis I intend to connect those stories with a larger analytical and theoretical conversation in order to learn from them, and from the workshop process itself. Ultimately, I intend to demonstrate how of students’ experiences before, during, and after moving to a new country inform language learning and can be grappled with within a classroom context.

In *Immigrant Students and Literacy*, Gerald Campano (2007) speaks to what he deems “silencing in schools” (p. 54), which produces negative results for students and prevents teachers from seeing the true potential and accomplishments of their students. When an adult immigrant is learning a new language in a new country, that silencing becomes inherent to the experience. The silencing can be literal—the result of not having the language to express oneself—but it can also be the result of not having the space to tell one’s story, of being overlooked because of one’s accent or of being assumed to have nothing to say. This research attempted to counteract some of that silencing by making students’ experiences the focus of the curriculum and letting their voices guide the inquiry process.

This study aims to show how the background that students bring into the classroom, the reality of their lives in their home countries, of their decisions to
immigrate and their experiences in their new country have a profound impact on the way they learn and see their learning. Additionally, I intend to demonstrate here how these influences can be explicitly incorporated into language education using poetry and critical classroom conversations. In the following chapter I lay out the context for this study and the evolution of this inquiry, as well as situating myself as a teacher researcher in relation to this work. I end with the research questions that serve as the foundation of this study.

Context

This study comes out of a desire to understand the ways that the immigration experience plays out within language classrooms. Immigration continues to be a source of heated debate within the United States, but the political fervor that encompasses it tends to remain in the abstract, obscuring the day to day realities of the millions of immigrants that reside within the United States. Underlying conversations about granting visas, about asylum claims, amnesties and deportations is the assumption of the American Dream—the idea that, no matter the barriers that exist, the United States remains preferable for all people, from any country. By believing in the American Dream we do not have to question the daily difficulties associated with the decision to move to a new country and the struggle to establish oneself (Fry, 2007). The constant barrage of news and political commentary serve to generalize what is in fact a complex and very individual process, rife with contradiction. Without acknowledging the personal complexities of the immigration experience, we are unable to alleviate some of those
challenges for immigrants, for people who work in immigrant communities, and for the larger community around them.

While language proficiency is an assumed requirement for life in the United States, the process of language learning rarely enters into the larger discourse of immigration. This study posits that those two processes are inextricable, and in so doing hopes to illuminate the ways in which understanding one can help us better address the other. According to the United States Census, more than 4 million reportedly speak little to no English (census.gov, 2010). What those numbers no doubt ignore are the people who are proficient in the language and yet continue to feel disconnected and uncomfortable in it, whose experiences living and learning English have alienated them from the process instead of helping them adapt. This study addresses those students, the ones who could express themselves in English but who continued to feel as if English did not yet belong to them, and therefore that they did not yet fully belong in their new country.

This study took place at a non-profit community English school called the New York Center for Language and Learning (pseudonym, hereafter referred to as the Center), in downtown Manhattan. The students that are enrolled in this Center come from all over the world and find themselves in New York for a variety of reasons. The Center provides a community environment where they can improve their language skills without being in a formal school setting. Some are students, visitors, or temporary workers, while others are settling in New York as immigrants and working to establish a new life in a new country and language. This study focused on a group of immigrant students at the
Center, most of whom were educated professionals who had made a choice to move to the United States.

It may be easy to assume that because these students were educated and living in New York of their own volition, it was somehow easier for them to learn a new language. While this study does not seek to quantify this learning or judge experiences in comparison with one another, it does set out to explore the background and knowledge that a student brings into an English language classroom that may traditionally go unexplored. The workshop that framed this research focused on students’ voices, both spoken and written, as a means to explore, collaboratively with each other and with myself as a teacher researcher, how their experiences before they moved, and as immigrants, inform their learning.

The diversity of experiences, motivations and identities present in any ESL (English as a Second Language) classroom is both a challenge and an important opportunity for teachers and students. Too often however, in our quest to deal equitably with a diverse group of students, or to enforce an “English-only” environment for the sake of immersion, or because of an inability or unwillingness to truly communicate with our students, we as teachers silence the very stories that are at the heart of our students’ learning (Nieto, 1999). However, by situating language and learning in the context of a students’ larger experiences, we can understand the profound effect that past knowledge and experience have on learning.
Situating the researcher and the question

Since I began teaching English to immigrant adults seven years ago, I have been consistently confronted with the vast and complex diversity present in my classes. During my first teaching experiences many of my students were refugees of war and genocide, many others were undocumented, having crossed the border in a desperate attempt to improve their present and future. Most were living in poverty; those that were in the U.S. legally were mostly on government assistance. Many were raising children or had left children behind in their countries. My knowledge of their individual experiences was limited to what I could ascertain from casual conversations or assumptions made based on some knowledge of socio-political realities. Working with these students it became glaringly obvious to me that these unknown complexities, the histories that each student brought into the class, were a vital component of their learning and the ways that they were experiencing their new language and environment. These initial experiences have stayed with me as I have continued to teach and to learn, and are fundamental to my desire to do this kind of work with students and to ask the questions I am asking here.

Teaching in New York, Minnesota, and Toronto, the demographic landscapes of each city and school have been different, but what each setting had in common were students with a diversity of home countries, first languages, reasons for immigrating and experiences adjusting to their new space. Those differences have continually interested me as possible reasons for discrepancies in the way students experience language learning. Paulo Freire (1987) states that, “language and reality are dynamically intertwined” (p. 1). If that is true, then without understanding students’ various realities it becomes nearly impossible to teach them language.
Watching students make sense of their new surroundings and try to navigate how and why they got to where they are has inspired me to take up this work. For many years, as a young, often untrained or volunteer teacher, I was cautious about engaging my students in conversations about themselves, in constant fear that those questions would offend them, put them at some kind of risk, or open up memories of past trauma. In the process of looking at my own practice and perspective through a theoretical lens however, I have been drawn to the work of scholars and practitioners who are concerned with uniting the social contexts of students with the classroom context that they encountered in, as well as with affirming and coming to an understanding of a student’s multiple identities.

At the same time that I began teaching I was also being exposed in my undergraduate studies to the work of critical race theorists such as bell hooks (1994) and Gloria Anzaldúa (1987). As I continued teaching adult immigrants, these theories began to frame my perspective. The incorporation of critical race scholarship and feminist theories into this research is a reflection of the impact these thinkers have had on my worldview in ways that became inseparable from my understandings and analysis of what was happening within my classroom.

One of the influences that this kind of theoretical work had on my thinking was in the ways it helped me understand my positionality in relation to teaching as well as this research. By entering into the world of adult English as a Second Language education, first as a teacher and now as a teacher researcher, I have chosen to be a part of a world in which I possess certain privileges that make me unable to fully share the experiences of my students. I am white, a U.S. citizen and a native English-speaker, so my experiences
are necessarily different from the students that I am working with, who understand and relate to the United States from explicitly different positions of privilege.

My understanding of the United States, or of New York, which is the geographical context for this study, is not that of a newcomer who lands in the city with the gaze of an outsider. When I disembark in New York, it is a homecoming. My understanding of English is likewise that of someone to whom it is inherent. English is the language that I do not think about, whereas for my students it necessitated an enormous amount of thought. I do not, nor have I ever, spoken English with an accent, and neither does anyone in my immediate family. Because of my name and the color of my skin, not to mention my citizenship, my belonging within the United States is never questioned. And so it is with an awareness of all of these myriad differences that I approach my work as an English teacher and that I have approached this research.

While my experiences moving to a foreign country and living and working in a foreign language have helped me connect with the realities of my students and have contributed to my interest in the experiences of immigrant students, I am aware of the differences in terms of privilege and choice at work in these circumstances. Although I often used those experiences as a means of building common ground with students, it was vital to acknowledge the differences in context, especially when thinking about what it means to be a white American living abroad with the freedom to experiment in a foreign language as opposed to an immigrant in the United States that has a certain level of English proficiency demanded of them.

Additionally, it is important to understand my positionality as a teacher and a researcher within this work. While I made a conscious and consistent effort throughout
my teaching, as I try to do in my practice in general, to establish an open and safe environment for students to express themselves and exert control over the class and curriculum, it is undeniable that there is an entrenched power imbalance in being a teacher. This was compounded because my students were aware that the class was being used as part of a research study. I made every attempt in my practice and approach to negotiate that power dynamic, an effort that I continue here. In analyzing, contextualizing and reporting my students’ work and comments here, I do not try to speak for anyone or to generalize or simplify experiences that I do not have first hand knowledge of.

Cummins (2011) discusses the ways in which the larger power relations in our society manifest themselves within our classrooms and how collaborative negotiation of identities between students and teachers can begin to subvert these dynamics. By ignoring students’ histories and past experiences, regardless of intention, we reinforce power imbalances and send the message to students that the acquisition of their new language stands in opposition to who they were before they emigrated. Adichie (2009) tells us:

The Palestinian poet Mourid Barghouti writes that if you want to dispossess a people, the simplest way to do it is to tell their and to start with “secondly.” Start the story with the arrows of the Native Americans and not with the arrival of the British and you have an entirely different story.

All too often, that is what we do with our students and with immigrant adults in general—we start the story with secondly. We start with their situation in their new country, we start with the way they sound and act in a language that they are just beginning to learn, we start with a prescribed understanding of their country of origin,
and not with the “whos”, the “whats”, the “hows”, and the “whys” of all of their years of lived experience. This study seeks to fill in some of the “firstly”s of student’s experiences in an attempt to more fully understand how and why adult learners of English approach their own acquisition.

**Definitions and terminology used**

*ESL (English as a Second Language)*—While this term is often considered reductive, since many English language learners speak multiple languages before they learn English, it is used here because it remains the most common way to discuss these sorts of classes, and because it is the way that the students would identify themselves. When the focus is on the student and not the subject, I may also use “English language learners.”

*Learning/Acquisition*—The use of these two terms is informed by Jim Gee (2012), wherein acquisition is understood as the more natural process that comes about based on exposure to language, and learning focuses more on the results of explicit instruction. Since this study focuses on what happens within a classroom environment, the word learning occurs here more frequently, but acquisition is also referenced.

*Students/Participants*—Both of these terms (as well as, to a lesser extent, members) are used to describe the people I worked with within this workshop, and those who are interviewed. Each word is used in slightly different contexts; participant as it relates to this study, and student as it relates more specifically to their role within the classroom context. The word “member” is how they are referred to within the context of the Center, and so is occasionally used here.
Research questions

In order to approach this problem, this research looks at different factors that may inform an adult English language student’s learning. Specifically, it addresses the ways in which the immigration process and a newcomer’s ability to find community upon arrival inform their learning experience. This work is informed by an explicitly critical understanding of literacy, and more broadly, language learning, in that it understands both as a set of situated practices (New London Group, 1996; Gee, 2000) that can not be separated from individual and collective histories (Barton and Hamilton, 2000), or from a learner’s various identities. The questions below have guided this research; the first three frame each of the three findings chapters, respectively. The other questions are addressed throughout.

The central questions for this practitioner research study are:

• In what ways do students’ first languages, their histories before immigration and their decisions to move inform their learning experiences?

• How does settlement in a new community and the ways that ones’ identity and knowledge are perceived by others impact learners’ experiences with English in and outside of the classroom?

• What are the aspirations and goals that students have for their future in their new country, and how do those inform their learning?

• How can the use of narrative poetry around these issues of students’ pasts, presents and futures contribute to a “collaborative negotiation” (Cummins, 2011) of identities and help students to feel more connected to their language learning?

Further questions that have contributed to this inquiry are:
• What kinds of challenges do the negotiation of various identities (as immigrants, students, professionals, etc.) and the way they may be recognized or ignored by others, pose to learning?

• What kinds of pedagogical tools can educators use to create a classroom environment where these issues can be critically addressed?
Chapter Two
Adult Language Education, Critical Literacy, Critical Pedagogy and a Conceptualization of Identity: A Literature Review

In order to engage in this research and contextualize the questions put forth in the previous chapter, I engage here in a brief review of the literature as pertains to adult language education, before going into a discussion of the theoretical framework that shapes this work. I have separated the applicable theoretical literature into three categories, which look at the more conceptual underpinnings of this study, while still also incorporating empirical examples. These categories are not entirely separable, but in organizing them in this way, I attempt to situate my work from both a conceptual and empirical vantage point. In addition to being discussed here, these theories are also taken up throughout the findings chapters in an effort to connect the research with the theories that it speaks to.

The first of these theoretical components is that of multiliteracies and New Literacy Studies (e.g. Gee, 2001; 2012; Street, 1993). While these two terms describe distinct theoretical traditions within literacy, I group them together here because each of these traditions explores relationships between literacy, culture, identity, and power; concepts that are central to this study. The second component I explore is the field of critical literacy and critical pedagogy (e.g. Freire, 1970; Cummins, 2001; Christensen, 2000). The third and final category that will be addressed is that of identity, framed by the work of critical race scholars and feminist theorists (e.g. DuBois 1903/1994; hooks,
2003; Mohanty, 2003; West 1993) specifically using the border as a conceptualization of
and influence on identity (e.g. Anzaldúa, 1987).

**Adult language education: An overview of the literature**

Studies in adult education take on many forms and encompass a wide range of
methodologies, contexts, pedagogies and purposes. The following pages discuss a range
of studies pertaining to adult English language education in English-speaking countries,
as that is the context of this study. The types of studies that inform this one look at the
navigation of identity and the use of certain reading and writing practices, as well as
attempts to create community within the classroom context, all ideas that shape this work.

Cooke’s (2006) study of adult language learners in England explores through a
series of interviews how students’ identities and past experiences inform their needs
within a life skills English classroom. A life skills program, according to Cooke,
purports to address students’ needs in their new context, and Cooke’s work looks at the
extent to which educational environments are effective in understanding and meeting
those needs and addressing students’ full potential. Warriner’s (2007) work, like Cooke’s
(2006) is situated within learning environments with strict requirements and prescribed
curricula, while my study looks at the teaching practices that are afforded within a less
mandated pedagogy. Warriner explores what she refers to as “transnational literacies” (p.
201) where local literacy practices are explicitly shaped by their transnational context and
the multiple socio-historical influences that are embedded within them. This focus on the
transnational, especially the influences of home countries, as well as students’ new
contexts and the interplay between them, is something that is also examined within this research.

Crowther, Maclachlan and Tett (2010) look at the way learners can change their attitudes around language learning through an interrogation of their past experiences. This study took place in eight literacy and numeracy centers in Scotland and focuses on the identity of being a learner as crucial to success, in other words, how re-centering the way students see themselves as learners can impact their learning. Schwarzer (2009) advocates for approaching adult students as what he deems “whole learners” (p. 25) in terms of putting the focus on their specific realities in order incorporate who they are into what they are learning, instead of a focus on isolated skills. This discussion is indicative of the trend in much adult ESL education that stresses using students’ current contexts and the vocabulary they are exposed to as resources for their learning. The study I conducted here takes that a step further in terms of incorporating critical conversations and written exploration of those realities, as well as discussion of past influences.

Another approach to studies of adult language learners that incorporates identity is those studies that look at the dynamics and specific experiences of one national group or immigration experience. Han (2009) provides an example of this kind of work in a case study of a Mandarin-English church community’s English language learning program that examines over a three-year period how one couple used their bilingual context to find community. Baynham (2006) looks specifically at the experiences of asylum seekers and refugee students, as pertains to their agency within the classroom. He frames their student identities as a potentially stabilizing force. By comparison, my study
understands the social location of being both an immigrant and a language learner as decidedly destabilizing, and by its very nature transitional.

Other studies that have informed this research look at specific pedagogical practices as a way to support student identity. Wallace (2006) looks at the texts used in adult English classes as compared to the kinds of texts that students are encountering outside of class. She also discusses how sociocultural understandings of text and context help us understand the ways that students interact with and position themselves in relation to their texts. Larotta (2009) explores the use of dialogue journals in which students write back and forth to their teacher as an important pedagogical strategy that prioritizes the students’ voice and experience. Larotta’s work differs from the studies discussed previously in that it comes directly from her own classroom practice. In addition to being a demonstration of how student writing can be a tool for students to express their daily realities, Larotta’s work looks at how her students used Spanish in their journals, demonstrating the efficacy of allowing space for incorporation of first language.

Larotta’s work looks at the interaction between teacher and student in writing, and how that can forge community. Other studies address the intentional practices that can create classroom community despite the limited time frames of many adult ESL classes. Martinsen (2009), like Larotta, writes from his own practice, looking at ways to foster community in short-term classes. His analysis looks at simple pedagogical steps, such as the ways we go about learning students’ names, that can help establish a sense of community. Additionally, he analyzes some of the teaching methods most prevalent in adult ESL in terms of how they establish community in the classroom. Watanabe and
Swain (2007) look at the effects of collaborative dialogue on pairs with proficiency differences. They look at how the proficiency differences mediate learning and communication when students are engaged in collaborative dialogue. These processes are also at work in my study, which was conducted in a class with multiple proficiency differences, and also looks at the way poetry writing works to navigate those differences.

The research discussed here has been formative to my thinking and approach to my own study. I take a multifaceted approach to many of the issues discussed above, looking at how they relate to one another in a diverse setting. Additionally, because of the curricular freedom and the use of practitioner research that allowed me to view the work both as a teacher and as a researcher, this study discusses how issues of immigration and identity can be embedded into all classroom practices and discussions, and can in fact serve as the foundation of curriculum and pedagogy.

**New Literacy Studies and multiliteracies**

In order to contextualize how literacy fits into a conversation of immigrant language acquisition and identity, perhaps the best place to start is with the ways in which both multiliteracies scholars and New Literacy Studies scholars have re-framed literacy beyond its traditional definitions. As mentioned in the first chapter, an understanding of literacy and language as a set of situated practices (New London Group, 1996; Gee, 2000) is a fundamental principle of this work. The idea that literacy does not exist in a vacuum, but instead is informed by individual and collective histories, (Barton and Hamilton 2000) and is in constant negotiation between one’s identity and social context
is foundational to both of these theoretical fields and is also intrinsic to the perspective of this research.

In his essay “What is Literacy?” Gee (2001) problematizes traditional understandings of literacy by framing it instead as a set of Discourses (capitalized according to Gee’s usage) which he describes as kinds of “identity kits” (p.1) that define the ways we interpret and operate within different contexts. In Gee’s explanation, each of us has various Discourses that we use depending on the context in which we are operating; for example a Discourse for our home lives, one we use at school, a Discourse for our profession, etc. that dictate not just the kind of language we use but the way we interact with others and the way we understand that interaction. Gee’s conceptualization of “Discourses” as countable, acquirable, and explicitly different than the traditional, neutral understanding of discourse, is crucial to this study.

Another crucial element of Gee’s analysis is that our ability to function in a Discourse is determined not just by whether or not we have the tools of that Discourse, but if we are recognized as possessing them:

Being in a Discourse is being able to engage in a particular sort of “dance”…so as to get recognized as a distinctive sort of who doing a distinctive sort of what.

Being able to understand a Discourse is being able to recognize such ‘dances’ (Gee, 2012, p. 152).

This is of great importance to our understanding for multiple reasons, not least of which is that it makes social interaction inherent to the concept of Discourse. By understanding the importance of what Gee (2012) terms affinity groups, a Discourse is automatically extended beyond a mere catalogue of language that we have into an ability to
communicate that language in socially and culturally informed ways that are recognized as being a part of a specific group.

Seeing literacy as inherently linked to identity and as being different sets of knowledge that we can acquire stands at the heart of this work. Gee’s argument that one can acquire different Discourses in order to move in and amongst certain circles directly speaks to how immigrant students may view English as key to entering their new community and accessing the opportunities it has to offer. Additionally, this theory helps us understand the loss associated with speaking in a new language if we understand our language as more than just the way that we speak but as a way of entering into different circles and having our expertise acknowledged.

By framing Discourses as ideological and as inherently linked to power relations and social hierarchies, Gee’s analysis is just one example of how critical, social practice perspectives on literacy can disrupt more traditional understandings of literacy as neutral, apolitical and static. Gee (2012) argues that different Discourses are either dominant or subordinate; some give their speakers power within society, others detract from a sense of agency. Gee discusses how dominant Discourses and those who are fluent in them often serve as a gatekeeper to upper-echelons of society. These kinds of power dynamics are deeply entrenched in the way our society is historically and politically constructed and serve as a tool for dominant classes to preserve their control.

According to Gee (2012), we all have a primary Discourse that we carry with us from childhood that either gives us privilege or blocks our access. This primary Discourse is one that we acquire, meaning that it is not taught but rather picked-up through exposure and trial and error. Gee’s take is that the Discourses that we acquire
are those that we have full mastery of. He asserts that learning (being explicitly taught) a new Discourse, especially one that is hierarchically different from one’s primary Discourse, can force people to abandon the identities that are embedded within their primary Discourse.

Lisa Delpit (1992) takes Gee to task on this last point by stating that this stance makes the education of students from subordinate Discourses inherently problematic. According to Gee’s analysis, if we attempt to teach dominant, academic Discourses to people whose primary Discourses are subordinate we are actually undermining their senses of self. This can also pose a problem when we think about learning and living in a second language. If we assume that we possess multiple Discourses in our first language that we may not be able to recover in a learned language, the argument stands that learning another language is inherently problematic and only a vehicle for loss.

However, if dominant and subordinate Discourses are all seen as valuable, and acquiring one is framed as additive instead of a substitution, there may be a middle ground between the poles of Delpit and Gee. By interrogating the ways in which identity and Discourse interact, and by allowing space for multiple Discourses within an educational environment, it may be possible to reframe previously held Discourses instead of merely erasing them.

While Discourses are not restricted to spoken language, the way we speak, be it our accent, grammatical structure or use of vocabulary is an important manifestation of our various Discourses. Discourse allows us to understand that speakers of the same language may have very different ways of communicating that inform and are informed by their various identities and social-locations. While Gee’s (2012) analysis focuses on
the dynamics of multiple Discourses within a single language, this work aims to extend
the conversation by applying this theory to the dynamics of acquiring a new language.

Gee (2001) also discusses the ways that developing a meta-discourse, a way to
talk about your Discourse, can be key to disrupting power. The idea of using literacy as a
means of social restructuring relates to Paulo Freire’s assertions (1970). In Freire’s work,
literacy is not an end in itself but rather a means to larger liberation. By seeing both the
Teaching of literacy and literacy itself as socially situated (New London Group, 1996), so
that it is both informed by and informs its context, the act of literacy cannot be separated
from where and when it exists.

In the “Importance of the Act of Reading” Freire (1987) states that “reading the
world precedes reading the word, and the subsequent reading of the word cannot dispense
with continually reading the world” (p. 5). It is that act of continually reading the world,
and continuing to make relationships between text and context, that strikes at the heart of
the language learning experience for adults. In the context of immigrant adults, by
understanding these practices as socially situated we can come to a clearer understanding
of how being in a new place informs learning and literacy.

In 1996, when the New London Group went about the work of defining
multiliteracies, they made the connection between the act of reading and the larger social
context in which that reading happens. Of particular relevance to this study is the
statement that, “we want to extend the idea and scope of literacy pedagogy to account for
the context of our culturally and linguistically diverse and increasingly globalized
societies, for the multifarious cultures that interrelate and the plurality of texts that
circulate” (p. 61). Within the context of adult English language education both the
diversity of cultures and languages within any given classroom and the plurality of texts provided are always informing the work that is being done. Understanding literacy as being informed by all of these factors allows us to regard learners from various circumstances as being literate, albeit in various ways.

Street (1993) discusses different models of literacy, the model that views literacy as ideological and thus informed and shaped by social context, as compared with the model that sees it as autonomous, or devoid of context and thus possessing intrinsic, immutable characteristics. A major feature of the ideological model that Street emphasizes is the link between literacy and power, which is lost if we look at literacy as solely autonomous. Street (2005) also highlights the importance of understanding learning as more than what happens within the walls of a school but rather a collection of influences from the home, the community and the culture at large. This is a powerful notion when thinking about language learning, especially the experience of learning a language in an environment where that language is dominant (e.g. learning English in an English speaking country). It also speaks to the need to incorporate the different kinds of knowledge that students encounter in various contexts into the classroom so that the learning that takes place in school can be supported by instead of competing with the acquisition that takes place outside of it.

By viewing literacies from an ever globalizing perspective we can begin to see the “linguistic capital” (Cummins, 2007, p. 9) that students, be they adults or children, already have, and work with them to build on that capital instead of undermining it, or worse, doing away with it entirely and starting anew. Cummins’ use of this phrase is vital to our understanding of multiple Discourses and the knowledge that exists outside of
traditional educational spaces in that it invokes the notion of “capital” as something that students can bank on and use to their advantage.

In Gerald Campano’s (2007) practitioner research study his immigrant elementary school students wrote stories and poetry about their families and their experiences in migration, including memories they had of their native countries and also the stories they had heard from relatives. This is a powerful example of the ways that multiliteracies can be used within the classroom. Campano’s work is very specific in the way that he views student knowledge as a form of “capital,” and writing and storytelling as a way to tap into that capital. His work explores stories as not just lived experience but passed on multigenerationally, exploring the ways that a legacy of immigration continues to play out in the consciousness of its descendants.

Like Campano’s work, many of the practitioner research studies that use a multiliteracies framework look at the ways these practices can be used with children (Ballanger, 1999; Simon, 2012). These studies serve as important examples of the way that a child’s previous knowledge and linguistic resources can be used to their advantage in a classroom. Ballanger’s study (1999) looks at the literacy practices that are happening in her elementary school classroom with students that are often seen as not having any literacy practices to speak of. This idea, of seeing the literacy and learning that often goes unseen, is an important notion that also exists within this work. These youth-focused studies have provided an important entry point into this work, which takes many of the same principles and puts them into practice with adult students.

The ideas discussed above are useful in complicating common understandings of what it is to know something, what it is to be literate. These theorists have worked to
extend the definitions of literacy so as to acknowledge how power and context inform our ways of knowing, learning, reading and communicating. By understanding literacy as inherently socially-situated we can begin to interpret these practices in terms of the contexts they are informed by and in which they exist and can more easily recognize the literacies and literacy practices that students possess.

**Critical literacy and critical pedagogy**

While there is an inextricable link between the theoretical and empirical work discussed above and what I am categorizing below as critical literacy and critical pedagogy, they have been separated here in order to delineate two distinct influences on this work. Just as critical literacy is defined as far more than the act of reading, critical pedagogy understands the purposes and principles of education as extending far beyond the classroom. As Freire (1970) makes abundantly clear, “when a word is deprived of its dimension of action, reflection automatically suffers as well; and the word is changed into idle chatter, into verbalism” (p. 75). As much as the word cannot be separated from its action it also remains inseparable from the different contexts in which it exists, from its various Discourses.

Freire also discusses, along with the popular educator Myles Horton (1990), that no education is neutral. Critical pedagogy takes the myth of neutrality in education and strips it, injecting positionality and identity. Freire and Horton (1990) engage in conversation around the balance between teaching a subject and teaching the social conditions that surround it. They use biology as an example, but English language education is also fraught with faux claims of neutrality. What they land on, which speaks
to a larger theme within critical pedagogy, is an acknowledgement that in fact there is a
history, a context, and a power relation in everything.

Sonia Nieto (2002) also speaks to this lack of neutrality in her discussion of the
fundamental importance of multicultural education. What is taught and how it is taught
are always informed by the social context, and as Nieto puts it, this “reflects the political
ideology and worldview of the decision maker” (p. 43). By acknowledging the context
and forces at work behind decisions that often go unquestioned, we set the stage for
different types of pedagogical decisions and critical engagement with the world around us
and with the various ways of knowing that we are confronted with.

The work of Jim Cummins (2011) and Linda Christensen (1999) are examples of
educators incorporating their students’ personal experiences and examination of context
into the act of writing. Similarly to Nieto (2002), Christensen (1999) asserts that each
choice we make as teachers is inherently political. These could be choices about what to
assign, how and what to edit in a student’s writing, or what grammatical and syntactical
choices to value as “correct”, but all of them send implicit and explicit messages to
students about what is and is not valuable, and what does and does not fit into the
Discourse of being a student. Through her work as a teacher researcher, using poetry and
other writing strategies with her students, Christensen (2000) is at once bringing her
students’ lives into the classroom as a way of disrupting their historical silencing and in
order “to examine how they have been shaped or manipulated by the media” (p. 19).
Christensen’s work with high school students in which she incorporated critical reading
strategies and writing activities into English classrooms is an important example of
empirical critical pedagogy research.
Cummins’ work (1996; 2011), also gives examples of the way that critical literacy can be incorporated into the classroom. His book *Identity Texts: The Collaborative Creation of Power in Multilingual Schools* (2011) looks at various cases of how educators use identity texts, which he defines as multimodal and multilingual expressions of identity. This work looks at the use of identity texts both from a teacher and a student perspective in different multilingual contexts and shows the value in allowing students to construct their story in a multiplicity of ways and in many languages. His work around bilingual education (1996) is another assertion of the importance of incorporating multiple languages into learning. In this work Cummins looks at the efficacy of bilingual programs and policies and argues that bilingual education can be effective in the process of identity negotiation.

The idea that pedagogical choices are explicitly political is inherently Freirean in the way that it seeks to use dialogue as a means of consciousness raising. Central to an understanding of critical pedagogy is that it is not learning for the sake of learning, but rather learning for the sake of transforming the world and seeking a more just society. Freire (1970) makes it clear that his call for reflection “is not a call to an armchair revolution. On the contrary, reflection—true reflection—leads to action” (p. 52). Cummins (2009) builds on Freire’s ideas when he advocates for what he calls a “transformative multiliteracies pedagogy” (p. 1) where, apart from merely transmitting knowledge, pedagogy has the goal of engaging in collaborative critical inquiry as a means of understanding power and how that power intersects with what and how we come to know.
Giroux (2001) is another thinker that links education with a need for resistance to the status quo. While the above quote from Freire states that action is the natural result of critical reflection and dialogue, Giroux advocates for a more purposeful politicization of schooling. He looks at the way that traditional education is structured, especially as it relates to a hierarchal power dynamic between student and teacher, and the ways that academic subjects are often cut off from their political, historical, and social context. He thus supports an injection of clearly articulated political and historical context and an understanding of social movements into traditional schooling in order to move towards more liberatory practice.

Cummins’ (2011) use of identity texts expands on the ideas of questioning and upending power relations and also of affirming students’ identities as a way to invite them into new and different literacy practices. By building on students’ backgrounds and previous experiences, the activities featured in Cummins’ work acknowledge and incorporate previously held literacy practices. This is vitally important in that it understands that there are many ways of knowing, and that the knowledges (for example, speaking a language other than English) that are often viewed as a disadvantage in traditional schooling in fact contribute to a rich worldview. Campano and Ghiso (2011) speak directly to this notion with their positing of immigrant students as “cosmopolitan intellectuals” (p. 164), addressing the idea that the process of navigating cultures, countries, and languages gives students, (in their case, youth) a distinct collection of knowledge that, if validated and given space in the classroom, can be advantageous in their educational pursuits.
Ghiso and Low’s (2013) practitioner research using multimodal texts with immigrant students is another example of how multiple ways of knowing and producing knowledge can be accessed in the classroom. Through comic books and other visual texts, their students were afforded various modes of meaning making. By opening the space for students to tell their stories, they encountered what they refer to as micronarratives, often dealing with the explicit moments of immigration and the losses that those moments represented. Their work is yet another example of the power of inviting students into the process of making meaning and the ways that immigrant students can benefit from a variety of resources and modalities.

Cummins strongly advocates for the creation of spaces where learners can use their first languages to help them understand and interpret their experiences in their second languages. Inviting first languages into the learning process develops what he calls, “identities of competence” (Cummins, 2011, p. 4) as opposed to the feelings of disempowerment or disengagement that often accompany being in an environment where your previous knowledge or language is not recognized. This practice of bringing in first languages stands in opposition to much English language education that advocates for an “English-only” zone in hopes of encouraging full immersion (Nieto, 1996). Cummins point though, speaks directly to a critical pedagogy stance that disrupts power, promotes action, and talks back to the silencing that often goes unquestioned.

To understand critical pedagogy as a means of disrupting power one must look at the relationship between teacher and student, something taken up by various scholars including Cummins (1996). He uses the language of a mutual negotiation of identity, otherwise framed as a “relationship based on mutual recognition” (hooks, 1994, p. 13).
This idea of mutuality and of disrupting the usual bounds of teacher and student speaks to Freire’s idea that “no one can say a true word alone—nor can he say it for another, in a prescriptive act which robs others of their words” (1970, p. 76). Central to Freire’s conceptualization is that the world cannot be named on behalf of someone; this naming must be done together, in a process where those in a dominant position do not speak for or speak at those they claim to help but rather work with them in an equitable collaboration.

Using the idea of a “multiplicity of discourses” (New London Group, 1996, p. 61), the explicit extension of the theories of multi and critical literacies to cultural and linguistic diversity is used as a conceptual framework for many studies of multilingual adult English language education. Bartlett’s ethnographic work (2005) takes explicitly Freirean principles of critical literacy and looks at how they can be used in practice in Freire’s home country of Brazil. She looks at how popular educators are using Freire’s principles in order to enact social change. This work speaks to the importance of the local context, and it also uses critical pedagogy in the context of adult education, something that is of particular relevance to this study. Additionally, Bartlett’s research (2005) is helpful here in that it looks at educators’ attempts to negotiate the distance between theory and practice, and the sometimes-difficult realities of trying to achieve theoretical objectives in the field. Janks and Comber (2006) take theories of critical literacy and put them into action in a cross continental exploration that looks at how these practices worked in two schools, one in South Africa and one in Australia, showing both the importance of the local context and the value of opening up space to discuss the realities of one’s situation no matter the context.
Using studies done internationally to inform this work maintains a focus on how critical pedagogy can be navigated in various contexts, often many at once. When similar engagement is done in a classroom with participants from different countries and cultures, the idea of multiplicities and of various readings of the world takes on new meaning. Within a multilingual environment of newcomers there are various local contexts at play, both the literal one of the present, and those that students have previously resided in. Cummins (2011) discusses in detail how, when we think of linguistic resources, we need to think beyond specific languages to include all of the different types of registers and linguistic interactions that happen outside of a classroom, which is a way of the various types of linguistic resources present in any local context.

Sonia Nieto’s question, “who is doing the accommodating?” (2010, p. 101) also speaks to how critical pedagogy can reframe the power dynamic between teacher and student. This question speaks to historically marginalized groups being asked to adapt themselves to traditional schooling and to make accommodations in order to be successful while the school system has never made an effort to change. Bringing in different languages and affirming various knowledges and experiences are all forms of accommodation (Nieto also uses the word negotiations) that are not often made. This kind of question puts the onus not just on individual teachers but the system as a whole to make education more accessible to all its students. It is important in conceptualizing work like this to look systemically, as well as at the level of individual classrooms and teachers. All of these theoretical principles laid out above contribute to the idea of education as transformative, inclusive and collaboratively negotiated.
Conceptualizations of identity

The last body of literature I review explores the role of identity in learning, specifically how identity is shaped by immigration. Immigration is just one way that identities get shaped by moments of cultural dissonance; two alternative examples would be globalization and colonization, all three of which are interrelated. In this section I lay out some of the theories, drawn from feminist and critical race scholars that I use later on. The first theoretical lens is that of a “borderland” identity, an idea put forward by Gloria Anzaldúa (1987). Anzaldúa looks specifically at identity as it relates to the physical U.S./Mexico border and the histories of Mexican-descendants living in the shadow of that border, which serves as an important way to understand how those sorts of divisions infiltrate one’s consciousness.

Anzaldúa theorizes the border as a historical wound, stating:

The U.S.-Mexican border es una herida abierta\(^1\) where the Third World grates against the first and bleeds…the lifeblood of two worlds merging to form a third country—a border culture. Borders are set up to define the places that are safe and unsafe, to distinguish us from them (Anzaldúa, 1987, p. 25).

While Anzaldúa’s context of the border comes with its own set of historical and political specifics that do not apply in every situation, her framing of the border, and what it means in how we divide people from one another; as well as the way it creates its own culture are all theoretical concepts that can inform our thinking.

Anzaldúa (1987) uses the borderland to speak directly to the idea of language as informing and being informed by our identities. Her focus is on the dynamics of

\(^1\) Is an open wound
speaking multiple languages, many of which are hybridized and regionally situated and are expressions of self, place, and community. In her essay, “How to Tame a Wild Tongue” (1987) she discusses the roots and evolutions of various languages spoken around the border, for example Spanglish and Chicano Spanish, and talks about how these languages are a direct reflection of the histories and cultures of the people who speak them. To devalue a language, she argues, is to devalue the speakers themselves. A major component of Anzaldúa’s analysis is about the devaluation of languages that are seen as not standard, either because they are a hybridized mixture of two languages (like Spanglish) or because they do not adhere to formal rules of grammar and syntax. The recognition of non-standard languages as being vital expressions of culture and identity is an important step in understanding the way that language is inseparable from context.

Anzaldúa is not the only theorist who frames language in terms of identity and history and who advocates mixing and switching between languages as a way of expressing one’s culture. The artist and performance studies theorist Coco Fusco (1995) also discusses the border as a representation of culture and identity, and speaks specifically about language as a way of delineating between public and private spheres. In her analysis, Spanish is often used more at home, where English, because it implies more social capital, gets used for public consumption. Anzaldúa, as well as Fusco and other scholars referenced here, assert their rights to their multiple blended languages not just in what they say but in how they are saying it, switching back and forth between languages within their texts, often without translation.

A third scholar who explicitly historicizes language as a battleground of identity is bell hooks (1994), whose context, while very different than those above, can also give
valuable insight into these intersections. Her context is an imagining of enslaved Africans’ first contact with English and its implications for English as a tool of both oppression and resistance. She quotes the poet Adrienne Rich in saying “this is the oppressor’s language yet I need it to talk to you” (p. 167). While English has very often been adopted by peoples as the result of conquest, hooks’ point is that it then can become a tool for subversion, a way to speak back to that oppression, which is an important way of understanding the implications of language learning. She goes on to trace English as it was used by enslaved peoples to current iterations of black vernacular. This work around the meaning and subversive value of non-standardized forms of speech is of vital importance as a lens through which we can understand the semantic choices made by both teachers and learners of English.

Many scholars look at the ways that immigration and both literal and figurative border crossings inform one’s view of oneself and one’s identity. Much of the work of this nature that is used here speaks from an explicitly feminist theoretical stance. Chandra Mohanty (2003) looks at conceptualizations of home as informed by being a woman of color who has resided in many different places. Navigating issues of inclusion and exclusion as well as feeling disconnected from one’s original community are all issues at play in her writing. Mohanty’s work additionally looks at how processes of globalization, colonization and immigration are all interwoven together, and how that informs identity, especially as it relates to the positionality of third world women of color. By understanding the forces of globalization, and by engaging in a conversation of what “home” is, we can begin to see how identity negotiation and navigation of multiple
worlds is a process that is becoming more and more common regardless of physical location.

Heitlinger (1999) also speaks to the kind of negotiation and navigation that is necessary as an immigrant woman. While obviously these negotiations are not exclusive to women’s experiences, her analysis looks specifically at the way that notions of feminism and womanhood are navigated across borders, from the perspective of various immigrant experiences. Her collection looks at the ways that new practices and politics around gender, as well as race, religion, and ability inform how women navigate their new spaces and how that navigation allows for a formation and reformation of identity.

As made clear by Delgado-Bernal’s (2006) work, a legacy of immigration and the border exist for women who were not immigrants but instead were U.S.-born Chicana/Latinas. Her work explores the way Chicana/Latina women engage with various educational contexts and navigate the internalized borderlands that Anzaldúa (1987) speaks of. By centering her analysis on women who are not themselves newcomers, Delgado-Bernal helps us frame the way that the violent otherization of people of color and those that speak languages other than English is often perpetrated against people no matter what country they were actually born in. This sort of analysis allows for a deeper understanding of migration and transnationalism as more than just a process of physical movement but as a consciousness developed both by experiencing multiple worlds and by the systems of oppression that enact themselves on those that are perceived as outsiders. Additionally, by studying the realities of women in various schooling contexts, she also underscores the importance of ethnic and linguistic identity in the navigation of educational spaces.
Anzaldúa and Moraga (1981) also look at the types of identity negotiation that are necessary for women of color. Much of the writing in their collection speaks back to notions of having to choose a singular identity, and of having to constantly make others feel comfortable with one’s identity, of serving as a negotiator and an ambassador instead of an individual. The women featured write at great length about the influences of their families and their personal and community histories on their identities. A collection such as this, which is not traditionally academic, shows the importance of personal narrative and multiple styles of writing (poetry and prose) in the theoretical understandings of identity, race and transnationalism that inform this work.

Central to all of the work discussed above is the notion that, as opposed to being a collection of isolated individual experiences, oppressions or migrations, realities of immigration and the border form a consciousness. Framing these theories and experiences in this way allows us to understand their depth, and they also become applicable to a range of experiences. In this vein, Anzaldúa’s (1987) use of *mestizaje*—a Spanish word most literally understood as a mixed race—while explicitly referring to the Mexican-American experience, can easily be applied to experiences of migration more generally. “From this racial, ideological, cultural, and biological cross-pollinization, an “alien” consciousness is presently in the making—a new mestizo consciousness, *una conciencia de mujer*². It is a consciousness of the Borderlands” (1987, p. 99). This is a theory of identity that speaks to the mixing, or “cross-pollinization”, that is such a part of finding one’s way in a new country.

² A woman’s consciousness
In defining the *mestiza* consciousness, Anzaldúa touches on issues of ambiguity, living at a crossroads, and having an identity that shifts according to context. In speaking directly about language she talks about adjusting language based on who is around, and about never feeling quite at home in either a standardized English or standardized Spanish. These issues of shifting, and of feeling in between realities harken back to W.E.B. DuBois’ theory of double consciousness (1903/1994). DuBois posits that, for Black Americans, the lens through which they interpret both the world and the self is forever mediated by the perceptions and boundaries instilled by living within a white supremacist reality.

The fact that both of these theories are framed in explicitly racial terms (DuBois, 1903/1994 and Anzaldúa, 1987) is crucial and allows for a discussion of how immigrant peoples are racialized as they cross literal and figurative borders, perhaps in ways that they never were before. Cornel West (1993) is very clear that present realities are forever informed by the legacies and current manifestations of white supremacy in the United States that were born out of enslavement and genocide. Additionally, Omi and Winant (1994) discuss the process of racial formation, tracing the historical, political and social forces that produced the racial distinctions that exist within our current reality. These issues counteract a conception of race as biologically predetermined while still maintaining it as a force within our society. These concepts are key to our understanding of racial identity as it plays out in immigration because they historicize the racial dynamics beyond the individual level. This speaks to why a newcomer to the United States will feel the effects of racial oppression and white supremacy even though their
ancestors were not a part of those histories. This has important implications around
agency, access, and positionality for new immigrants.

Crucial to an understanding of these identity frameworks is that the historical,
political and cultural repressions out of which they are born have left a legacy that has
very real repercussions on the day-to-day realities of individuals. To that end, while we
may understand the identity of immigration as existing solely based on one action—that
of moving to another country—because of the sorts of structural injustices, histories and
realities discussed above, the immigrant consciousness may linger long after the act of
migration. Campano and Simon’s (2010) use of disability studies as a framework for
arguing that teachers can critique and create alternatives to inequitable educational
arrangements speaks to a similar phenomenon. They state that much of the disability
identity has been constructed by social movements. The work of these social movements
has also served to construct an identity built on pride and solidarity, not solely on being
oppositional to repression.

This analysis could be extended to the immigrant experience, especially in the
United States, where much of the discourse around what it is to be an immigrant is
articulated either by policy makers or those fighting against the policies. It is especially
helpful in constructing a transnational immigrant identity that extends beyond any one
country of origin, because it sees the identity as constructed not by immutable factors but
by a political and social reality. Additionally, by understanding an immigrant
consciousness as not just the result of negative pressures, we can see that it serves as a
vehicle for generating the kinds of multifaceted knowledges that come from migration.
While there are many empirical studies about the relationship between identity and adult language learning (Baynham, 2006; Schwarzer, 2009; Soto, 2011; Warriner, 2007), this study takes a different perspective. The studies cited above concern themselves with how identity is navigated in the classroom. While that is an important component of this study, it is extended here to look at how the very process of immigration, re-establishing oneself in a new community, and learning a language shape and re-shape identity in ways that inform learning. Campano and Simon (2010) posit “disability as a minoritized identity, one informed in part by socially produced injustices” (p. 226). This argument, if extended to the immigrant identity, can shed light on the ways in which having recently immigrated informs both the experience of being a student, and of trying to redefine oneself in a new context.

Final remarks

In the preceding pages I have laid out some of the theories that are vital to an understanding of this research and that have shaped my thinking at every stage of this research process. I have attempted to here to carve out a context for this work, both theoretically and in relation to other empirical studies. Although they were separated into discrete groups here, each theory informs the others, and collectively they have helped in creating a multifaceted lens through which to see this work. These concepts were a vital component in constructing the workshop that provided the basis for this study and will be used throughout a discussion of the findings to give a more in-depth analysis.
Chapter 3
Methodology and Research Design

In the following chapter I describe my methodology and discuss how the study was designed to best answer the questions laid out in the first chapter as well as how the data collection and analysis supported those aims. I first situate this work within the larger landscape of practitioner research in order to explain the methodological rationale behind it and why I feel this was the best methodology for this study. Next, I give a brief explanation of the site where this work was conducted, followed by a discussion of the curriculum design and my pedagogical approach. The fourth section focuses on the method of data collection, the types of data used, and the method of transcription, as well as some of the decisions around representation that informed the writing of this thesis. I end this chapter by providing biographical introductions to the participants featured within this work.

Practitioner research

This study was conducted using practitioner research, which allowed me to combine my perspectives as both a teacher and a researcher (Cochran-Smith and Lytle, 2009). This research took place at a school in which I had previously taught, and the data was mostly collected from a class that I was teaching. The design, collection and analysis phases all utilized the kinds of reflective methods that Cochran-Smith and Lytle discuss. In their book Inquiry as Stance, Cochran-Smith and Lytle (2009) look at the various ways that teachers reflect on the experiences that led them to the classroom and that have informed their thinking and their decision to engage in teacher research. As a
part of this larger text, Swati Mehta (2009) discusses practitioner research as “creating a hybrid space for self, teacher and researcher” (p. 293). This work aimed to do just that, as well as to create a hybrid space for my participants’ various perspectives as students, as learners, as immigrants, and as members of an educational community.

By focusing the research on the classroom itself the participants were invited into the work at all levels in a unique way. Not only were the research participants answering questions that I believed to be relevant, they were moving the conversation towards what they viewed as the important issues, and were themselves engaging with many of the texts and theoretical concepts that serve as a foundation for this work. While I approached this study with a clear set of goals, both in terms of curriculum and research design; the work both within and outside of the classroom was also very much shaped by the experiences and analysis of the participants. Cochran-Smith and Lytle (2009) argue that the idea of inquiry as stance is not just about understanding how to enact change within a school context but that it is inherently political in that it prioritizes an understanding of what problems to tackle, why, how, and by whom. By engaging the student-participants in these kinds of discussions of what was important and why, the inquiry was democratized so that it extended beyond myself as the individual researcher.

Susan Lytle (2000) compares the stance of practitioner research to Anzaldúa’s *mestiza* consciousness in that it is a way of occupying more than one space and mindset at the same time. She states that “the positioning or location of teachers as researchers interrupts the easy distinctions often made between “insider” and “outsider” and destabilizes the boundaries of research and practice—creating a space where a radical realignment and redefinition may be possible” (p. 699). It is that spirit of unification of
theory and practice, of learning and identity, and of past and present experience, that lies at the heart of this work.

In addition to the relationship between theory and practice, the above quote also makes reference to a disruption of the false dichotomy between insider and outsider that traditional research often demands (Cochran-Smith & Lytle, 2009). My own position within this work speaks to that dynamic. I started volunteering at the New York Center for Language and Learning in 2006, and have continued to volunteer there whenever I am in New York. While I feel connected to the Center and understand its mission and pedagogical values, both of which have helped to inform who I am as a teacher, I have also taught in various different contexts, and all of those experiences were brought to this workshop and research, from curriculum design to implementation to analysis. The class itself also served to disrupt the insider/outsider division, since the workshop invited the students to engage in the very material that is providing theoretical context for my research, and required me as the researcher and teacher to engage in the conversation in ways that went beyond traditional dynamics so that meaning was being co-constructed.

Practitioner research is uniquely suited to this kind of work because it allows the theoretical lens to be multi-dimensional and to be shaped both by my positionality within the classroom and by the research lens that I bring (Simon, Campano, Broderick, & Pantoja, 2012). This has proven especially true when it came to analysis of student work and comments. Through practitioner research I was able to analyze students’ comments as they related to the theoretical work, but was also able to see the comments in the context of the grammatical and semantic tools that the students had. This was also true for the student writing that is a part of this study. By reading their poems through my
experience as an English teacher, and also having knowledge of these specific students’ use of English, I was able to see the way poetry allows for unique expression, so I was able to acknowledge errors while still seeing the progress and potential that this form of writing provided.

The use of practitioner research also allows for the kind of identity negotiation that is advocated through Cummins’ use of identity texts (2011) and that is highlighted in much of the theoretical work that was discussed in the previous chapter. Additionally, through practitioner research, it is possible to investigate not just how factors of immigration and identity inform learning but how those conversations can be navigated within a classroom context.

Context

This research was conducted at the New York Center for Language and Learning, a non-profit organization located in downtown Manhattan. The organization, founded in 1961, serves members from 64 countries speaking 39 different languages. The Center is a unique educational environment, serving a diverse cross section of students and functioning more like a community center than a school, with a strong focus on providing opportunity for members to interact with each other outside of class. The Center’s cafeteria acts as a social hub where Center members and volunteers spend hours practicing English. Many of the members of the Center are temporary visitors to New York, and so the turnover amongst the membership is quite high, which means that while there is a strong sense of community in the Center overall, the individual members are in an almost constant state of flux.
The Center was selected as the site of this research for various reasons. I chose to
do this research in New York as to situate it within a deeply multicultural environment.
This meant that I would have access to a diverse group of students and it also allowed me
to engage in conversations of adaptation and finding community in a city so diverse that
it may be hard to imagine that adaptation would ever be an issue. Situating this research
in the United States also put it in a national political context wherein immigration is an
increasingly polarizing issue and immigrants are often seen as statistics instead of
individuals and are rarely understood as bringing knowledge and experience into the
country. The uniquely complex American dynamics around assimilation, immigration,
race, and language policies are all at play in this study.

Because of my previous connections to the Center, I was also able to traverse the
kinds of insider/outsider dynamics at the heart of practitioner research, as discussed
above. While I have been volunteering there on and off since 2006, I remained largely
unknown to most of the members because of the high rate of turnover, so while I had
some knowledge of the centers’ dynamics and philosophy, I was viewed mostly as an
outsider. However, by spending the weeks of the workshop engaged in various Center
activities, I came to be seen as a member of the community, though my position as a
teacher, as well as the fact that I was engaged in this research, continued to maintain the
balance of being an insider/outsider, both from my perspective and the way I was
perceived.

The Center’s structure and pedagogy also lent itself to this kind of work. The
Center’s classes are taught mostly by volunteers, and Center members are not bound by
any required courses or prescribed schedule. The majority of classes function on a drop-
in basis, with a small number of “structured classes” that students sign up for and attend for a set number of weeks supplementing the drop-in schedule. This class was one of the “structured classes.” The mostly open dynamic of the Center as a whole contributed to the community environment necessary for these kinds of conversations to take place.

In this environment, the lines between inside and outside of the classroom are continuously blurred, with conversations spilling into the cafeteria and open classes building off of that energy. The classes themselves often become topics of conversation in the cafeteria, with students sharing materials with each other and explaining what they have learned. That process certainly happened with this class, with many non-participants engaging in the same kinds of discussions that were happening in the workshop outside of it. For the duration of my time conducting this workshop I was also an active member of this community, teaching open classes and working with small groups in a more informal way. That level of engagement allowed me to see the types of conversations that were going on outside of the confines of the class I was teaching and also allowed me to get to know students who were not able to commit to the workshop. Due to these interactions I opted to conduct interviews with a number of students who did not participate in the workshop, in order to provide alternative experiences and perspectives.

Curricular design and pedagogical approach

Curricular design

Central to the methodology and execution of this study was the design of a workshop that would best facilitate the kinds of discussions and interactions necessary. I
wrote the curriculum, which consisted of twelve two-hour sessions. This curriculum was both a culmination of ideas and concepts drawn from my years of teaching, as well as the beginning of this research journey. While it was written specifically within the context of this study, and was done as I was building a theoretical conceptualization of this research, it was also intended to be pedagogically effective independent from the research. While the curriculum has elements of the theoretical framework woven into it, it was also written in order to offer as fulfilling an educational experience to the students as possible.

The curriculum (see Appendix A) was designed with one theme uniting each week. The themes were selected to support and explore the research questions that I had developed. Each week included one written text and one writing assignment for the students. Of those pieces of writing, the three poems that were completed in the middle weeks of the workshop became the centerpiece of this study and frame the following three chapters. Some of the texts, such an excerpt from Gloria Anzaldúa’s “How to Tame a Wild Tongue” (1987) were meant to explicitly engage the students with the theoretical work I was involved in. Conversations around that text and others are included in the chapters to follow. Inversely, texts such as Suheir Hammad’s poem “What I Will” (2011) and Chimamanda Adichie’s lecture “The Danger of a Single Story” (2009) have informed and been incorporated into the writing of this work, in addition to being a part of the workshop.

Based on students’ initial trepidation about poetry, the curriculum was revised as to get students comfortable with the new form of writing. This started in the first week with a found poem activity, wherein students were provided with a list of words from a previous in-class writing activity and asked to create short poems using only those words.
This was followed in the third week with a “Where I’m From” poem, adapted from the work of Linda Christensen (2000). This was the most structured of the three main poetry activities, as students were provided with multiple examples of “Where I’m From” poems and a worksheet to fill out prior to their writing. The other two poems, though inspired by the “Where I’m From” idea, were not directly adapted from a source and rather were developed to support the conversations of present and future that were crucial to this work. The second was a “Where I Am” poem, which students did not have an explicit model for, instead they were asked to generate a worksheet together as a class, based on many of the themes that they had used in their first poem. The third was inspired by Hammad’s (2011) “What I Will” and was a collaborative poem where each student contributed a stanza to five different poems, all based on students’ ideas of what they were or were not willing to compromise in their new countries. All of these pieces, though written almost exclusively in English served as forms of identity texts (Cummins 2011) as they relied heavily on students’ past knowledge, experience and context.

While I felt it was important to provide some texts for discussion in this class, the main “text,” as it was, was the students’ experiences. Classes were structured as to give maximum time for students to share their opinions and stories, and it was those influences that were the priority in this class. Texts were used not as the end of conversation but as the beginning, they were intended to provide students an opportunity to connect with their own experiences. This was not a traditional reading or writing class in the sense that limited time was spent on the mechanics of either, but instead both were seen as a vehicle for the exploration of identity and self.
Pedagogical approach

Just as the workshop curriculum was important to this research, so too was the pedagogical approach that I took to ensure that this class was a safe, supportive and productive environment for the students, as well as being conducive to the kinds of conversations and writing that would support this research. While much of my pedagogical strategy was consistent with the values and style that I utilize in any class, this class demanded that I tailor my pedagogy in various ways. Below I lay out a few of the techniques and tools that I used that were important to the execution of the class. These strategies will be discussed further throughout the following chapters.

My pedagogy in this work was greatly influenced by Campano’s (2007) notion of “systematic improvisation” (p. 112), what he refers to as the “cross-pollination” of the teacher’s plan and intentions and the students’ experience and values. While this is hopefully true in any class, my use of this strategy was more explicit here, as the students’ knowledge and experience were in fact the central “text” at work in this class. This manifested itself in multiple ways; while the themes themselves stayed mostly as I had planned, the way those themes were approached and interpreted was left up to the students. Additionally, issues such as what it was like to be without a job, and how to function in an American work culture, which had not been an initial part of my plan, grew in importance due to the students’ interests and perspectives. This approach to the inquiry carried over from the workshop into the analysis and writing of this thesis.

My use of systematic improvisation informed both the content and the delivery, especially as concerned the order of topics and the role of collaboration. The description of the curriculum included above is based on the way it was delivered, which differed
slightly from its original design. Steps like the found poem, as well as the collaborative element in the third poem were adaptations based on my assessment of the students’ needs and comfort level. By seeing this workshop as being constructed in dialogue with the students, I was able to adjust my own teaching style to give them the reins as much as possible, both in terms of content and the daily functioning of the class. I found myself intentionally stepping aside in class discussions, forcing myself to stay silent and let the students navigate the conversations by themselves.

Shifting control to the students also happened in more deliberate ways. For example, in the second poem they were responsible for developing the worksheet and in the third, the starting points for the poem came entirely from the students. This was done both to give them more of a voice in framing their writing, but also to allow students to acknowledge the linguistic strengths they had, building what Cummins (2011) refers to as “identities of competence” (p. 4). While students felt very competent and successful in their first languages, within the context of an English classroom they felt less so, so I focused on using their words and ideas to build the structure of the class, starting in the first week when their poem was generated entirely from the words produced in their own writing.

By highlighting the students’ voices and taking a step back in many situations, I also hoped to open up a more collaborative environment. Campano (2007) speaks to a need for solidarity within the classroom in order to combat a sense of competition. Even though the Center itself is not a particularly competitive environment, that does not mean that competition is completely absent from students’ experience of learning. So this solidarity was an important part of the work that was being done. In the later poems,
when students were working together to decide what was important and were then writing poems together, that solidarity was central to the pedagogy.

Another important intentional pedagogical step that I took within this work was a sense of transparency about my decisions. This went hand-in-hand with the idea of systematic improvisation in that, if my teaching was to be informed and shaped by students’ perspectives I felt it valuable that they know that. Additionally, because I was approaching this class as a teacher researcher, it was important that students understood the decisions I was making as I was making them. This standard of transparency proved important to the students, who began to ask me for my rationale for certain choices before I had provided one. In addition to transparency, I also felt that, in line with Cochran-Smith and Lytle’s (2009) notion of the insider/outside paradigm of practitioner research, it was important that I engage with these issues along with my students, and take the same risks I was asking of them. If I was asking my students to share their experiences, I often contributed my own so as not to establish an imbalance of exposure. Both of these moves helped to contradict traditional notions of the teacher as the unquestionable, outsider authority who remains on a different plane.

**Data collection and analysis**

*The three types of data*

In order to best address the research questions that guide this study and to do justice to the students’ voices and experiences, this work relies on three types of data. The first type of data is the class itself; the conversations and interactions shared within it. This is provided based on transcripts of recordings of the class sessions (more on data
The second form of data is the students’ writing itself. The focus in this work is on the three poems that the students wrote (with limited excerpts from the found poem as well) but all of the students’ writing informed the conversations in class and my analysis. The third form of data is individual student interviews, which I conducted with the workshop participants and with four other center members.

These three types of data all reflect different aspects of this research and serve to provide complete answers to the questions raised. The classroom discussions give insight into not only the content of the conversations but the way that questions of identity, immigration and adaptation to a new environment were navigated within the class; how students can learn from each other by hearing others share experiences; and how group conversation can stimulate those students who may not otherwise share their experiences to participate and reflect. The writing grew in importance throughout the course of this workshop and the analysis of the work. It allows for an analysis of how a new mode of expression can be valuable as a tool for language learners, as well as being a vehicle for students to share experiences and opinions they otherwise may not have. The individual interviews served as a way for students to share their personal stories in more detail and for me to ask clarifying questions. As a researcher, the interviews were useful in ascertaining students’ opinions and the specificity of their experiences away from the larger group in order to make sure that each student was accurately represented here.

Data collection

In order to complete this practitioner research study, I utilized multiple forms of data collection and analysis as was appropriate for the three types of data. These collection procedures were decided upon before the research took place and all of the
student participants, as well as the Center, consented to them prior to the start of the study. Following this explanation I discuss how this data was analyzed and utilized within the chapters to come.

In order to preserve the integrity of the class sessions themselves, and to ensure that I was able to accurately represent the conversations had in class, all of the class sessions were audio recorded in their entirety. I also took occasional notes during the class and would routinely record my own observations as the weeks progressed. Most of those notes had to do with the teaching practice and classroom dynamics as well as the kinds of collaborative tools that could continue to be utilized. Those notes served as a form of analytic memos that helped to guide my thinking when I began the analysis of this work. After the workshop was complete, I selectively transcribed the recordings with a focus on student conversation (as opposed to explicit instructions from me, and some vocabulary and grammar lessons that did not contribute to the content of this research), indicating as I went what had been cut. While some class sessions proved more integral to this work than others, every session was transcribed to some extent. Within the transcripts the integrity of the students’ delivery was maintained, I made no revisions in terms of grammar, syntax, oral pauses, or repetition at the time of transcription.

The students’ writing was collected and either typed or photocopied and then returned. When typing student work I was careful to maintain the original structure including original spelling, punctuation and, in the case of poetry, line breaks. A note was made if student work had been peer-edited in class, or if the students themselves had
completed multiple drafts, and all written work was typed before I made editorial comments or changes to it.

The individual interviews were all semi-structured. I approached them with a list of questions (see Appendix B) and during the interview selected those questions that were best suited based on what was being discussed. Most of the interviews took place directly after class and so would sometimes build upon what had been discussed. I began the interviews at the end of the second week of classes, so I was familiar with the students before I met with them individually. The interviews were informal in nature and quite conversational. I followed up each interview with individual language tips and corrections based on notes I was taking during the interviews. Those tips were not recorded. I chose to do this so that I was not correcting students during the interview itself but still helping them with their oral skills. As I was not an outside interviewer, students continued to interact with me as their teacher during the interviews, and would often ask for help with vocabulary. I provided assistance only when I was confident of their exact meaning and those instances were all noted within transcriptions.

The individual interviews were also audio recorded and were transcribed in their entirety. As with the class transcripts, no grammatical or syntactical revisions were made at the time of transcription. All of the interviews were conducted exclusively in English, with the exception of Mercy who had a lower oral proficiency than the other students. To make sure that she was able to express herself as much as possible I conducted the interview in both English and Spanish, translating questions to make sure she understood and asking her to clarify some answers in Spanish so I could be sure to capture her full meaning. I translated those answers at the time of transcription.
Data analysis

During the transcription phase I began to make notes of emerging themes, commonalities and discrepant cases. After the transcription phase I continued to read across the data using a grounded approach (Corbin & Strauss, 2008). I looked at the different forms of data in conjunction with one another and also as they related to the theoretical concepts that were laid out in the previous chapter. This theoretical work was incorporated into the reporting of the findings that follows in the next three chapters. According to the themes that I found, I chose not to divide the findings based on data type, and instead grouped them around the student writing itself because the themes speak across the data and were never confined to just one type of data.

Issues of representation

As is to be expected with participants who are all speaking and writing in a language that they are still learning, their responses featured some grammatical and syntactical errors. I have chosen to leave their poetry as it was written, fixing only spelling errors, so as not to make any assumptions about their intended meaning. In order to allow the reader full access to the power and precision of the points that students were making, and in order to ensure that students are well-represented here, I have inserted in brackets an occasional word or extracted (noted by the use of ellipses) any unnecessary repetition that often comes with the discomfort of speaking a second language or any major grammatical missteps. These modifications are all indicated by brackets or ellipses and in no way alter the meaning of the students’ words but rather provide the clarity necessary to get the full meaning of those words.
Participants

Participant selection for the workshop was entirely voluntary and based on a description of the workshop as one of the “structured classes” that the Center offers. In addition to the course descriptions, recruitment was conducted through individual conversations between Center staff and Center members. I also participated in some of this recruitment in the days prior to the workshop. Immigrant students signed up for the workshop as they would have any other structured class, but were explicitly informed of the research element and signed consent forms covering their participation in the study (see Appendix C). Since the workshop was the core component of this study, by signing up for the workshop they were automatically agreeing to participate in the research, something that all students were aware of before the workshop began.

The participants in the study all self-identified as immigrants, meaning they considered their move to the United States a permanent one, and many came from the Centers’ scholarship program, which is geared towards the immigrant population and whose members often have a much longer tenure at the Center. All of the students had been living in New York for at least six months. Below are brief biographical sketches of each participant. All of the students who regularly participated in the workshop are discussed below; an eighth participant attended only for the first week and thus is not mentioned here. Further details of their experiences and perspectives are discussed within the next three chapters. All students are identified by pseudonyms that they selected themselves as to keep their names as culturally accurate as possible.
Alphadjo

Alphadjo was a medical student from Guinea, who was the most recent arrival to the United States. Alphadjo joined in the third week of class (he had only recently come to the Center from another English school), but very quickly jumped in to conversations. Even though he was often hesitant about some of concepts when they were raised in class, he engaged with those same ideas within his poetry. Alphadjo had won a green card lottery to come the United States and had moved with his wife. He spoke fluent Arabic and French, but identified his native language as Fulani. Much of his hesitation seemed to come from the fact that in his limited time in New York he had not ventured out very much, and so he had not yet come across some of the frustrations he heard from his classmates.

Amanda

Amanda was from the Chinese province of Wuhan where she had had a successful professional career. Her frustrations about not being able to work, not being viewed as a professional and not being financially independent were palpable and became an important part of our conversations. She had moved to New York with her husband, leaving a teenage son in China, and was currently helping to raise an American-born stepson. Amanda spoke three languages other than English: Mandarin, Wuhan and a local Chinese dialect that she identified as her mother tongue. Amanda spoke with great care in English, it often seemed as if she was fighting for each and every word. She was also the most vocal about incorporating conversations around work and job skills into the classroom.
Angeline

Angeline was an engineer from Brazil who had moved to New York with her husband. While she said her husband was the main reason for her move, she also described a desire to change her situation in Brazil, where she discussed feeling unsatisfied. For her, New York represented a chance to start over. Angeline had previously lived in France for work and had used English professionally before her move. Of all of the students, Angeline had expressed the most skepticism when told she was going to be writing poetry, which she had never done in any language. By the end of the six-week course, Angeline had really taken to poetry, and expressed enthusiasm about continuing to write poetry after the workshop had ended.

Ariana

Ariana was an educational psychologist from Peru who had moved to New York to be with her American husband, who she had met while doing a graduate degree at Columbia University years before. Ariana, partly because of her professional background, was very eager to engage with the content of the course. Her written work was quite sophisticated and she was one of the only students who did multiple drafts of her poems, changing them based on conversations that came up in the classroom. She was the only student who spoke English at home, and she had a high level of oral proficiency, but often discussed her frustration at not being able to express herself perfectly. Although she had lived in the United States previously, Ariana felt that her experience as a student was very different since she had not been trying to establish a life in New York and had always been planning on going home.
**Belle**

Belle was from Southwestern China and had worked in multiple Chinese cities such as Guangzhou and Shanghai before moving to New York to be with her husband. She had been working in China but had been unable to find a job in New York. In addition to her husband, who had been in New York for much longer than she had, Belle also had a college-age stepdaughter. Belle participated more and more as the workshop went on; she seemed initially cautious at expressing any negative feelings around her experiences but clearly benefitted from group conversations in her ability to share her frustrations around not working, and not being able to fully express herself. Belle also discussed feeling a separation between herself as a Mandarin speaker and much of the Chinese community in New York, which is dominated by Cantonese.

**Mercy**

Mercy was from Colombia, where she had worked as an educator in vocational courses. She had chosen to move to New York after meeting her husband there on vacation years before. Her ability to express herself in spoken English was more limited than some of the other students; she often repeated phrases instead of constructing full sentences. However, she was an active participant, and worked very hard to express her ideas, often speaking back to a lot of the negative stereotypes she had encountered about her home country. Through her writing, which was quite a bit clearer than her speaking, she was able to continue to express more of these ideas.

**Wendy**

Wendy was from the Hunan province of China and had moved to New York when her husband had gotten a job in the City. She was Mandarin speaking (in addition to her
Hunan dialect), but lived with her Cantonese-speaking in-laws, and so in addition to learning English she was living and parenting her newborn son in a language that was not her native tongue. Maintaining her first language was something that she discussed as being of major importance to her and she spoke at length about needing to speak Mandarin with her son. Wendy seemed to feel rather conflicted about living in New York, often expressing fears around her son losing his culture, and describing a lot of nervousness around interactions in English, often describing herself as lost or confused.

Center participants interviewed outside of the workshop

In addition to the workshop participants I interviewed a handful of other members of the New York Center for Language and Learning whom I had worked with and I felt would make valuable contributions to this study. The decision to conduct these interviews was made for various reasons, partly to increase the diversity of voices in the research once I realized the number of participants in the class and that many had immigrated for similar reasons. Additionally, I believed that it would be valuable to see how students approached questions of immigration, learning, and identity outside of the confines of a classroom. The workshop participants experienced six weeks of these conversations in various forms, where the others approached this conversation with less context, as well as less expectations. Conducting those interviews helped me clarify the relationship between the topics discussed and the pedagogy used, as well as the extent to which students were exposed to these issues outside of explicit spaces like the workshop. The selection of these participants came out of my conversations with them during my time at the Center. While they were not able to engage with all of the group conversations, their experiences and input are valuable in terms of the factors that inform
and shape language learning. Below are descriptions of these four students and why I felt they would be an important part of this work.

**Yeshi**

Yeshi was a Tibetan refugee who had worked as a nanny in New York for the past five years. She was one of the first people that I met when I came to the Center to conduct this research, and while she connected with the content of the workshop and expressed interest in participating, she opted not to because she was uncomfortable talking about her background and opinions in a class that was going to include many mainland Chinese students who she felt may not have been accepting of her. She chose to talk to me one on one; I also gave her some of the texts that we were reading in class and encouraged her to do some of the writing. I felt it was important to include Yeshi in this study because, as a refugee, she had had a very different experience of immigration and was also able to speak to the experience of learning English without a lot of previous education.

**Lechmi**

Lechmi was a young man from Senegal who I had worked with during previous times as a volunteer at the Center. Lechmi had come to the United States to further his education and was enthusiastic about learning; he often sought out volunteers in the cafeteria to ask questions about vocabulary and grammar. Lechmi was eager to participate in the workshop and approached me about doing some writing along with the group, because his work schedule precluded attending the workshop. I provided him materials to write a “Where I’m From” poem, and he later participated in an interview with me to discuss his writing process and his experiences. Working with Lechmi
allowed me to look at the value of this type of poetry for students when it is not a class assignment.

*Candice*

Candice was another Center member who was interested in the workshop but unable to attend because of a scheduling conflict. She had previously lived in France but was originally from Cameroon and had been an accountant in a French-speaking firm in New York. She had entered a green card lottery and had chosen to leave France to find new opportunities and because of the economic downturn there. Candice brought an interesting perspective to this work because she had been able to work in her field in New York. She had been working in French so she described feeling like she was lagging behind in her learning. Additionally, she had the added insight of having spent much of her adult life outside of her country of origin.

*Karen*

Karen was someone that I decided to interview during a conversation about a field trip she had gone on to Harlem. Karen’s reflections and observations around race and prejudice were something that I felt uniquely fitting for this work, and so I asked her to participate in an individual interview with me. Karen, who was from Korea and had moved to New York with her husband, had clearly spent quite a bit of time reflecting on the issues that stand at the heart of this research. Talking with Karen was an opportunity to see the way she was dealing with and confronting issues of race and identity on her own, without the structure of class discussions.
Introduction to Findings Chapters

I lived in a darkness and isolated life
Believe it or not
I really wanted to find
More important things
Not only perfection, success and competition.
My new life motivated me
To be the best of me
It’s not easy
But with love and curiosity
I discovered I’m a colorful and shine bird
Common, unique
I don’t care anymore
I’m happy in my new life
With friends and family
Believe it or not
--Angeline, Week 1 “Exploring Our Immigration Stories”

All students, and especially all adult students, bring to the classroom a past, a present, and a future. If all we make space for in our classrooms is our definition of their present, we limit their ability to bring their whole selves into a new language, and thus do a great disservice both to their education and their identities. By silencing students’ histories and past experiences, regardless of intention, we send the message to students that the acquisition of their new language stands in opposition to who they were before they emigrated. This workshop intentionally invited students into the conversation around their experience, and asked them to engage with the very issues that are at the heart of this research. In so doing, it gave students free rein to define and describe through conversation and writing what was important to them about where they came from, how they saw their current lives and what they believed was important for their futures.
In the next three chapters, I lay out some of the resulting examples of these students’ efforts to use their new language to name their world, to tell their truths. In a context in which so many students described feeling silenced by their lack of fluency (or perceived lack of fluency), opening up space for these kinds of conversations allowed students to begin to break that silence and thus gain more ownership of their new language. These three chapters weave together the different types of data collected—class discussions, interviews and students’ poetry—with the theories that guide the analysis; allowing the students’ work and ideas to speak for themself wherever possible, while still putting them into a larger analytical context.

Freire (1970) states that “authentic education is not carried on by “A” for “B” or by “A” about “B”, but rather by “A” with “B”” (p. 82). This quote underscores the idea that to speak for someone else is not constructive; the work of naming one’s world must be done together in order for it to be transformative. This workshop provided a space for its participants to name their worlds, and through that naming find voice in their own learning and be able to incorporate their experience and knowledge into their new language.

The poem at the beginning of this chapter comes from the found poetry activity that students were asked to do in the first week of class. The vocabulary provided for this activity was drawn from students’ work during a free-write activity inspired by Sandra Cisneros’s vignette “My Name” (1984) that they had done on the first day of class. The poem was loosely intended to address the question “Who Am I?” and came after a discussion of how they described themselves or were described. This was the first
chance for students to experiment in this new medium, supported by the fact that the vocabulary was given to them.

Angeline, from Brazil, told me on the first day of class that she had never written poetry in any language before, so the above example was her first attempt in this medium. Her repeated use of “believe it or not” was a way to be assertive in what she was saying; implying that she felt her story was different than the norm. The poem also looks at the process of immigration, using the metaphor of the bird to bridge the gap between her past and present. Angeline articulated that for her, moving to the United States was a move away from what she called “a darkness and isolated life” into something more hopeful. This trajectory of moving towards something positive, instead of away from home, was something that she would come back to repeatedly throughout the course of the workshop.

As Angeline’s poem shows, when spaces for honest and personal expression are opened up in the classroom students begin to see themselves in a new language. In so doing, that language can hopefully represent something gained, instead of focusing on what is lost by communicating in a language other than their first. These spaces allowed for students to have the agency to interpret and interact with the content as they saw fit, to use the language they had and the context provided to name their world, however they understood it.

The next three chapters will explore the aspects of these students’ past, present and future selves that were at play both in the classroom and in discussions of their learning. These three chapters are framed around the three major pieces of poetry that students completed in the class, which roughly follow a division between past, present
and future. This division serves as a way to organize themes, but also to maintain the focus on the work that was being done in the classroom. The first was the “Where I’m From” poem, based on work done by Linda Christensen (2000) in *Reading Writing and Rising Up*. This chapter looks at the elements of participants’ lives before emigration that are playing out within an English language classroom. This includes their reasons for moving to the United States, the conversations and writing about their home communities that were made possible through the writing of the “Where I’m From” poems, and discussion of their various first languages.

Chapter 5 looks at the “Where I Am” poems that students wrote about their realities living in New York City. This chapter allows us to look at the various ways that students’ identities, both prescribed and self-identified, have changed since moving. It will explore specific personality factors such as being perceived as shy, or how students were treated because of their limited language skills, and also larger categories such as being perceived as being part of certain racial groups or having to confront stereotypes about one’s culture. Additionally, this chapter begins to highlight the ways in which the collaborative writing processes that students were engaged in supported their learning.

The sixth chapter, “What I Will”, gives voice to how students envision their futures, moving from a narrowly constructed understanding of jobs and material goals, into what students were not willing to give up or adapt within their new American contexts. It looks at the ways that students have embraced or hope to embrace their new country, the ways they maintain ties to their home countries, cultures and communities and the duality that begins to develop between identities and languages. This sixth chapter also looks at how classroom communities can support these visions of the future.
These three chapters feature a combination of students’ comments in class, in their individual interviews with me, and the poems that they wrote. These three components are also interwoven with the theoretical texts that make up the framework for this study, as a way to analyze and contextualize the work that came out of these six weeks. While not every story can be included here, and while some students’ voices may be featured more predominantly than others, each of those stories has helped to shape the larger landscape of this work. My hope for these chapters is that by placing the various students’ perspectives in conversation with one another, and with the theories that inform my analysis, we can begin to come to a deeper understanding of what informs an immigrant adults’ learning, and how that can be encouraged and supported within a classroom context.
Chapter 4
“Where I’m From”: Exploration of Students’ Pasts

As quoted in the first chapter, Chimamanda Adichie (2009) reminds us that “stories matter”, that through telling stories and hearing stories we can begin to reclaim that which we may have lost and begin to see people and histories for the complexities that they are. That was the hope for this workshop, that by inviting students to tell their stories, whatever that meant to them, they could begin to reclaim some of what may be lost by living in a new context and having to communicate in a new language. Through this process, they could begin to see English classes, and in fact the English language itself as a site for their stories and themselves, as opposed to just a series of rules and restrictions that did not truly belong to them.

Listening to students speak in classes and in the cafeteria of the New York Center for Language and Learning, they often avoided personal details in favor of national generalizations, starting comments with “in my country”, instead of telling stories truly related to their lives. In this chapter I document what happened when we began to push this envelope, when students’ answers to the question “where are you from?” shifted from a recitation of facts to a reflection on personal experience. This chapter looks at the various histories that students bring into their learning of English, histories that their teachers and classmates, and very often they themselves, do not often see as being relevant to their learning.

In this chapter, I first look at students’ reflections on their professional lives before moving to the United States, and on the decision to move. Secondly, I explore the way students depicted their home communities in their “Where I’m From” poems and the
conversations around that poetry. Lastly, I discuss the conversations we had about students’ first languages, both their ability to express themselves in those languages and also the way those languages are treated in their home countries, including specific discussion of students who identified their first languages as something other than the official language in their home countries.

Getting here

Cummins (2011) talks about the myriad choices, large and small that we make as educators in any given classroom. As a teacher of adult immigrants, I have always made the conscious choice not to ask students the whys and hows of their immigration experience. In this project, however, those experiences were of vital importance to our conversation. I usually believe that those types of questions present some amount of risk, but in the case of this workshop discussing the immigration process allowed for an exploration of what was, for many of the students, a shared experience. The discussion of these issues was an important step in incorporating students’ histories into their learning experience.

All of the women who participated in this workshop ascribed their decision to move to the United States to a desire to be with their husbands, who either needed to move for work or had been residing in the United States for many years. When asked what brought her to New York, Ariana stated:

The only reason is my husband. Because I was in love, and I always put my personal life over my career, and even though I was so successful in Peru…it’s
just because of him…that is what’s…made things harder in the first, because it’s like he’s the only reason.

Ariana’s professional success was very important to her, she discussed at length the kinds of opportunities she had in Peru. She had previously completed a master’s degree in New York City, but stressed that with this permanent move she felt much more pressure to adapt and be successful than she had before.

That idea, that their husbands were the only reason for their move was a common theme among the women, all of whom had been professionals in their home countries, and often described their professional successes back home and their level of comfort in that realm of their lives. Another expression of this sentiment came from Amanda, who had left a job and a teenage son behind in China to follow her husband, stating:

The only reason is because my husband, I gave up high salary job. So that’s why, when I first came here, I can’t speak English well, and I can’t apply for job … I felt lost…I felt I don’t have my personal value and because in China …I don’t know how to say, maybe I pay attention about woman’s rights.

Amanda, Ariana, and to varying degrees the rest of the students, were very clear to define themselves in terms of their professions, and were very interested in discussing job skills in order to get back to work in New York. Frustrations around their lack of comfort in English were often expressed in the terms that Amanda lays out above, the idea that they did not have enough language to work within their field; or even more fundamentally, to be seen as a professional. Gee’s (2012) definition of Discourses as specific ways of communicating and interacting that are distinguishable as a part of a distinctive socially situated identity is useful in framing these conversations. Central to
Gee’s (2012) definition of a Discourse is the idea that others can recognize you as a member of that Discourse. So while these students were (rightfully) concerned with rebuilding their “professional” Discourse in English, Gee would argue that it is not enough to acquire the Discourse, but you also have to be able to be acknowledged as possessing that Discourse as well. So while they in fact had Discourses within their given fields, the issue was greater than language, but was in fact that they weren’t being understood to be professionals, largely because of their English skills.

Gee states that, “to mean anything to someone else, (or even to myself) I have to communicate who I am (in the sense of what socially situated identity I am taking on here and now)” (2012, p. 155). What was very clear in the students’ discussions of their professional lives was that they had previously been very clear of what those socially situated identities were and how they were interacting within them. Moving to a new country and language where they weren’t working shook that security. To take the example of Amanda, when she described herself as being a part of the “woman’s rights”, I offered her the word activist, which she did not seem to connect with. So while exactly what she meant may have been unclear to me in my context, within her context she had a clear understanding of what that meant and she was understood to be a part of that affinity group (Gee, 2012).

Professionalism and independence were what many of the women spoke about as being of major importance to their lives back home. For Amanda it was a sense of financial independence, Mercy, a student from Colombia who had worked as a teacher described, “when I single I’m [by my] self, I go to work, every day 8 pm, 9 pm, I no worry, because no obligation…I teach …I travel in different towns, different people, is
very very interesting….Yes. Is beautiful life.” There are a few pieces of importance here, obviously one is the idea of her independence, but also she discusses being able to travel and having an intimate understanding of one’s surroundings, something that is lacking in a new country.

Another participant, Candice, the Cameroonian accountant who had lived for many years in France, took great pains to describe her professional success before moving to the United States. Unlike the women discussed above, Candice (who did not participate in the workshop, but who I spoke to in an individual interview) won a green card lottery and emigrated on her own. Reflecting on her life before her move she stated that, “I have a stable life, I have my good job, I have my child, I have like a life completely life, good life…” She went on to describe how the economic crisis in France informed her decision, stating, “I was like, why I can’t take a chance? Why can I just go and try…. and then I decide to move here to have like an American Dream.” While Candice had found work in her field in a French-speaking firm, she still described herself as feeling unsettled in the United States, not yet having regained the stability she discussed above.

While Candice was the only student to invoke the phrase “American Dream”, she was not the only one who posited that the United States was the answer to something that she was looking for. For Angeline, while her husband was the impetus for her move, she stated, “even before I met him I would like to change something my life.” While she continued on to discuss some of the loss of independence she felt, she was very clear to differentiate herself from her classmates, saying to me at the end of her individual
interview that she felt she was an outlier in the class, because she had not experienced some of the depression and loneliness she was hearing her classmates express.

Angeline wasn’t the only student who expressed that the United States was an opportunity to seize something that was missing. Alphadjo, the Guinean medical student, stated that he moved to the United States, “to improve my knowledge.” He had been in the U.S. for the least amount of time and often responded that he had not been in the country long enough to have formed a lot of opinions about it (or long enough to become frustrated). Alphadjo described feeling professional frustrations back home in a way the other students did not, discussing the corruption he faced in school. Lechmi, the student from Senegal who participated in an individual interview, stated that he came for:

Two reasons, just two reasons. One, I got a green card lottery. And it was, I like to do a PHD… In a good school, and when I got the lottery, I say wow that’s a chance to, realize my dream, get a PHD and uh, have a better life, get more money. But they are linked. That’s why I’m here.

Both Lechmi and Candice expressed great love and nostalgia for their home countries, but also, as stated above, had great hope for their lives in the United States. While Lechmi had been in New York quite a bit longer than Alphadjo and thus expressed more frustrations around his ability to express himself and interact with others, his motivation to be in the U.S. remained unshaken. Because Candice had been able to find work in her native language, and possibly because she had already lived outside of her native country prior to coming to the United States, she also expressed less of the day to day frustration around language, but her comments looked more at the different norms of social interactions that she had encountered.
While most of the participants that I spoke to for this project had professional backgrounds and had come to the United States by choice, one student, Yeshi, had a very different story. Yeshi was a Tibetan refugee who did not take the workshop, but who I spoke to in an individual interview. Though her journey had been different she also expressed a similar sense of conflict between a love for her homeland and a need to start her life in the United States, stating, “For me, I wish I could go back, because my father alone, and the situation’s very difficult but…I don’t have that much option, so now I’m like a citizenship.”

Yeshi was the only person in this project who described herself as not having an education prior to immigration. As opposed to most students who described frustration at not having their knowledge acknowledged, Yeshi described being embarrassed that she could not fully participate in classes, explaining why she usually did not participate in classes she stated “especially sometimes they talk about a map, some place I don’t know many things, everything’s new for me.” While it is certainly possible that Yeshi wasn’t the only student in her classes with little education, in this case she was identifying all of her classmates as possessing Discourses that she did not, and thus as able to transition more easily into new Discourses.

While these students’ experiences of immigration are obviously each unique, the contradictions and conflict in their feelings towards their old and new countries spoke across their experiences. It was clear in all of the students’ discussions of immigration that how they came to the U.S., and the fact that they were committed to building new lives there informed their learning and shaped their motivations. Telling those stories and
seeing similarities in their reasons for moving to a new country were important in exploring the factors that informed learning.

“Where I’m From”

In the “Importance of the Act of Reading,” Freire (1987) states that “reading the world precedes reading the word, and the subsequent reading of the word cannot dispense with continually reading the world” (p. 5). It is this reading, and speaking and writing of, their worlds that students were asked to do in this workshop. One of the ways that this was done was to engage in writing and conversation around where students were from, using Linda Christensen’s poetry activity as a starting point. Christensen (2000) discusses how the “Where I’m From” poem process is an attempt to:

Find ways to make my students feel significant and cared about as well, to find space for their lives to become a part of the curriculum. I do this by inviting them to write about their lives, about the world from which they come (p.19).

The conversations around where students were from were one way to invite students into the curriculum, and by extension into the very language that they were learning.

One of the most important pieces of this process was to encourage students to use a broader and more personally defined understanding of the statement “Where I’m From.” The examples in Christensen’s work include mentions of food, smells, phrases and household objects as part of the definition of place. After reading sample poems, we had a conversation about this larger definition of place represented in the poems:
Emma: if I had said to you oh we’re going to write about where you’re from, and not given you one of these [poems], would you have talked about the food and the memories in this way, do you feel like that’s where you’re from?

Alphadjo: Oh no I, I think where I’m from I don’t speak about these things, I wouldn’t think about.

Angeline: Yes when I talked with her [another student], I was trying to explain her a kind of fruit we have just in Brazil that my mother used to put the stuff into, to fry

[…]

Ariana: Yes, food definitely, for us Peruvians food is very important

Emma: Would you say you’re from food, no?

Student: No

Mercy: …I from, um difficult.

Emma: Difficult?

Mercy: [Difficult] condition…., violence, or beautiful because the beautiful landscapes, beautiful people

This conversation allowed students to connect to the text and to the curriculum itself, and also began to lay the groundwork to write their own poems. Mercy began to express the dualities of where she was from, when she stated “violence, or beautiful because the beautiful landscapes”. This theme of contradiction was one she carried through her work. While her writing expressed some of the negative associations people have with her country, she also stressed the positive aspects of her experience.
Mercy spoke at length in her individual interview about feeling silenced in English, often referring to the fact that she did not like English before she moved to New York. In class, while she participated often, her answers were sometimes off topic, due to the fact that she would take individual words she heard out of context in order to craft a response. These attempts though, showed just how hard she was working to express herself. That was further demonstrated in the poem she wrote, where she was able to take advantage of poetry’s sparse form to be able to convey the contradictions from her childhood:

I from home
I grow up in a home very strict, but player and love accompanied my childhood.
I’m from adventure in big cities and player in small towns with smell of coffee and delicious food
I’m from Land Rover Car, ride in the rivers and camps,
Big family and big houses, I meet the poorness and richness
Many schools, many friends, many changes, but every happy and every again start.
I grow up in a country of war and peace, good news and bad news in a day self.

While there are clearly constraints in Mercy’s ability to express herself within traditional grammar structures, a poem like this also allows us to look beyond some of those errors, into what we are able to understand from the way she chose to describe her experience. For example, in her last line, while the final phrase “in a day self” may be unclear, the dynamic she is setting up of talking about the war and peace, good news and bad news and the complexities of her experience remains clear, and from the context she develops
we can understand that she means that those opposites often take place within a single day. We can see here how she was able to describe in detail the associations she had with her life growing up, using specific examples the way the sample poems had, but also how she was setting up her own pattern—moving back and forth between positive and negative throughout the poem.

The way Mercy expressed the duality of her experience, mentioning both the positives and the negatives, was something that resonated specifically with Ariana, who had a much higher comfort level with English, and, since she was a psychologist was particularly attuned to the conversations that were taking place in class. After Mercy shared her poem, Ariana was quite shocked at herself, realizing that, having come of age at a time of intense violence in Peru, she had failed to include that:

I was thinking about how she talked about peace and violence, and how…I blocked from my memory twenty years of terrorism in my country, it’s like yeah, I should have written about….because it’s part of the person I am. For example I’m not scared of anything because of that. Like I can go wherever, when they tell me oh this is a dangerous place, I don’t care because I suffered terrorism for many years, I don’t know maybe I was so focused on positive things, now I’m going to include that. Because it’s very important.

It was through this exchange of experiences that Ariana was able to realize that a piece of her narrative was missing. Campano (2007) explicitly states that, “storytelling becomes an ongoing process of inquiry and discovery that is potentially generative” (p.18). Ariana’s process speaks to that, even though Mercy struggled more to express herself,
through the collaboration of reading aloud, Ariana was able to learn from Mercy’s experience and perspective in order to better express her own.

Most of the students were less focused on the larger contexts in which they were raised and focused solely on their personal and family lives, but in Ariana’s case, she felt very strongly that wasn’t enough. Ariana was one of the only students who chose to re-write her poem to include what she felt had been a glaring absence from her first work:

I Am From Life

I am from a big city, the colonial history and the tradition,
from the huge contrast, the cement and the pollution.
I am from the sea, the humidity and the “panza de burro” sky,
from the centralism, the conflict and the daily challenge.
I am from a mosaic of people, a complex puzzle
a place where everyone is from everywhere.

I am from the birds chirping and the rooster crowing,
from the sounds of my dad’s typewriter and my mom’s sewing machine,
the buses passing by, the people greeting on the street,
the water boiling in the kitchen, the contagious music in the radio,
and the endless sessions of playing and laughing.

I am from my grandma’s bodega and the forbidden candy,
from my inexperienced parent’s protection and love,
my always there for me Lucia and the complicity of my siblings.
I am from family and friends, the gang and the fun.

Soccer, los 7 pecados, bata, matagente, the street market,
grocery shopping once a week, good food on the table,
cebiche, pollo a la brasa and inchicapi is where I am from.

I am from the violence, the uncertainty and the bravery,
from bombs in unthinkable places, from the darkness,
the light from the candles, the water from containers,
the blood everywhere, the crying, the feeling of hopeless,
the apparent peace and the pending forgiveness is where I am from.

I am from the easy laugh no matter what, from the resilience
from the “yes we can”, the hard work and the rebuilding,
the wiped away tears, the healing process and the scars.
I am from a long history of struggling and the idea that,
in the end, everything will be fine.

Ariana’s experience in this activity speaks to Jim Cummins’ notion of mutual
negotiation of identity (1996) whereby the work of her classmates, the structures
provided by myself as the teacher and, possibly, the perceptions people had of where she
was from were all informing her thinking. Ariana spoke at length, both in her individual
interview and in class about her lack of confidence in her learning, how much she longed
for perfection in English. She also began to speak, towards the end of the six weeks
about how being asked to share of herself so personally in English had helped her, especially since it spoke to her strengths as a psychologist.

While Ariana’s poem touched on the larger social and political factors that influenced her childhood, there are also intensely personal references, references that could not be fully understood by an outside reader, but whose resonance can certainly be felt. All three of the sample poems that students were given were full of references that they did not understand, many of which I was unable to explain, because they were specific to the writers’ contexts. By using texts that featured these kinds of personal references, I hoped to show that students could share what was important to them, instead of focusing exclusively on whether or not they could be understood, which is often such a focus in an ESL class. In so doing, I hoped to allow students to develop a connection to English within a personal, private Discourse (Gee, 2012), instead of the public, externally defined realms that they were used to.

While the worksheets they were given somewhat shaped what the students chose to include, it was clear that they were selecting what truly resonated for them, since none of the poems was based line by line off of any materials given to them. In his “Where I’m From” poem, Alphadjo, who had only joined the class the week that we began these poems, wrote “I was running through the field one day/I fell and hurt my toe/a feeling of pain and discomfort I found/tears began to flow.” It was unclear from the poem what the significance of this moment was, only that it was important enough to include. By including this stanza, even breaking from the “I am from…” repetition that he used throughout most of his poem, Alphadjo was using the given examples and frameworks simply as a launching pad for his own expression.
References to food and family are found in many of the students’ poems. References to food found their way into many conversations throughout the workshop. Meyer and Rhoades (2006) advocate an understanding of multiculturalism that goes beyond what they name as “food, festival, folklore and fashion” (p. 82). While this is an important challenge for educators, and while this workshop certainly attempted to take a more nuanced view, for these participants, discussing, comparing, writing about, and ultimately sharing food was an important way for them to evoke concrete memories of home and to find common ground. Beyond similarities in the actual foods they mentioned, the way they discussed them, linking cooking to eating and those two actions to their families, was something the students noticeably had in common.

The sharing of food memories was also a site for students to find some of the joy that is an inherent part of the “Where I’m From” process (Christensen, 2000). Another commonality in the poems that elicited and evoked some of this joy was a sense of family, and also of their larger communities. In her poem, Wendy writes “I’m from the neighborhood/Sharing, caring, helping/We like a big family/I’m from the sisterhood/we keeping the secret for each other/sharing the sorrow and delightful.” With these opportunities to talk directly about their childhood, students were able to assert their values and their priorities within an English context, claiming and articulating where they are from within the larger journey of acquiring this new language.

It was not just the personal moments, but also descriptions of their homelands where students were able to find joy. There were many conversations in class and one-on-one about the stereotypes attributed to people’s communities, which will be explored in depth in the next chapter. Mercy discussed how whenever she told someone she was
from Colombia they would bring up cocaine and the war on drugs, but that did not reflect the whole picture, that “the perception Colombia… [is] coca… but people is smart, the people …work.” Throughout the “Where I’m From” process, however, students were able to describe the beauty of where they were from, and because they were given the freedom to choose what they wanted to include and how, they were less hemmed in by others’ expectations.

Throughout this workshop, students talked about feeling silenced by English, echoing the kinds of silencing that Campano (2007) discussed as being prevalent in schools. There are, as Campano discusses, practical limitations to our ability to know our language-learning students, but not necessarily as many as we would think. A student like Mercy, who struggled to express herself in classroom conversations, who talked about how limited she felt in her ability to communicate, was able to do just that when writing her poem. By asking students to discuss where they were from, and by allowing them to answer that question however they saw fit, they were able to begin to speak back to the silencing, and also see within themselves an ability to communicate themselves and their histories.

**What I speak**

The unavoidable conflict in a class like this is that while one of the explicit goals of the workshop is to elucidate students’ roots, that work is done entirely in a language that is not their own. That contradiction became a topic of discussion, and I also tried to take steps to alleviate it. Throughout the workshop and in interviews, I attempted to discuss with students their pride in and the importance of their first languages, as well as
opening up spaces, for example within their writing, for students to experiment bilingually. This section looks briefly at some of those attempts to incorporate both languages, both on the part of the students, but also pedagogically. From there, I discuss how students identified their first languages, lastly I explore the conversations that about the range of expression that first languages provide.

In her essay, “How to Tame a Wild Tongue”, Gloria Anzaldúa (1987) states:

So, if you really want to hurt me, talk badly about my language. Ethnic identity is twin skin to linguistic identity—I am my language. Until I can take pride in my language, I cannot take pride in myself. Until I can accept as legitimate Chicano Texas Spanish, Tex-Mex and all the other languages I speak, I cannot accept the legitimacy of myself. Until I am free to write bilingually and to switch codes without having always to translate, while I still have to speak English or Spanish when I would rather speak Spanglish, and as long as I have to accommodate the English speakers rather than having them accommodate me, my tongue will be illegitimate (p. 81).

Within most English schools, including the New York Center for Language and Learning, students are discouraged, and often entirely forbidden from using their first languages in classrooms as well as public spaces, including for the purposes of translating new vocabulary. If one uses the terms that Anzaldúa sets up above, that insistence is an act that illegitimates students instead of empowering them.

When presented with the above excerpt, whereas students agreed with her assertions around the inherent connection between language and culture, they did not seem to extend that to a critique of being forced to speak English in schools. Though
they were very clear that they wanted to maintain their first language, and that it was within their first language that they felt the most comfortable, they did not see a contradiction in being told to speak only English in a school setting. In talking about the importance of first language, Belle stated “language comes from culture, and culture also creates language…when they at home they have to speak their mother tongue.” Earlier in that same conversation however, Belle and many of the other participants discussed how being forced to speak English can be an important learning tool.

These two conflicting opinions may stem from various factors, both in the students’ individual experiences and in the learning environment they were in. They obviously did not see what happened in school as being a threat to their larger senses of self. Notably, the students who were most vocal in this conversation were Spanish and Mandarin speakers, both of which are languages that occupy ample amounts of public space within New York. If the students did not speak such commonly used languages, it is interesting to think whether they would have had the same opinion.

The other factor that could inform the students’ opinions about this is the kind of learning environment in which they found themselves. The Center, while it generally discourages use of first languages, including in public spaces, is not particularly rigid in its enforcement. Because it is a school with no requirements, students are free to choose how they use the services provided, what kinds of classes they take, how much time they spend there, and who they communicate with and how. This could mean that the students did not feel particularly forced to speak English, and also that they understood that their learning came from their own motivation.
Within the confines of this workshop however, I gave more space for students to use their first languages when necessary in order to allow for the negotiation of various linguistic identities (Cummins, 2011), and to accommodate student needs in ways that may not traditionally happen (Nieto, 1999). The first way this was done was simply to allow for the translation of individual vocabulary words. While this seems obvious, it is something that is very rarely given space for within most classes, and something that I am usually quite strict about in other contexts. Because all of the students had at least one other person they could get first-language help from, I felt that doing this would not create an inequity in the room. By allowing for translation, the focus actually shifted from electronic translators or dictionaries, both of which are solitary and do nothing to promote collaborative learning. Additionally, the focus also shifted from me as the teacher into a context where students were working together to define and make sure everyone understood, without giving me the last word.

The other way that first languages were incorporated was in the actual activities, especially the brainstorming that took place before the poetry. When a prompt asked for something that was more natural in a first language, such as the name of food or an expression they heard growing up, students were asked to share in their languages instead of merely translating. This benefitted not just the student using their first language but the classroom community as a whole as it gave students the opportunity to hear one another speak the languages most central to their identity. As per some of the texts we read, students were invited to incorporate their languages into their poetry, though almost no one did. Ariana used proper nouns, names of games and food, and one expression, “panza de burro,” which she said was a description of the color of the sky that would
have been lost in translation. So even though she used Spanish in her poem, her reasons were more to maintain the integrity of what she was saying as opposed to trying to express something dually.

The only other student who incorporated first language was Lechmi, who wrote his poem outside of the confines of the class. His poem focused less on personal experience and was more about his country, in one line stating—“That why it is the only country in the world with a brand: TERANGA/Yes hospitality!” Including this word was very important to Lechmi, as he felt it was the only way he could represent his homeland. He initially was going to structure the whole poem around the word, but later incorporated it this way, choosing “hospitability” as the closest he could come to translation. It was clear that in this case merely translating the word and leaving the original out would have been insufficient to convey meaning, and that it was also important to his point to use his language.

After writing the “Where I’m From” poems, I asked students if they felt the poems would be different had they written them in their first languages. Ariana, who had been concerned about having initially left out discussion of her country’s violent past, felt that she might have included it more naturally if she had been writing in Spanish. She was the only student who expressed that the content may have been different, but Belle and Amanda explained that writing in Mandarin they would have conformed to the rules of poetry they learned in school, using specific rhyme schemes and syllable patterns.

After this conversation I suggested that the students try to write a “Where I’m From” poem in their languages to see what would happen. I had not initially set up the assignment to produce dual-language poems, a tool that Cummins (2011) often uses.
This was partly because the class still needed to conform to some of the Center’s standards of an English class, but also because I wanted to see how students were able to express as much of themselves as possible using English as the primary linguistic tool. The only student who responded to my suggestion was Angeline, but she reported feeling uninspired and unable to write anything in Portuguese. As mentioned previously, Angeline had discussed at length that she had never written poetry before, and how this was a new mode of expression she was developing, which may account for why she was unable to work through her ideas in her native language.

The above examples were all attempts to interrupt the limitations of traditional “English Only” spaces. Sonia Nieto (1999) asks, “who does the accommodating?” (p. 72). This question could be related to a variety of issues within a classroom, but it is certainly of relevance here. First languages are often limited in English classrooms in order to try to imitate the acquisition of our primary Discourses (Gee, 2012) in our new Discourses and languages. While this is certainly well intentioned, to go back to Anzaldúa’s (1987) text, by not accommodating multiple languages, students end up internalizing a feeling of illegitimacy.

Cummins (2011) also demonstrates at length how, by incorporating first languages into learning, students gain the ability to build off the knowledge they already have, or, to put it in the context of Gee’s (2012) work, the Discourses they have in their first language. Moreover, it allows them to recognize their various Discourses, and the way those Discourses may operate in English. By opening up spaces for translation, students were able to use their previous knowledge not just to further their own learning,
but to support their peers, thereby strengthening the sense of community and collaboration.

Cummins often refers to students’ linguistic resources; that even the youngest child, upon entering a classroom brings with them a variety of stored up linguistic knowledge. Those pre-schooling linguistic resources can be understood, in Gee’s (2012) terms, as being different, private sphere Discourses, which, in an attempt to build academic Discourses are often discarded but are in fact vital for expression. For adult students, regardless of their educational or professional backgrounds, this is even truer. “Everything they have learned about life and the world up to this point is being dismissed as irrelevant to school learning” (Cummins, 1996, p. 2). Where Cummins states, “school learning”, which is clearly relevant to adult learners with limited formal education, in this context one could substitute “English learning”. For the participants here, this was particularly painful, and by inviting not only discussions of that knowledge but the linguistic resources themselves into the process, that dismissal was at least slightly alleviated.

Our primary Discourse, which we acquire in childhood and speak in our most private moments, usually exists apart from the rules of grammar that we may learn later in schools. While most of us function within at least some of the grammatical bounds of our first language, by understanding that we all have multiple Discourses we can realize that we possess the ability to move back and forth between registers and degrees of standardization within our language. When this was discussed with students, many of them struggled to admit that they did not always speak the most technical, formal version of their languages. After a bit of prodding, Belle said:
Sometimes it’s different because in textbooks it’s more formal, it’s formal and absolutely it’s correct but in daily life language it’s more casual, it’s informal, and if the two persons are close friends, they can talk more casually, and they always use more contractions.

In her own way, she is making reference to having multiple Discourses, and being able to switch back and forth between them.

While students discussed using slang or informal registers within their first languages, and even admitted to various “imperfections”, within English, there was a desire for the very perfection they did not feel a need for in their first language. Ariana, who was particularly concerned with achieving perfection in English, also articulated the fact that her Spanish had multiple Discourses, some of which were very informal. This inability to be comfortable in an informal English may come from the fact that, for many of the students whose family and social lives were being conducted in their first languages and who weren’t working; their only real English Discourses were school Discourses, which demand a level of standardization. It may also be a result of English teachers presenting the language in terms of what is right and what is wrong instead of allowing for variation. The focus on being correct over being expressive within most classes can mean that they have trouble expressing themselves in less structured and controlled environments outside of the classroom.

In addition to switching between Discourses within a language, many of the students I spoke to were also raised switching back and forth between languages, which in many cases each occupied a specific Discourse (e.g. a local mother tongue that was used at home, a second mother tongue used socially, an official national language used at
school). In almost all of the interviews I conducted, when I first asked a student what languages they spoke, they only answered the official language of their country. However, after other questions, I was able to ascertain that their “mother tongue” or primary Discourse was in fact something else, and in many cases they spoke multiple dialects or local languages. For many, the official language that they spoke, be it French or Mandarin (as the cases were for most of the students in this category), was used almost exclusively for professional or academic Discourses. Lechmi went as far as to say “sometimes when you speak French on the street, they might look at you like ‘what he’s doing?’”

These students with multiple first languages all identified their mother tongues as forming a kind of affinity group, that there was a recognition that they received in their home countries when speaking languages other than the official language. Lechmi, referring to multiple Senegalese linguistic/ethnic groups, described it as an instant code-switching, “If you Wolof, [when] you speak to Wolof you speak Wolof, if you Pol…when you meet Pol, you speak Pol, if you Soninke you do the same.” While the groups he references here are ethnicities as well as languages, which complicates this type of recognition, the fact remains that the affinity group was acknowledged through language.

Speaking with Amanda, the affinity group concept of local dialects was put in more emotional terms. She explained that when she was living in a larger city, hours away from her hometown, and working in a language that was not her primary Discourse, “when I took the bus back to my hometown… if I heard the language that from the small town, I felt very warm, I felt that they were my family.” Although this was the language
she spoke with her husband in New York, she explained that outside of her house she did not come into contact with it. Talking about her life in New York, she attributed those feelings of community to hearing Mandarin, a language that from her explanation seemed to be of little use outside of school in her life in China.

Another student who talked about her multiple first languages was Candice, who actually mentioned an English pidgin as one of her first languages. In describing it, she stated, “it’s not the really English.” This speaks to the issues of standardization of languages, wherein we only have one concept of a “real” language, and anything hybridized or outside of those bounds somehow does not count. These linguistic hierarchies are often legacies of colonization and racialized nation building, (Haque, 2012). So instead of seeing English pidgin as its own language (to be fair, Candice identified herself primarily as a French speaker), or as something that could be incorporated into the English she was acquiring in New York, it was framed as a negative.

Despite their resistance to naming all of their languages, the majority of the students said that all of their languages were respected within their countries. While not claiming that she had experienced prejudice, Amanda did discuss that her local language was seen as being from the countryside and as not particularly cosmopolitan. The only student who explicitly discussed experiencing linguistic discrimination within first languages was Yeshi, whose first language of Tibetan often made her the target for bias. While most students discussed a positive affinity group association with their languages in New York, that when they were heard speaking them they felt part of a community, for Yeshi it was quite a different experience. She said that she spoke some Mandarin, but in
the context of the Center, if she was to speak it, she felt uncomfortable, because it put her
with a group of people who did not accept her. When she spoke Tibetan, by her own
account the Chinese students often ridiculed her, asserting that she was really Chinese.

Most of the students talked about how it was their official languages, French or
Mandarin that they used to find community in New York, instead of their mother
tongues. This fact, coupled with the fact that most teachers and Americans would only
really be able to identify their official language, could contribute to the resistance to
listing all of their languages; since most people they are speaking to may not have heard
of their languages. What this means though, is that they have lost these specific affinity
groups. The same way they struggled with not being seen as professionals, they were
also not being seen as belonging to specific regional or ethnic communities any more.

It is not just the languages themselves that serve as identifiers that may no longer
exist within English. Students often talked about the range of expression that they had in
their first languages that they no longer have. In a discussion around expressiveness in
language, Amanda was able to provide a metaphor for speaking in another language,
encapsulating the frustration of not being able to express oneself:

I think it’s like I drive a car, in China I drive a good car, I drive a car with
direction wheel…[but in English] it has some trouble, so I couldn’t direct to the
place that I want to go…maybe I going around there….Or just to the left side, or
the right side, not the correct side.

This idea, that you are going around the point instead of being able to make it, was
something that students talked about a great deal.
Anzaldúa’s (1987) idea that culture is “twin skin” to language is not only important when talking about first languages, but also English. Within our first languages, we naturally understand all of the tools that come in our “identity kit” (Gee 2012), we understand the cultural implications of what we are saying. In a new language however, those subtleties are not always clear. So while Amanda’s point was being made more in terms of being able to choose correct words, it could also be extended to an understanding of the connotation of those words. For example, Ariana described differences in the meaning of the word “friendship” in English and Spanish, explaining that while technically the words translate, because of the way we interact with people, the true meaning changes.

Gee’s definition of Discourse goes beyond what words we choose to use, as the identity kit covers all manner of social interactions and the way we communicate with others. Often not fully understanding that fact can be a real challenge in learning a language. The following conversation looks at how students thought about those differences:

Ariana: Like English is, that’s what I was telling her, it’s very straight, because in Spanish we go around we decorate, and then finally you find the idea, but here it’s like…

Belle: Very straight and direct

Ariana: Time is money.

According to these students, adjusting to the language being more direct, or other ways that English functions differently than what they were used to was in many ways much
more a challenge than learning grammar and vocabulary in terms of finding their footing in a new culture.

In some cases, those different social practices can be a respite from practices in a first language. When discussing the fact that English does not have a clearly defined formal tense the way Spanish does, or that it lacks as many specific ways of conveying respect to elders and authority figures as exist in Chinese languages, I asked if the students felt uncomfortable without those tools. Ariana said it was the opposite, that:

I actually love it, because you don’t have to worry about that, … you’re careful about the words that you use but not the ways, …in my country I have to decide should I use the usted or the tu³, I don’t know I’m not sure…but here, you don’t have to worry.

This change in language practice was liberating for Ariana. Some of the other students, specifically those from China who were used to having terms of respect for different people, discussed feeling uncomfortable without those tools. How we use language, what is considered rude or polite, appropriate or not, are all of vital importance to our identity kits, and can often seem inherent in our primary Discourses and entirely baffling in our secondary Discourses, or second languages (Gee, 2012). Within our first languages we can choose whether or not to be rude, we can choose to show respect where we believe it is needed, and we can delicately approach controversy without avoiding it all together. In our second language, a lack of linguistic tools, but also unfamiliarity with the embedded cultural assumptions and cues makes those navigations more challenging.

³ Usted is the formal second person verb tense in Spanish, tu is the informal.
These challenges can mean that it is difficult to show one’s personality in a new language. I asked students in their interviews if they felt they were able to show their personality in English, which was something that came up in class as well. Candice discussed, similarly to Ariana and Belle’s conversation above, that she felt she was more direct in English, not necessarily because she wanted to be, but because she lacked the language to, as Ariana put it, “decorate” her points. Lechmi also talked about feeling like he could not really express himself, and that he felt “slower” in English.

While some of these issues could be understood as natural parts of the language learning process, there were other points that were less about actual learning, but more informed by the differences in our linguistic personalities. Something that students often brought up was that they felt that no one knew they were funny when they spoke English, that they were unable to convey their humor. While this may be somewhat connected to lack of language, it is more deeply rooted than that. This also gets back to the idea of affinity groups, that not only could they not *be* funny, they were not being *seen* as funny. The notion of affinity groups (Gee, 2012) is most commonly thought of as relating to more clearly defined Discourses, those linked to a specific neighborhood, profession, or hobby. In this case it is helpful to see them slightly more broadly in the sense that one is, in their first language, easily identified through the use of their “identity kit”, as having certain personality traits, such as humor, but in a second language, that identification is no longer there. This is particularly relevant to the notion of Discourses as socially-situated practices because humor itself, from language to content to delivery, is very much culturally and socially informed.
Within this conversation around languages, we talked not only about expressing oneself culturally, but what happens when we lose untranslatable words and concepts when switching to a new language. I asked students if there were words they missed in their languages, and while they all agreed there were many examples, they only articulated a few, including a Mandarin way of expressing disinterest, and the Portuguese word *saudades*, which Angeline explained, “It’s a word that means something that you miss, but if you use the word in English I miss someone, it’s not the same meaning it’s not the same sound.” This word is an important example of what happens when one is left expressing their emotions in a new language, because while a native English speaker would feel that saying you miss someone sufficiently expressed that feeling, a speaker of Portuguese would be constantly missing a depth of longing that is not encapsulated in the English equivalent.

This similar experience was expressed by Ariana when she discussed the Spanish way of saying “I love you”:

I always thought that I was not going to be able to express my feelings… in English the way I would express them in Spanish. Because I was like, oh, saying I love you is not the same, *Te amo*, has a lot of meaning for me.

While she discussed having gotten more comfortable expressing emotions in English, this comment underscores the connection between language and emotion that can have a profound impact on the ability of a language learner to feel that they are authentically expressing themselves.
Final remarks

While it is common practice for students to be asked where they are from and what language they speak, the cursory responses do not begin to really tell the whole story. During interviews, I often asked students if other teachers asked these kinds of questions, and what they wished teachers knew about them. Most of the students said they understood that it was impossible for their teachers to know everything about them, and while a few seemed to like the anonymity, most talked about wishing their teachers knew more of what they brought to the class. It was clear, through responses to the question of where they were from, and from their eagerness to share, that being able to express their previous experiences and knowledge, through conversation and writing helps these students express their whole selves—who they are and what has informed their identity—in their new language.
Chapter 5
“Where I Am”: Explorations of Students’ Present

The bridge I must be
Is the bridge to my own power
I must translate
My own fears
Mediate
My own weaknesses

I must be the bridge to nowhere
But my true self
And then I will be useful

--excerpted from “The Bridge Poem” by Donna Kate Rushin

As a teacher, one of the moments of great joy and camaraderie that I see in my classroom is when students are able to ask all of their “whys,” their questions about how things work in the U.S., or in New York, and the rationales behind those norms. By opening up that space to question the day-to-day realities that they are confronting, they are able to take ownership of their new situation. As Lechmi said in his interview:

At the beginning it was very hard for me to accept some acting from [Americans], I said what they doing, why are they acting like this? Because I’m a people who always ask why, before I make up a conclusion, I ask why to myself, if I can’t find an answer I’m gonna ask you why, why you doing this?

By talking about “where we are”, the space is naturally carved out for students to question their new surroundings and culture. Those questions present a shift in the assumption all too common in teaching that there is such a thing as neutrality (Freire & Horton, 1990), as students call into question what may be a normalized part of life for their teachers, or for other classmates. It also allows students to talk about their current
situations, to see themselves in English and in their new contexts, and it gives their classmates and teachers an understanding of the larger picture of their lives outside of the classroom. Working around themes of their current situations gave students an opportunity to explore what English meant to them, what they thought and understood of their new city, and how they saw themselves and were seen. These kinds of conversations illuminated instances of common ground amongst the students, whereas a focus on home cultures can tend to highlight differences.

The above poem states, “The bridge I must be is the bridge to my own power” (Anzaldúa & Moraga, 1983, p. xxii), and comes from a collection of women of color feminist writing. It asserts that women of color are often used as a way to explain oppressions, as opposed to being seen as individuals; they are often go-betweens, mediators and translators. The same can be said about the immigrant experience in a lot of ways, and about the way that students are often asked to speak from a larger experience than just their own. Throughout my work with the students, and throughout my analysis here, I attempt to keep the focus on the individual experiences, as opposed to asking my students to be token representatives of their cultures and countries.

The choice to use third wave and women of color feminist theory (e.g. hooks, 1994; Mohanty, 2003; Sandoval, 2000) as a theoretical lens for much of this chapter, as well as border theory (e.g. Anzaldúa, 1987; Anzaldúa & Moraga, 1983; Delgado-Bernal, 2006), is not a way to ascribe onto my participants identities that they themselves may not claim, but instead is a way to draw analytical parallels around the negotiation of multiple identities, and how one sees oneself versus what is being seen by others. Additionally, focusing on the present realities of students is not a way to divide past from
present from future as if they are not interconnected, but instead to highlight each piece, each set of dynamics, understanding that all inform one another and cannot be easily separated.

This section therefore focuses on the topics and writing that can fall under the concept of “Where I Am”. It looks at the new ways that the participants were seeing themselves, and the ways that they were being seen. This includes more individual factors, such as the parts of their personalities that they were able to express or the ways they saw themselves in terms of work, and being at home in their new city. The second section looks at how they felt they were being treated because of their language skills, and status as newcomers, in terms of feeling microaggressions, and how they felt that their knowledge and intelligence was being recognized or not. The third section of this chapter looks at the new identities that students saw themselves as occupying, be it as students, immigrants or as belonging to racialized categories, such Latino or Asian that may not have existed for them before.

“We melt during the day”: Seeing oneself in a new space

As a way of engaging students with the idea of “Where I Am” now, students wrote poems about their current realities based off some of the concepts introduced in the “Where I’m From” poems. Before they wrote, students listened to and discussed two iconic songs about New York, one from the 1970s by Billy Joel and one more recent, a rap song by the artist Jay-Z. By using songs about the city, the lesson was immediately focused on students’ common experience, and gave opportunities for students to recognize the different ways that they saw their current surroundings. The differences in
the songs allowed students to see different visions of New York and choose which they identified with more.

Despite it having more difficult language, the students were more drawn to the hip hop song and were able to identify that it represented a version of New York that might more easily include them. As Mercy said “This [the Billy Joel] is more romantic, from New York, versus this [the Jay-Z] is more, real. More diversity, is more… New York.”

When asked what the audience might have been for each song, Angeline, though she was clearly nervous about labeling it that way, stated that the song seemed more geared to a white, educated demographic. As Ariana said in response “It’s like less inclusive.” This interpretation may be due to a myriad of factors, including the era each song is from, or the general association with hip hop as being geared to a more diverse audience, but it may also be due to the fact that within the Jay-Z song students saw glimmers of their New York, of neighborhoods, and references to sounds and tastes that represented their experiences moving throughout the city. Interestingly, it was the Billy Joel song that I felt would be more accessible due to the use of language, and that was the “safer” choice in terms of the kind of text that is traditionally used in an English class. Taking the risk of using a more complicated, slang-laden hip hop song gave students exposure to something that they identified as more inclusive and reflective of their experiences.

Students were invited into this activity by designing the worksheet that they used for the second poem. While the “Where I’m From” poems were relatively structured, the “Where I Am” poems drew on students’ own ideas of where they were living, and of what represented their current realities. Because there was not a specific model of a poem that students followed in this case, their final products also reflected more freedom
and variation in terms of linguistic and aesthetic choices. Angeline’s poem reflected some of that, both in the way that she was reflecting different representations of her current situation, but also in her choices to start playing with literary devices even though they weren’t being taught:

I’m from my new life

I’m from New York.

I’m from my new country, my new life,

I’m from my new friends

I’m from the new Center

Subway, sirens, smells and songs

Yellow cabs, gray buildings and brown stones

Different colors for different seasons

White rice, soda, donuts and “pollo al horno”

Cranberry juice and tea

Sweet is too sweet

No taste to meat

No soulfood to eat

Studying, watching, and walking.

Different English accents,

Different nations mixed in one.
Crazy people on the streets. All crazy people.

I don’t care. I don’t care.

Riverside Park, Metropolitan Museum,
Morningside Heights and Columbia University.
My neighborhoods, my new friends.
Old and young people,
Living together, playing together.

I’m from New York.
I’m from my new country, my life.
I’m from my new friends.
I’m from the new Center

In this poem, Angeline made a few decisions that clearly were representative of her experience. First of all, she chose to keep the repeating refrain of “I’m from” from the first poem. Angeline saw New York as an opportunity to start over; perhaps more than the other students, she saw it as fulfilling something that was missing in her life, and this poem therefore has more of a content tone than some of the others.

Aesthetically, she began to experiment with rhyme and alliteration. These choices were things she came to on her own, they were not part of the instruction. Freire (1990) talks about the importance of having to “invent with the people the ways for them to go beyond their state of thinking” (p. 98). He also talks about the importance of focusing on the ways that people speak and the semantic and syntactical choices that are
being made. Within an ESL framework, it may be easy to dismiss some of those choices as accidental, but looking at Angeline’s work, these choices were clearly deliberate and were ways to convey meaning and depth.

Through poetry’s relative semantic freedom students were able to play with some of the kinds of self-expression that may otherwise be limited by grammar. The conventions of poetry, which value word play and place a premium on the strength of one’s words instead of on complex sentence structures, are in fact uniquely suited to the kind of language exploration that is happening when a student is expressing themselves in their new language. Additionally, literary devices such as rhyme, alliteration and even metaphor, all of which are used above, give a student writer the chance to play with the sounds and multiple meanings of their newly acquired language. Since poetry was not something Angeline was used to writing, these choices are very telling. By using these kinds of devices, Angeline begins to enter into the Discourse of poetry (Gee, 2012), wherein she can be recognized as participating in a certain situated-social linguistic and cultural practice.

By mentioning very American things like donuts, as well as a traditional Latin dish “pollo al horno”, Angeline began to address some of the diversity that was a part of her experience in New York. This was something that was mentioned in many other students’ poems. Belle states “Where I am right now is unique, it has diverse cultures, people, foods and customs/It adopts any kind of culture and religions/ That’s why it’s so fascinated, colorful and tolerant.” This diversity was also discussed in terms of the phrase “melting pot” that students were exposed to in “Empire State of Mind” (Carter,
2009). Asked if they agreed that New York was a melting pot, most of them said no. In response to this question, Ariana stated:

I think we all pretend here that we melt, like during the day, you go on the train and you see all people from different places, but then at the end of the day they all go back to they’re in ghettos, basically because they have some kind of ghettos, you have the Harlem Latino, Spanish Harlem… I think it’s not that real, I think you learn how to interact with people, but you don’t really melt.

This idea, that one learns enough to adapt when in public, but holds on to their roots, is reminiscent of W.E.B. DuBois’ theory of double consciousness (1903/1994), in which he states that:

It is a peculiar sensation, this double-consciousness, this sense of always looking at one’s self through the eyes of others, of measuring one’s soul by the tape of a world that looks on in amused contempt and pity. One ever feels his two-ness (p.2).

While DuBois was writing a century ago about the realities of being Black in a White world, the continued relevance can be seen beyond the black/white binary and also within the lived experiences of newcomers and language learners.

By seeing DuBois’s theory through the way Ariana has explained her experience, we can see that, while status as a new immigrant or a language learner may not be physically ascribed in the way race can be, it still sets up a constant duality in the images students have of themselves, and in the ways they are perceived that may not necessarily coincide with their view of themselves. This can be seen in Ariana’s idea of “melting during the day,” adopting behaviors or tendencies as a way to pass in public and not
really draw attention without actually changing oneself. At the end of her comment, she stated that in fact, “you don’t really melt,” implying that while students may be learning the cultural and social practices necessary to get by in their new communities, they are not in fact, and do not ever intend, to internalize them.

While DuBois argues that this double consciousness is inherent in the Black experience, the difference here is that for students who occupied positions of relative privilege in their home countries, or who come from societies with different and less heterogeneous racial landscapes, the idea of seeing oneself through the lens of how one is being seen, may be a new one, and therefore rather unsettling. DuBois’s point is that this consciousness is internalized as a result of legacies and realities of constant inequality. The process of internalization may be different for the participants of this study, depending on other privileges they may possess, and because they are in fact newcomers and not direct descendants from those affected by the U.S. racial system. However, as Omi and Winant (1994) point out, how one is racialized within the United States has very little to do with the subtleties of personal circumstance, but is in fact much more dependent on historical, economic, social and political factors.

So while this type of consciousness, this “two-ness” may change (or students may think it can change) in accordance with changes in legal status, or in language acquisition, if one understands these dynamics through a reading of Cornel West (1993), living within the United States automatically means existing within a racial structure built on white supremacy and the enslavement of African people. While the specific participants in this study all may have possessed some other privileges, and even though they were newcomers to the country and thus not directly implicated in these histories,
they were still being read as being a part of this historicized racial landscape—the kind of landscape that built the enclaves such as Spanish Harlem that Ariana describes as not having to melt in.

The idea of belonging to two minds, or two places, of straddling a present and past, was also present in student poems. Ariana’s poem begins in the following way:

I live in a new place,
a big city with huge buildings, a Tower of Babel,
where people are from everywhere
and home is yet nowhere.

I dream of somewhere else but wake up here…

There are two ideas at play here, one is the fact that this is a city of immigrants, a city of people that do not quite fit, and the other is that idea of always having one’s mind somewhere else. Wendy’s ending describes a similar balance, a similar feeling of conflict:

I’m in the heaven and hell
When cheap brand, beautiful landscape appear
Angel fly toward me
When in subway it looks like a hell

That’s where I am
Sometimes I like
Sometimes I want to run away
I know it’s a wonderful place
to be

but my heart still belong to

China.

This interpretation, of having one’s heart and mind split and residing in two different places brings us to Gloria Anzaldúa’s conceptualization of the borderland (1987). The way Anzaldúa defines it, “A border is a dividing line, a narrow strip along a steep edge. A borderland is a vague and undetermined place created by the emotional residue of an unnatural boundary. It is in a constant state of transition.” (p. 25). This transition is reflected in a lot of what the students were saying, as well as in the idea that they felt they are constantly mentally and emotionally straddling two places. It also speaks to the depth of the immigrant experience to take over one’s reality, in ways that are much more pervasive than just having crossed some legal demarcation.

One of the metaphors Wendy uses is that of the subway, which is reflective of a certain adaptation to the way New Yorkers identify themselves, many students wrote about “their” subway lines, and more than one wrote of the specific subway lines that passed outside their windows as one of the sounds that surrounded their new lives. In talking about moving around the city, they also expressed some trepidation around not feeling like they belonged everywhere, or that some places felt more comfortable than others. On some occasions, this became a way to discuss not feeling represented within the ethnic enclave that they might be identified with. For example, Belle stated:

For me I can’t find the feeling of to be near home, especially in Chinatown or Flushing, because I can’t understand Cantonese, even several words…That’s not
home to me, and the, the person in Chinatown or Flushing is different from the person from China.

The process of being automatically assumed to be a part of community that does not truly represent your experiences in your home country is a byproduct of the globalized influences in the formation of ethnic enclaves such as Chinatowns, which often came out of a means of survival, and as a way to find strength in the collective (Ono, 2005).

A great deal of students’ discussions reflected their feelings of not being fully connected to their new home and it became apparent that that disconnection had begun to shape the way they perceived themselves. When I asked students to describe themselves, many of them chose relatively negative adjectives, and when asked if these were new to their time in the United States, they all said that they were. When asked to choose one identity word that to represent them, Wendy chose poor, saying that it wasn’t that she was financially poor, but as she put it she was poor “in spirit…philosophically.” It is here that we see her feeling of being incomplete in the United States. Wendy said she wished her teachers understood some of these feelings so that they did not just see her as unengaged or disinterested.

For many of the students these negative senses of self were directly connected to not working. Wendy also described herself as “confused”, because she could not work and was frustrated with her language skills. Ariana echoed this idea, saying:

I feel insecure about my skills, because I have to start looking for a job and I feel sometimes like my English is not that good, I want to be really fluent, and this kind of thing that I, or maybe I’m not gonna fit in here, I’m not gonna be able to
understand the culture here because I’m a psychologist, so I need to you know, language is very important for psychologists. Yeah, I did not have that before.

These new ways of seeing oneself can be connected back to DuBois’ concept in which he discusses “two thoughts, two unreconciled strivings” (1903/1994, p.2). All of the women featured in this conversation had chosen to move to the United States, but were faced with having to compromise much of what they had before. For Amanda, her frustration around not working, which has been discussed previously, was also about having lost her financial independence:

Yes, I depend on myself I don’t like to depend on my husband, that’s why I felt sad when I need to ask money…from my husband… I hope I can spend my own money, the money that I earn it myself, yes, that’s one reason so I study very hard.

This was in response to a question about how her daily routine had changed since moving, a question that prompted similar answers for a lot of the participants, who essentially felt the need to refer to themselves as “just a student”, having given up their jobs.

These student responses, especially those that expressed insecurity or feeling dependent, speak to bell hooks’ (2003) notion that shame can be a powerful player in a classroom, and can have a negative effect on learning. The shame hooks talked about is often informed by the larger culture and negative imagery around one’s race or cultural position, or it grows out of being in a minority position within a school. While certainly the latter, and in some ways the former, is not completely true in this case, that shame, of occupying a new social position, of having gone from successful careers and full reach of
their language to struggling for words and unable to work, was an important theme throughout these discussions.

**Ways of being seen**

While much of the conversation necessarily focused on how students saw themselves, it was also evident that the ways that they felt they were being perceived were also crucial to explore. This is important in that it informs the ways they operate within their communities and the larger world, but also because the ways they were being seen and treated clearly informed their self-perceptions. This is a conversation that returns directly to the ideas discussed in the previous chapter. These students were all used to possessing and being able to move between multiple Discourses (Gee, 2012) with ease, and were used to being acknowledged as possessing skills and different types of expertise. Much of this conversation had to do with recognition of their professional knowledge, not just within a work context. Without a perceived level of English, people did not see them as professionals at all, or more easily ignored their contributions.

When asked to pick one word that defined her, Ariana picked educated, stating: I picked this one, educated, because it’s an issue I’m having, it’s something that I would like to be considered here, because I work a lot, in my country, for my education, and I would be considered an educated person there, so that’s why I picked this…. for me always language, was a way to prove that you’re an educated person, or the things you talk about, but sometimes you’re in a place you don’t talk just because you’re trying to understand and they might think that you’re not educated, I’m working on that.
This is something that we can see strands of in a lot of the conversations, that it is not just about the actual work, but that through work, the students were used to having their ideas and expertise acknowledged. Without that space, and with limited language skills, they were no longer being seen as having that kind of knowledge. It is important to note that all of the women in the study who talked about their frustrations around work were legally able to work, but weren’t mostly because of lack of language skills or recognition of credentials.

This also speaks to the poem at the beginning of this chapter about being forced to explain or justify oneself to others. In *This Bridge Called My Back* (1981), Cherrie Moraga writes [emphasis hers]:“I lack imagination you say/No. I lack language/The language to clarify/ my resistance to the literate./Words are a war to me./They threaten my family./To gain the word/to describe the loss” (p. 166). While there is a clear political persuasion to these words, which most of the students did not necessarily express, the reality of having the ideas, but lacking the words to speak one’s truth or one’s opinion is very resonant. Many of the participants put it in terms of depth; they could get through a basic conversation but were unable to go any further. As Belle explained it:

The biggest barrier is that sometimes, I want to talk about something deeply or I want to know more but I cannot understand native speakers speaking and I can’t express myself properly, sometimes I can’t find the suitable words to describe something.

This was something echoed by Ariana, Angeline and many others. Lechmi referred to not being able to articulate his ideas as something that diminished him.
Karen, who I interviewed outside of the workshop, discussed the idea that by lacking a certain level of proficiency, one’s opinions or intelligence remains unseen. Karen said she had noticed stereotypes towards English language learners:

We feel like… we are not treated like adults… and the person has a whole rights and, I mean, even though you can’t speak English, you have, you know your intelligence, and your culture background, everything, you’re a whole adult. But here you feel like you’re not complete, and this, the people the way people treat you also reminds me…that like, oh I’m not treated as a … whole person.

The idea that somehow lacking English becomes equated with not having basic knowledge is key to our understanding of what it is like to learn a language as an adult. By allowing students to discuss these feelings, we also give them space to reclaim their knowledge in English. Campano and Ghiso’s (2011) use of the term “cosmopolitan intellectuals” (p. 164) is especially relevant here as it is a way to acknowledge and name all of the experiences and knowledges that immigrant students have acquired throughout their lives and migrations that can provide them “unique vantage points from which to interpret and generate knowledge about the world” (p. 167). When asked what terms should have been included in an activity where students had to pick one word to describe their identities, Angeline stated, “I’m from the world.” The fact that Angeline saw her identity as being shaped by experiences with different parts of the world speaks to Campano and Ghiso’s analysis. It is clear from all of these comments that the students themselves understand how their previous knowledge plays out in their current situation, so it becomes more of a question of forcing others to acknowledge it.
A disconnect between one’s experience and what is being seen of one’s experience can lead to feelings of infantilization. This was something that students shared quite often. Amanda put it simply as “when I came here, I felt I became a little girl, I need help.” Mercy discussed at length feeling like she was being treated like a child, despite her knowledge, saying she felt illiterate, and that:

It’s difficult for me, because, to be at the top of my profession, of my life, that people could recognize my professional knowledge, you see, is important, to move to not knowing anything, to start from zero, and be where you don’t know anything, it’s hard, to change, from, imagine, I expressed scientific ideas, sometimes…I directed projects, to move to not understanding, to not being able to get a phone call because you can’t understand, it’s sad.

These feelings clearly then infiltrate all aspects of students’ experiences, both in the classroom and outside of it, both of which inform their experiences of learning and the learning itself.

Feelings of being infantilized are not just internalized reactions to a new context, but are quite often a direct reaction to the way that language learners are treated. Even in what could be seen as very minor social interactions, being treated as incompetent, or having one’s English called into question can deeply shape the way students see their place in their new city or language. Students connected with one another over stories about trying to use a metro card to enter the New York subway, of asking for directions and being ignored, or being spoken to so quickly that they could not possibly understand. Or the opposite, as was reflected in Karen and Mercy’s comments, being spoken to in condescending tones because of a lack of language. Students also shared their coping
mechanisms for not understanding or being understood, things like accepting whatever food they were given in a restaurant because they assumed they had made a mistake ordering, of pointing to something instead of speaking, or of course, letting others speak for them. While each example could be seen as minor when taken at face value, when understood as microaggressions, we understand them as being of great importance.

In the context of race (this definition has also been used to talk about gender and sexuality) microaggressions are defined as, “brief and commonplace daily verbal, behavioral and environmental indignities, whether intentional or unintentional, that communicate hostile, derogatory, or negative racial slights and insults to the target person or group” (Capodilupo, Sue, et al., 2007, p. 273). This definition can easily be applied to the ways that English language learners are treated because of how their language skills, and by extension their general competence, is being perceived. While the participants who spoke were all framing these anecdotes in terms of actual deficits in their knowledge, we can understand that it is not necessary for them to have real problems with language to experience such treatment—a hint of an accent, a slip of the tongue, or, to reconnect with the racial lens of the above quote, being racially recognized as being part of a language minority group, would all bring the same kind of treatment.

Unfortunately, it is not just outside of the classroom that students felt the snub of not being able to express the full range of their knowledge and experience. As much as I intended to create a space in this workshop that valued and understood my students as, in Karen’s words “whole adults”, there was not a focus on them as professionals. This idea would have remained at the margins of conversation had the students themselves not pushed it to the forefront. As much as I tried to set a tone that allowed for the
incorporation of past knowledge, without being explicit as to the kinds of knowledge present in the room, I also took part in a process of undermining students’ expertise. When I asked students to choose a word to identify themselves, I included the word “professional”, but nothing more specific. On the other hand, I made a card for each student’s specific nationality, which reveals my bias both in the activity and in what I usually learn about my students. When I asked what I should have included, Amanda stated simply “job”, a sentiment echoed by many of the students.

While students were clear that they did not necessarily blame their individual teachers (in this center, most of whom are volunteers with limited if any training), many of them talked about how their teachers failed to understand the entirety of their situations. The way Lechmi explained it:

In this kind of schools, where… most of us come here because they get lost, so I think that teachers should be more, a little bit more focused on their students, just they should go a little beyond what … they assume and just teaching. Sometime people want to express they feeling.

Mercy attributed this to what she called a “standardization” that did not allow teachers to understand the participants as individuals. Yeshi also talked about this, though her perspective was less about having her education acknowledged, and more about having her reactions in the classroom misinterpreted. When asked if she wished that teachers knew about her lack of education she said:

I wish they did, because then, I wish they can understand a little bit about me my
personality, I’m very quiet and that’s why I don’t want to stay here, too long I take a few classes take home and then I can read aloud.

In this response, we see the consequences of not being having one’s needs or abilities seen by teachers. Because Yeshi felt misunderstood, she ended up limiting her time in the Center. Yeshi was not the only student who discussed, either directly or indirectly, adapting their behavior in school because of how they felt or were treated by teachers

Karen also acknowledged that she felt like a child in the classroom, though she said that she did not mind, since she was in the student role. “Teachers are better, but you know they have to, their work is teaching us, so they have to like, they don’t need to treat us, they treat us as adults.” Unfortunately, other students described more explicit incidents of microaggressions from teachers, such as being told they could not be understood, or that they were stuttering when they were in fact just trying to express themselves. Amanda described her response to being told she stammered too much, as “I told her, I was very good at speaking in China. Because I was a businessman, I need to talk very fluency to other people.” A statement like this shows how much what a teacher might have thought to be a simple comment undermines a student who had lived a successful professional life in a home country, and now was having their voice devalued.

While the teachers doubtlessly meant their comments as constructive, and the students themselves usually did not tell these stories with anger, when put into the contexts being discussed here, we begin to see the weight of these seemingly insignificant moments. When we fail to understand students’ previous knowledge, and when their own feelings of incompetence are so pervasive, the significance of these comments is
compounded.

Shifting identities

The fact that Karen was willing to dismiss what can be seen as infantilization from teachers is an indication of the ways that the participants in this work had started to take up new identities after migrating. Karen dismissed her negative feelings within the classroom by identifying herself as a student. Most of the participants seemed to excuse quite a bit, whether it was being forced to speak English, or not being known by teachers, based on the fact that they were students. This speaks to what being a student is understood as, that it is a social category that outweighs whatever background someone has, and that it is necessarily subordinate, instead of engaged in mutual negotiation (Cummins, 2011).

While I have discussed the ways that students defined themselves in their countries as being very multifaceted and informed by their social contexts, those changing social contexts had led to some new identifiers. The first two that are discussed here could be seen as transient, in the sense that both of them were created by the act of migrating, and, in terms of being primary identifiers, they may fade. Those are the student and the immigrant identity. The other component of emerging identities that I discuss is those racial identities that students may be identified with that they had not encountered previously.

While there is a power imbalance in any teacher/student relationship, even in a workshop like this, there were efforts made to try to shift what it meant to be a student, and what kind of voice students could have within the classroom. When participants identified themselves as students, however, that was not always meant to be a marker of
something negative, or even of something transient. When asked to pick an identifier, Belle picked student, stating:

I picked student, because I think in many fields, I just a student, I had to learn a lot of things, not just the language, English but also the manner, the way people are living here, and people get along with each other, and I also have to learn, I have to improve my profession, my major and during my life I also have to learn for example, about my family, I have to learn how to get along well with everyone, with each one, with my husband, with my parents-in-law. So I tried to be a student.

In this case student clearly represents her position not just within the classroom, but rather the way she is defining herself as constantly relearning and learning.

Another identity that some of the students claimed, and that is also something that no doubt plays out in their reality regardless of whether or not they claimed it, is that of an immigrant. Interestingly, both of the students who chose the word immigrant as identifiers, Alphadjo from Guinea, and Daniel, a student from China, who only participated in two class sessions, focused on the bureaucratic process of immigration, as opposed to something more nuanced. Daniel explained:

I’m immigrant. I still in immigrant process. So, the process [is] long and painful, sometime I made something wrong, I submit some document wrong by myself and wait a long time. … it’s a very long process, for me, it’s…painful.

By putting it in these terms, while he is still relating the technicalities of the legal process, he is still making the connection to how it informs his psyche.
Campano and Simon (2013) discuss disability studies theorists as using their lens to counteract an understanding of disability as an individual, curable deficiency. Alternatively, these theorists frame it as a collective identity constructed by social injustices. This can be directly related to the immigrant and linguistic minority identities described by students throughout this work. These are identities that are often seen as entirely individual, and as temporary—“curable” so to speak, by a change in legal status, or by improved language skills. However, through Campano and Simon’s analysis we can understand them both as collective and as oppositional to injustice. The conversations had in this workshop served as a way to frame students’ individual experiences as shared and to thereby contextualize them more.

While being an immigrant wasn’t the primary way that most students named themselves, that negotiation of place was something that came up again and again in their poems, and in conversation. In her poem, Ariana calls herself “A Peruvian in NYC living a choice,” indicating the kind of ongoing identity negotiation that takes place within the immigrant consciousness (Heitlinger, 1999). Within conversations around adapting and assimilating, that negotiation was very apparent. When discussing the melting pot, Belle explained it as, “I will change a little bit, maybe I will feel more comfortable and more casual but when I go outside I will be a little anxious, a little nervous.”

Ariana’s statement above, as well as many of the poems juxtaposed positive and negative experiences, speaking to the dialectic inherent in the migrant experience (Campano, 2007) and the ways that it can be engaged within an educational space. This dialectic can be well represented by Gloria Anzaldúa’s conceptualization of the borderland (1987), the idea that migration develops within one a dual consciousness, and
that the border is not just a literal, political divide but is something much more alive. It is also the notion, which was so represented by the student voices, that the border is not something we cross once: “Because I, a *mestiza*, continually walk out of one culture and into another, because I am in all cultures at the same time” (Anzaldúa, 1987, p. 99).

By using texts that explicitly speak of immigrant identity in racialized terms, and that use the word “*mestiza*”, a specifically Latin American racial category, I do not aim to name students’ racial identities for them, or to coopt a term. The way that Anzaldúa frames *mestizaje*, however, can be useful in these contexts. Conversations around racial and ethnic identity were not particularly common amongst these students, though it was a topic that I attempted to raise at various points. Mohanty (2003) makes it clear that racial categories are the inherent result of colonialism and racism, and that they can not be treated as static. That fact—that our conceptualization of race is informed by the colonial and hegemonic context that we find ourselves in, is central to the conversations around race that could be had with immigrant students as they found themselves occupying new collective categories based on regional or racial “similarities” that may not have previously existed for them.

The first person to raise this idea was Ariana, when she said:

*When I came here, everyone talking about Latinas everywhere, you know, when you watch TV they’re talking about Latinos, so it’s like, you have to put yourself somewhere so it’s like “ok, I’ll be a, I am a Latina now.***

While Ariana and Mercy both talked about how the term Latina was so culturally and racially diverse that they did not particularly see its usefulness, they also spoke to the collectivity that came with their shared language, in Ariana’s words:
I feel a connection because we all speak the same language and in that sense I feel, immediately, if I see someone, I call them *primos*[^1], like that’s the word I use with my husband “oh, let’s go there, there’s a *primo* there.” For me they’re all *primos*. Because that’s, that’s to show you how close I feel with that.

Those feelings of collectivity, based on language, or in Amanda’s case country, were new within the American context. Amanda explained:

For me, because, uh when I came to here, um, I we, live in uptown, so my neighborhood, there is fewer Asian…The, one day, I met a Chinese girl, we talked and chat and we cried, because it’s too hard to find Asian to find a Chinese to chat, to have the same feeling. And the first time, my husband bring me to the Chinatown of Flushing, when saw so many Chinese, I felt I found the feeling, to be a Chinese.

What is interesting here is that she is using Asian and Chinese interchangeably, which shows the beginnings of a connection to the ideas of panethnicity that form a collective understanding of Asian-American identity (Espiritu, 1992). It is clear though, that while she is familiar with the word “Asian,” it is her Chinese peers, because of shared language, to whom she felt a connection. This is especially relevant when compared with her previous statements about how it was her local dialect that connected her to people back in China. Without that option in New York, she has opened up her identification to a larger population.

Wendy, when asked in class about the term Asian, expressed it as a new idea, stated “Yes, because in China most of the yellow-skinned are the same, few people,

[^1]: Cousins
foreign people, also when I came, first, I’m afraid to go to the subway because so many
different kind of passenger, I really afraid.” Wendy spoke at length about her fears of
racism (though she did not use that specific word) in her individual interview. She
discussed how on some subways she felt nervous because there were very few Asians,
and when she was not around Asians she felt vulnerable. Even though when I asked her
about feeling connected to people from Asia, she distanced herself from other places
culturally, she had clearly picked up on the fact that they were being viewed collectively
in white America. When asked about this she stated:

    I think it is still not the Asian’s world. It is Europe, uh the American’s world,
    just. Even Europe people or some people from Colombia or from the Peru, I
    think they can, but I think I’m one, out of the world. Maybe because their face,
    and the physical are the same, and because Asia totally different.

She also talked about perceiving certain slogans or signs that she saw in different
neighborhoods as being discriminatory. Wendy was the only student who explicitly
talked about feeling racism directed at her.

    Nieto (2002) describes what it could mean to develop educational spaces that
allow for “Becoming American”, that lend themselves to the negotiation of bicultural
identities and multiple, even conflicting histories. But what Wendy stated above, which
is in fact echoed by Nieto herself, is that the intractable force of racism, determined often
by phenotypic categories makes that kind of becoming impossible. Nieto’s point is not
without validity in that it advocates for a pluralistic understanding of becoming
American, citing Maxine Greene’s notion of “passions of pluralism” (Nieto, 2002, p.
111). It also looks at an organic process of becoming, as opposed to something
bureaucratically enforced. When I asked students if they felt like New Yorkers they answered “not yet”, though it was unclear what would make them feel that way. I did not ask if they felt American, from other comments though, it is clear that they have not seen evidence of Nieto’s pluralistic definition of identity, and that to be American still seems to threaten loss of their native selves.

Wendy’s comment that in China “all the yellow-skinned” people are the same, is connected to Ariana’s analysis of how race has changed for her:

With the whole thing, you know the physical appearance, because immediately, when they look at me, the people who know Spanish they start speaking Spanish with me, that’s new to me. Because they put me in a box, here, they label me, something that in Peru I never thought about, like in Peru I was, the same, like everyone, even though we don’t look alike, we’re very mixed but that’s the only physical thing.

Being physically read as being a part of a racial group was something that was new for most of the students. Here, Ariana connected the racial reading to her language, but the phenotypically Asian students, as well as the African students discussed something different, that they were read as being part of a larger collective race that did not even have a linguistic link, so they could feel little connection to it.

While Ariana, Wendy and Amanda all discussed feeling a part of larger, regionally bound racialized groups (the role of U.S born Latinos or Asian-Americans did not come up), I asked Candice about feeling a connection to Black Americans (that I thought to ask this question of her and not students of other races shows my own bias). Candice had talked about always identifying as Cameroonian and not African, saying she
wanted to explain her country if she had to. When asked about whether or not she was being racialized similarly to African Americans she stated:

But I think they see us like, they don’t see us like, belong to them. For me that’s my personal feeling. I think they always put the barrier between them and us. So, for me, how can I explain, for me we’re all the same…, and I generally I don’t I do not put any different between me and other person, we are all in the same world, we are all belong to, for me there is no really difference between people, people are, it doesn’t matter where they come from, they are, they are people on the world. But I have the feeling that they always do the distinction between them and us, I don’t, I don’t understand why.

I chose to ask Candice this question because I believed that, due to the kinds of colonial and racist histories that Mohanty (2002) talked about, she would find herself put in situations where she was being racialized as a black American. However, because of the ways in which histories of oppression have inscribed a raced “otherness” on non-white people (Omi & Winant, 1994; West, 1993), this question could have been extended to any of the participants.

The last type of conversation that took place around race was about how moving to the United States had changed the way participants saw other races. This conversation took place with Karen, and was focused on her acknowledgement of having been raised with stereotypes, specifically about Black Americans. After a trip to Harlem with the Center, Karen expressed surprise at what she described as, “Yeah, like normal people, I saw powerful African-American people and very cultural, artistic black people but I did not have like that kind of middle class suburban image of black people.” So while she
wasn’t saying that she had only seen negative images of Black America, she was saying that it was the normalcy that shocked her; that her exposure to media had not prepared her for a middle class Black neighborhood.

Karen mentioned that since moving to New York, “My racial stereotype, um, is more, complicated.” She had clearly benefited from the exposure to different cultures within her English education, and was trying to find the nuances in what she was learning about American culture. When asked if she had noticed stereotypes of Asians, she described what can be understood as the “model minority” ideal (Prashad, 2000), that Asians were seen as smart or, in her words “nerdy” but said she did not feel particularly uncomfortable with it. She did however, express that the collectivity of “Asian” failed to acknowledge the differences she felt from, for example, Chinese students.

While Karen spoke more explicitly than other participants about the stereotypes she had heard about other groups, those conversations were not entirely absent from the workshop either. By discussing the stereotypes they saw of their own cultures, students had the opportunity to educate one another about the reality of their countries. For example, a discussion of feeling Latina gave Ariana the chance to explain what that category meant to the students who did not know. Beyond those moments of course, the kind of sharing that was done around where people were from and what their experiences had been were all opportunities to challenge preconceptions and through that kind of exposure students can begin to work through some of the prejudices they bring into the room.
Final Remarks

These conversations around students’ present situations gave students the opportunity to articulate the conflict and contradictions that they felt, as well as to find a common experience that transcended nationality and was defined more by the immigrant consciousness. They talked at one point about feeling different from those students that were simply visiting or working temporarily. And their poems were filled not just with struggle, but also with feelings of contentment and love. Because they had all migrated by choice, there was a common theme of trying to work through the difficulties that they were experiencing, as Ariana articulated at the end of her poem:

Here I am, this is my new me,

a Peruvian in NYC living a choice.

Things are not necessarily easy,

ups and downs and everything moving around,

sometimes I feel dizzy,

but hey, love is in the house, “I love you”

and “I love you too” will hopefully prevail.
Chapter 6

“What I Will”: Explorations of Students’ Futures

I will not forget where
I come from. I
will craft my own drum. Gather my beloved
near and our chanting will be dancing. Our
humming will be drumming. I
will not be played. I
will not lend my name nor my rhythm to your
beat. I will dance
and resist and dance and
persist and dance.


It is not uncommon in any English class to ask students what their goals are, what they want to do, what their plans are for their lives in a new country. These conversations are often very concrete—pertaining to future schooling and career goals—and can be very helpful to teachers and to students themselves to map out the specific objectives that they hope to accomplish within their study of English. Although this workshop did look at some of those concrete goals, especially in terms of employment, this chapter looks at the less concrete understandings of future goals that were discussed by the students.

In the last two weeks of the workshop we began to move a bit outside of the purview of traditional objectives and began discussing what I came to think of as the “non-negotiables” that the participants had for their lives in their new countries. The above excerpt is from a spoken word piece written and performed by the poet Suheir Hammad (2011). After watching a clip of Hammad performing the poem students
brainstormed a list of their “What I Wills,” which discussed the priorities they were setting for their experience, and the things they were not willing to give up in their new country. The last poem that students wrote was inspired by a brainstormed list of these non-negotiables. This poem was done as a collaboration, where both the initial brainstorm and the finished poems were done as a class as opposed to individually.

In the poem above, Hammad speaks back to the notion of what is expected of her due to her positionality as a Palestinian-American woman. She is placing herself in opposition to the racist assumption in the Western world that all Palestinians are terrorists while simultaneously resisting the idea of fundamentalism, thereby rejecting the hate and anger in both camps and stating that she will forge her own path without entirely giving up on her roots. Hammad’s attempts to tackle both the expectations her homeland has for her and the expectations that her adopted country has for her homeland served as an example of the balancing act between multiple identities and places that the participants had been discussing.

Based on the idea of “What I Will” the students laid out their “What I Wills” and “What I Will Nots.” I have chosen to include this brainstorm in its entirety, as to convey the kind of collaborative negotiation that happened during this conversation, and because this conversation serves as a way to frame the discussion in this chapter:

Emma: What are some things that you can say, I will never do this?
Ariana: I will never try to get rid of my accent
Angeline: I will not forgot my Brazilian food.
Wendy: I will not speak English with my son.
Ariana: I will not forget where I come from
Amanda: All of us.

Amanda: I will have enough rights in my family, in my home. Equal rights with my husband.

Ariana: I will learn American history.

Amanda: I will pay attention to China.

[…]

Angeline: I will dance tango

Wendy: I have a friend, I told you she married a Michigan guy, but the guy has problem with his family that his relative, no one care, but in China the relative care, I don’t know how to…

Emma: How about this [writes abandon] does that work?

Wendy: Abandon

[Emma writes “I will not abandon my family”]

Angeline: I will drink coffee

[…]

Angeline: I will live my life, as if I am at home. In fact I am at home now. I will speak English with my dog.

[Emma writes “I will be at home now”]

Mercy: I will travel in America.

Amanda: I will make money myself

Angeline: She’s a real American, I will make money

[laughter]

Emma: But that sounds to me like it’s about independence
Amanda: Yes.

Ariana: I will try to be happy in this country.

Angeline: You are happy

Wendy: Yes, try to be.

Ariana: But I want to be 100% happy. I’m getting there, it’s gonna take some extra time.

[...]

Wendy: I will learn how to survive in this city.

Angeline: I will learn English.

Ariana: No, no you will improve your English, you already know English.

Emma: Anything else you want to add?

Wendy: I will never forget my friends in China.

Amanda: I will do something for my home country, for China.

In this chapter, I look at how the kinds of statements made above can inform our understanding of students’ goals and needs within their learning. By understanding how students truly conceive of their future we can begin to understand how to best create learning environments where we are encouraging instead of stifling those goals. Some comments, such as “I will not speak English with my son” may run counter to the expectations of a language teacher, but by allowing not only the comment but the commitment to that goal, we can support learning as well as help to create a more accepting environment for students to be their whole selves.

This chapter also examines how the collaborative writing process in the “What I Will” poem allows students to speak their truths and work together to find the
commonalities in their experiences. The brainstorm above was largely done without my commentary and far exceeded my expectations of what students were going to say. This speaks both to the community that had begun to form in the class, as well as the value of these kinds of collaborations. The first section of this chapter looks at the importance of these kinds of collaborations in building community within the classroom. This section begins by examining the idea that Angeline expresses of trying to “be at home,” and other expressions of feeling acclimated to a new environment before looking at the role that collaborative learning can play in this process. The second section looks at the sense of responsibility towards one’s country, the ideas expressed above of staying connected to one’s country and also how students responded to some of the ideas and stereotypes they heard about their home country. The third section addresses how students attempt to balance their new language and country with a desire to stay connected to their home countries and how their work in class can support those linguistic and cultural dualities.

“I will be at home here”: Finding community

Throughout the course of this workshop, I created opportunities for the students to engage in intentional conversations with one another. This made it possible for the “What I Will” poem to be collaboratively written. The sorts of exchanges that were featured in the brainstorm above speak to Freire’s principle of dialogue, which is the “sealing together of the teacher and the students in the joint act of knowing and re-knowing the object of study” (Freire & Shor, 1987, p. 100). In addition to democratizing the dynamics between teacher and student, I would argue that through the kinds of conversations being had, the hierarchies between the students began to disappear. Even in
the least competitive of classrooms, hierarchies between students naturally arise—who has more fluency, who participates more, who has classmates who speak the same language and can help them. With this kind of writing, those hierarchies began to matter less, as all of the students, each of whom wrote with different levels of confidence, were able to participate in one text.

Nieto (1999) makes the point that purposeful, transformative dialogue is only possible when students are allowed to approach it in different ways. For example if a teacher fails to perceive that some students who are talking less are still actively participating in the dialogue, that can be highly damaging to both the dialogue and the student. The same can be said for the kind of writing that was done here; while some students made more errors when writing than others, it is still important to understand the contribution to the overall dialogue that was being made. This argument can be extended to the idea of allowing space for first languages in the classroom and in school communities, even though dialogue does not always happen in a language we as instructors can understand, that does not mean it is not happening, or that it is not just as relevant to learning.

The conversations raised in the class provided a space for students to uncover the commonalities in their experiences as immigrants, and to begin to shape community around that. When I asked them if they were surprised at some of the similarities in their poems, especially as related to the contradictions they felt in their experiences in New York, the students had this to say:

Ariana: When you move to somewhere else and you’re an immigrant and you’ll experience similar things.
Amanda: I think if we’re from the same country maybe we have more common ground.

Ariana: Maybe the things that you find contradictory depending on where you come from, but the contradictory feelings we all have the same.

[...] 

Wendy: Because we’re immigrants.

In this conversation, students went on to discuss how they felt a connection to one another, and a certain distance from people they met who were only visiting the United States or studying for a few months, and that they felt, because of age that the stakes were higher for them.

What became clear in these kinds of conversations was that, while they had very real frustrations in relation to their time in the United States, they were also motivated to learn in order to improve how they felt and in order to develop a sense of home. Therefore, the class became a space to share frustrations, but also motivations and to find community and solidarity in both. When asked if the frustrations of being unable to communicate motivated her or discouraged her, Mercy told me “It motivates me but, it’s hard, you know, hard. It’s difficult to start, it’s frustrating. You trip, you keep going, you trip, you keep going. It makes you tired.”

In each interview I conducted, I asked participants where they felt at home in New York. Most of them answered only their apartments; some said the New York Center for Language and Learning also felt like home. A few mentioned their immediate neighborhoods. But it was clear that they had not yet achieved a full level of comfort in the city as a whole, and still felt very much like newcomers. Angeline’s statement that “I
will live my life, as if I am at home. In fact I am at home now” was a very important and powerful assertion. When taking notes of the brainstorm on the board I wrote, “I will be at home now,” to accommodate the mixed feelings of many of the participants who did not have that sense of home. While it may not have been common to most students’ experiences, Angeline’s reality of already feeling comfortable is undeniable.

While Angeline was the only one who evoked the notion of feeling at home, she was not the only one for whom that was a goal. Another moment that captured attempts to find “home” was Ariana stating, “I will be happy here.” While Ariana spoke about feeling happy, and her friend Angeline also referenced her happiness in the exchange, she was clearly looking for a sense of being completely settled and content that she had not yet found. Wendy’s statement of “I will learn to survive in the city,” while certainly a different barometer than home or happiness, also articulates a desire to achieve a sense of connection to and belonging in one’s environment.

Campano (2007) talks about the individualism and competition that is common in many educational environments, and he posits empathy as an antidote to those dynamics, stating that empathy, “is characterized by an initial capacity to differentiate between self and other (so as not to overidentify) in order to vicariously imagine, feel compassion for, and express solidarity with another’s condition” (p. 81). This kind of empathy can come out of a true exchange of ideas and experiences, and is key to doing the kind of collaborative work that is seen here. An activity like this could never have come at the beginning of the workshop, and in fact was only possible because collaboration and common ground had been a part of the process since the beginning.
Empathy is crucial and it is impossible without meaningful exchange with others, something that many of the students talked about not having found much of in their new city. Many of the students said they did not really interact with people from different cultures outside of class. As Wendy stated, “I don’t know other country’s people, because I think it is not easy to make friends…just to say hi is ok. [Making] real friends, I think, is very hard.” This could be due to a language barrier between students, but that is not the only reason. It may also be due to some of the stereotypes that students discussed confronting about their cultures, not just from Americans but also from other students. Without the tools to navigate difficult conversations around culture, they may have chosen instead to avoid cross-cultural interaction. It may also be that despite the diversity they are encountering, the students are not engaging in substantive personal conversations within the classroom so they struggle to bridge the connections they are making in the classroom to interaction outside of it.

Because of the kinds of conversations being had in this class, students were able to get to know each other more, by the time we worked on the “What I Will” poem it had become clear that students were becoming more aware of, and empathetic to each other’s experiences. As is apparent in the brainstorm that appears above, they were able to encourage each other’s expression, in moments such as Ariana telling Angeline that she speaks English and should say that she wants to improve, or Ariana stating that she will not forget where she comes from and Amanda chiming in with “all of us.” In discussing the early days of the Highlander School, an organization that trains social justice organizers, Myles Horton (1998) discusses how, by sharing similar experiences, participants could begin to value their own experiences and this had the potential for
“multiplying what they learned” (p. 147) in order to seek change. A similar process seemed to be evident in these students’ collective work, where they were able to encourage one another about the same things that they may have felt they were lacking themselves. By acknowledging the language skills of others, they are equally able to communicate in English. Additionally, discussions of where they are from and where they are had the ability to affirm similar experiences.

When I asked students if they thought there was value in the kinds of activities done in the workshop, they all attributed that value to being able to learn about each other, and seemed resistant to the idea that they could also learn about themselves, continuing to place a premium on learning about others over self-reflection. While students were eager to discuss their knowledge around their first languages, and the fact that they had professions back home, they did not seem to acknowledge the kinds of rich experience and knowledge that their current experiences were providing them, let alone recognizing the English language skills they already had.

The community that was formed in the classroom was something that I was able to build on in this third poem, using Campano’s “systematic improvisation” (2007, p. 112), through which a teacher adapts their classroom practice and content by incorporating the knowledge and experience of their students. While I always intended this “What I Will” poem to be structured more like the first two, the collaboration and sense of solidarity that I saw in the room allowed me to shift from a more individualistic approach to more collective co-construction. After the brainstorming session, students each picked one of the “What I Will” lines, and then wrote a short stanza. These were then passed around so that each student could add a stanza to each. While the students
may not have fully agreed with each line, they were able to shape their visions around the topic and form a complex whole.

One of the poems came out of what could have been seen as one of the less serious suggestions, Angeline’s “I will drink coffee.” It was clear that while there was some humor in this, it also represented something larger, a way to be herself in her new context, and a sense of comfort. The resulting poem demonstrates how the students began to play with metaphor, and also shows the way that students began to speak back to one another, interpreting what was given them, and changing the ideas to express their views and realities. Because this poem, like the others featured, was written collaboratively, a different student contributed each stanza. The students who participated in this poem were Angeline, Alphadjo, Mercy, Wendy, and Ariana, respectively:

I will drink coffee

Sit on a bench at Riverside Park.

People running, people walking, children playing

Time passing fast at New York City.

I will try to stabilize my mood

I will act like a New Yorker

to be able to survive in the concrete jungle

Not so excited by the content of coffee

But in a normal state of mind

I will drink the superior quality coffee.
In my country born the coffee
That move slow of word
I will not exchange the coffee
because is my tradition, heritage and identity
I will drink coffee forever my life

I will drink coffee if I have no choice
I will drink coffee when someone invite me
I will drink coffee when I need energy
I will drink coffee when I really like

I will let caffeine to go into my system
I will wait to see what happens
I won’t promise to have coffee every day
But I will try.

We see here how the students are choosing their own language patterns, and using the vocabulary that they have to express themselves, with Wendy choosing to repeat the refrain in each line. We also see that while most of the students used this opportunity to talk about their current lives, using coffee as a metaphor for adaptation to New York, Mercy used it as a way to talk about her home country, an expression of what she will carry with her. By using coffee as a representation for her home country instead of her new country, Mercy was able to take this collaborative writing activity and make it her
own, using her perspective to guide her writing, even though it was different from her classmates’.

Students clearly drew great motivation to learn and a sense of home from their families. For some of the students, family life in a new culture was challenging to navigate, but that challenge lay at the core of their motivation. Amanda, who had a stepson, was parenting not just in a new language but a new culture, saying “at this age, he, we have different culture, and how to help him, how to take care of him is very hard for me.” When asked to identify herself in one word in the first week of class, Amanda chose parent and it was clear that improving not only just her language skills, but also her ability to navigate and negotiate new cultural norms was crucial to the way she saw her identity. Belle was also a step-parent, and Wendy was raising her infant son, and for all three, this struggle to maintain their cultural values within their families while still adapting to their new cultures was an important motivating factor.

For Ariana, her family, in her case her American husband, gave her the chance to feel more personally connected to English. As she said:

I used to feel weird because I always thought…that I was not going to be able to express my feelings for example in English, the way I would express them in Spanish…but now…like I feel comfortable in both languages, and I feel more comfortable with the English now.

These connections to family were an important motivation for all of the students, and talking about them allowed for those influences to be even more present in their learning.
“I will do something for my home country”: Maintaining connections and roots

What was clear throughout this class, but became even more obvious during this “What I Will” process was that students were not willing to compromise where they were from as key to who they currently are, and will be in the future. This was brought into clear focus with the beginning of the brainstorm. Students began the conversation, following very little guidance from me, by listing strong statements around preserving their roots, such as not getting rid of their accent, not forgetting their food, not speaking English with their child and not forgetting where they come from.

The fact that these were the first things to spring to mind speak both to what these students were demanding of their new lives and the fact that they felt under threat, and thus felt the need to articulate these ideas. Something as simple as food, which was discussed previously as both a site for adaptation in Angeline’s “Where I Am” poem, and a way for students to share experiences in the “Where I’m From” poems, is used here as a way to stand up for where one comes from, and to not lose that. Three lines from the poem inspired by this idea speak to the strength of food as a way to hold on. Wendy stated, “I will go to Chinese restaurants to get my memory back.” For Wendy, whose life in New York allowed for very little contact with her native language since she mostly spoke Cantonese and not Mandarin at home, food was a crucial link to her memories of home. Ariana echoes this idea of food as being linked to memory when she states, “I will remember my past every time I taste my country’s food.” Angeline sums up the connection by stating “I will not stop eating my country’s food…because part of me is my country’s food.”
Food is just one way that students talked about maintaining that connection with their home countries. Besides language, which will be discussed in detail below, students also discussed the idea of keeping up with their country’s news, and of course, keeping in touch with their families. In addition, some students, specifically Yeshi, the student from Tibet, and Amanda, talked about feeling a certain responsibility to their countries. For Yeshi, learning English was key to her ability to talk about where she was from. Yeshi spoke candidly through the course of her interview about not feeling entirely comfortable at the Center because of prejudices from Chinese students. She discussed wanting to try to explain the realities of living in Tibet to people who might not understand that experience. When asked why she wanted to learn English she stated “I don’t want to hide anything, I want, I can explain what happens, like, someone asking me what Tibet looks like, I can tell them.” Using her newly acquired language for this purpose is an instance of Freire’s idea of praxis (1970), that dialogue itself is not enough, but that dialogue must be linked to, and be the catalyst for, transformative action.

The idea of praxis, that language is not an ends with in itself but a means for social transformation, was echoed by Amanda, who also discussed feeling a responsibility to her country when she stated, “I will do something for my home country, for China.” While she did not elaborate on what the “something” was, the responsibility she felt towards her country was still clear. This speaks to Mohanty’s notion of home (2003):

home, not as a comfortable stable, inherited, and familiar space but instead as an imaginative, politically charged space in which the familiarity and sense of
affection and commitment lay in shared collective analysis of social injustice, as well as a vision of radical transformation (p. 128).

While I am hesitant to attribute specific politics to Amanda, or any of the participants, the idea of home as more than a stable physical space, but rather the result of our allegiances and emotions, resonates in the idea of doing something for one’s country. Mohanty’s conceptualization of home as not being neutral and geographically determined but rather a space carved out by loyalty, solidarity and commitment to doing good allows for an understanding of how immigrant students can continue to actualize their notions of home no matter their physical location, and thus how dialogue around their countries and communities can allow for a feeling of being at home.

Through their poems, students also expressed the importance of holding onto their country, for example, in a collectively authored poem based on the line “I will support my country,” they wrote:

I will support my country.

I will pay attention to my country

I will care about my country

I will argue for my country

I will have my country on my heart,

I will feel for my people and fight their battles.

I will dream about a better place for the people to come.

My country will be always my second home.
I will always love my country.
I will write beautiful things about my country.
I will show to the world the power of my country.
Because my country is my true soul.

I will never forget my country
the country which made me what I am today
I will always be grateful to that miserable country
a country where I passed my whole child and teenage hood

I will represent my country
the beautiful of our landscapes
I will travel to my country
I will believe in my country.

The above poem shows references that are both deeply emotional and personal and also show an impulse towards advocacy. A line such as “because my country is my true soul” highlights the profound importance of where one comes from and asserts how pivotal their country is to this student’s sense of identity. Lines like “I will argue for my country” or “I will feel for my people and fight their battles” echo an idea of responsibility to one’s homeland, arguably using one’s position in a new country to advocate for or defend a country. The actual specifics of what that would look like may be secondary in this context, because it is that desire or need that is playing out in the classroom. To connect back to the idea of praxis (Freire, 1970), we can understand that
for these students, who are using verbs of communication such as argue or write, the “word” in English is not enough, but they are motivated by the idea that, “there is no true word that is not at the same time a praxis. Thus, to speak a true word is to transform the world” (Freire, 1970, p. 75).

An example of this praxis is the way that students were using their language to speak back to some of the stereotypes they were encountering. Chimamanda Adichie’s TED Talk lecture, “The Danger of a Single Story” (2009) speaks to the idea of whole countries, cultures and groups being distilled into single, prejudicial notions. For these participants, even before listening to Adichie’s lecture, this was a familiar idea that came up over and over.

Mercy was someone who addressed this repeatedly, since she often encountered stereotypes when she told someone she was from Colombia. She discussed at one point the way that her country is seen as being entirely made up of drug dealers, stating, “because in Colombia the weather is perfect for the crops…a few persons is bad… [drug trafficking] is big business, but is illegal…every people is good, [people are hardworking] is very beautiful place in Colombia.” She went on to discuss the depictions of Colombian drug dealers in American films and the way this perception affected her personally, specifically in terms of being hassled at the airport as soon as she showed her Colombian passport.

In her comments she dissected the way that these stereotypes are perpetuated by the media and also contextualized them in her comments about climate. Mercy was confronting this “Single Story” of her country, and so it made perfect sense that she would come into an environment such as this workshop with a desire to dispel these
notions. She was not the only one who seemed both baffled and angered by what she heard about her country. Others were equally committed to explaining the truth behind misconceptions they heard. Explaining the story behind the stereotypes relies on that previous knowledge that we have discussed as being so vital to a students’ experience. This was echoed in Yeshi’s discussions of the situation in Tibet, and a comment that Wendy made about China’s single child policy.

There were other stereotypes that students discussed encountering, for example Angeline talked about how the only references she heard about Brazil were to soccer, samba and the Amazon rainforest. In Angeline’s experience though, while these constant associations may have been irritating, what seemed to be of more importance was the fact that she did not find herself fitting into people’s stereotyped understanding of what a Brazilian was:

All the people that I talk, they don’t see me as a Brazilian, I don’t know why, but they “oh, but you don’t seem like a Brazilian girl”…maybe because they don’t know Brazilian people, and they think that the most are like…Darker skinned, or a more, um, friendly, extroverted.

Just as the previous chapter discussed the idea that students were for the first time being put in racial categories like “Latino” that they had never encountered before, in Angeline’s case, both her phenotype and her quiet personality were excluding her from being identified as Brazilian based on the preconceived notions that outsiders had of what that meant.

It was clear from conversations with Angeline that prior to leaving Brazil she had never been confronted with the idea that she was somehow not a “real Brazilian,”
because in her country there was obviously a more pluralistic understanding of nationality. It was not until coming to the U.S. that she faced such limited stereotypes of what a Brazilian is. Ariana also discussed how it felt to confront certain assumptions of her personality based on her country of origin. She stated, “what’s bad is when sometimes people expect something from you like a stereotype, and you are not the stereotype. Like people think that all Latinos they’re loud, they’re fun they like to dance.” Ariana’s point here serves as an extension of what Angeline had been discussing. While Angeline’s reaction was based on a national category, Ariana is discussing being confronted with the idea of what it means to be a “Latino,” and being perceived as not fitting into an archetype that people have of Latino identity. Both are powerful notions and reflect the consequences of being seen not as an individual but as a collective group, which allows for much less nuance.

Many of the students expressed surprise and concern at feeling that their personality or actions were being judged based on other’s expectations of what they “should” be because of where they were. While a student like Yeshi discussed wanting to be a representative of her home country so that she could explain some of the truth of it, for Ariana, being in that position was more complicated:

I never felt before like that, I feel like I represent my country. So I feel like an ambassador like that. Because people that know me, I always think if they don’t like me they’re going to think that all Peruvians are like me, because they don’t have much reference. So they’re going to think oh I remember a Peruvian I met, she was so disgusting… that’s a new feeling, because in your country you’re one
among all these people, but here, especially because there are not many Peruvians.

The weight of being viewed as a representative of one’s culture is clearly something that impacts and shapes learning. In addition to the daily struggles of trying to find the right words to express one’s thoughts, and of trying to represent themselves and their knowledge accurately, these students were also being confronted with the reality that they were being judged by impossible standards attributed to their entire culture as well.

“I won’t speak English with my son”: Living the duality

I have written at great length about the issues related to living in two languages in the previous two chapters—what is lost when speaking a second language, and the ways that people can fully express themselves in a first. This seemed to be perfectly captured by Wendy’s statement in the “What I Will” brainstorm, “I won’t speak English with my son.” This was not a statement of aggression, or an indication that she was giving up on English, but it was rather an assertion that her native language was the one she was going to parent in, the one that remained truest to her. Additionally, it spoke to a desire to pass on her culture in a way that only a first language can. Earlier in the workshop, when talking about the connection between language and culture, we discussed the question of speaking English with children, and she said “Because we [are] from China, we don’t want to lose the generation. Yeah, I want to….., even though that child [may] just stay here, we want [him to] have the rules of…China, he know the Chinese culture, yeah we want.”
This statement about holding on to a first language is crucial to an understanding of the dynamics at play in language acquisition. For Wendy, speaking her language at home was something she was not willing to sacrifice, so if she was ever asked to do so, or told that her ability to speak English was dependent on her full immersion into English at home, that kind of ultimatum would likely threaten her ability and desire to speak English. This is a phenomenon that Nieto (2002) addresses at great length in terms of children, that despite good intentions, forcing or encouraging an English only environment at home can achieve an entirely different goal than desired. This is just as true for adults, if not more so, because of the depth of previous experience and knowledge that they possess in their first language, and also because of the kinds of complex relationships that are being carried on in that first language. Especially for students who are parents, being encouraged towards full immersion represents giving up something in parenting their children, or not being able to pass something along to their children.

By allowing a space to both articulate and actualize the idea of wanting to maintain a first language, one language does not threaten to supersede the other. Both Cummins (1996, 2011) and Nieto (2002) talk at great lengths about the value of bilingualism, and of encouraging a multilingual classroom as a way for students to succeed, and also incorporate their knowledge and experience. For my students, that multilingualism, as well as multiculturalism, was clearly important to them. As they began to assert in this last part of the class, while they were happy to be learning a new language, they also felt a need to maintain their first language.
Amanda, who had previously discussed how comfortable she felt when she found Mandarin speakers also talked about how the Center, and the other English school she frequented gave her the opportunity to connect with people who spoke the same language: “I only have Chinese friends … from school…. sometimes we speak Chinese … because … we are not totally adjust our life in New York, sometimes … we encourage each other.” The ability to find a community of people with similar experiences, in this case, who speak the same language, had obviously been very helpful to Amanda, and shows the importance of preserving those spaces within schools for first language communities to form.

One of the features of their first language that students talked about was accent. While all of the students showed the kind of interest and focus on pronunciation skills that I have come to expect from adult learners, in the “What I Will” activity, they wrote a poem entitled “I Will Not Get Rid of my Accent.” This poem was begun by Ariana, and is followed by Angeline, Alphadjo, Mercy, and Wendy:

I will not get rid of my accent,
I want to be understood,
the fluency in my talk but the music in my words.
I want people to know where I came from,
I want people to respect me for that,
I will not pretend to be what I am not.

I want to be a happy person.
I will continue loving my country.
My heart is divided in two pieces
One to my country and other to my new life.

I just want to be understood.
I’ll use all my means
To speak like a Native American
I know it will take time and effort
But I am sure I’ll be able to do it
However, I will keep my native accent
And the other languages I learned too

I will feel my words, my speak
I will remember the tradition of my parents
I will practice my home-education
and the tips of my father and mother

I will not get rid of my accent
I will try my best to learn English
I will speak correctly even I have accent
I will respect other’s accent.

While there seem to be moments of tension here and some students did not necessarily agree with the original statement as much, there are also strong statements around how their accent represented them and was not something they were willing to
sacrifice. The notion of embracing both one’s accent and one’s new language is not just a statement in favor of bilingualism, but one that speaks to DuBois’ notion of “two-ness” (p. 2) that I discussed in the previous chapter. This “two-ness”, a dual way of seeing oneself and one’s world as mediated by the demands of the world around us, is crucial to the process of negotiating the cultural and linguistic demands of immigration.

bell hooks discusses the use of English as almost a strategic move, discussing how, even though English has historically been a tool of conquest, those that were forced to speak it also were able to use it as a tool for resistance as well as a way of connecting across experience, (hooks, 1994). While it would be wrong to compare the experiences of these students with peoples who were conquered and enslaved and forced to speak English, which is the context hooks is writing about, we do see moments within the conversations around speaking for one’s country where English can be seen as a tool for resistance, be it against cultural stereotypes, or against the kind of isolation that so often comes with immigration. In a multilingual environment such as this class, English is also very much the tool that is used to connect across experience.

To put this another way, stating both that individuals want to stay connected to their home country and language, and that they want to become more connected to their new country is a way of expressing the development of Anzaldúa’s *mestiza consciousness* (1970), which she describes as “the coming together of two self-consistent but habitually incompatible frames of reference [which] causes un choque⁵, a cultural collision” (p. 100). Both ideas here speak to the idea that language is not merely the

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⁵ a crash
words we say but represents the lens through which we see the world, and when we possess two or more of those lenses, we occupy the space in which they all intersect.

When framed in terms of language, the “crash” that Anzaldúa references may be thought of as its own Discourse (Gee, 2012). This is not to refer to an actual hybridized language like Spanglish, but rather the socially-situated practice of having moved between places. It is a Discourse that encompasses the balance of adaptation and preservation and the attempt to maintain various influences at once. Anzaldúa’s assertion of the kinds of psychic advantages that mestizaje can bring speaks to this idea:

The new mestizo copes by developing a tolerance for contradictions, a tolerance for ambiguity….She learns to juggle cultures. She has a plural personality, she operates in a pluralistic mode—nothing is thrust out, the good the bad and the ugly, nothing rejected, nothing abandoned. Not only does she sustain contradictions, she turns the ambivalence into something else. (1987, p. 101).

Thus the border-crossings, the bilingualism and the cultural, social and linguistic negotiations that have been discussed at length in the previous chapters serve to form their own affinity group and identity kit (Gee, 2012), recognizable in the way they negotiate and articulate their circumstances.

By seeing these experiences as making up their own Discourse, understood as language embedded within negotiations of social, cultural, and political context, and identity, we can affirm the unique experience and value of maintaining a duality of experiences, allegiances and languages. It is an accented Discourse, as the students above attest, wherein the accent does not cancel out the validity of the words. It is a Discourse shaped by border crossings, no matter how that border was crossed, and by the
daily struggle of balancing and negotiating the various homes that exist within an individual. And it is a Discourse informed by the struggle to acquire enough language to be able to articulate all of the hard-earned knowledge and experience one already has.

**Final Remarks**

In the discussion of the idea of the single story, Belle shared with the class a Chinese proverb:

If you behave like a frog in the well, the frog just sees the sky, the sky is very small, but when the frog jump out of the well he will found the whole sky…oh my god the sky is infinity….So anyone should open their eyes bigger.

To extend Belle’s metaphor, moving to a new country can be like jumping out of a well, in Belle’s terms, and finding an ability to see the whole sky, or it can be like jumping from one well into another, which cuts one off from where they came. The ideas discussed above, of understanding the experience of immigration as a consciousness informed and shaped by all the experiences that came before and by the communities that one finds in a new country, counteract the isolation of feeling cut off from one’s roots, either culturally or linguistically.
Chapter Seven  
Implications

Throughout this thesis, I have laid out the work that was done by seven students in the workshop “Exploring our Immigration Stories.” In so doing I have hoped to contextualize these students’ voices and experiences within a multifaceted theoretical framework in order to show how adult English language learners’ lives as immigrants in the United States inform their learning and how those experiences can be drawn upon in a classroom context in order to create a more constructive, inclusive, and transformative learning environment. This work speaks from an explicitly critical stance on literacy, meaning that learning cannot be separated from identity or from the social, cultural and political context in which it exists (New London Group, 1996) and thus has discussed and interwoven these various dimensions into both the pedagogy and the analysis.

Often when an adult student enters an ESL classroom they are asked to abandon that which brought them there, their first language, their professional experience, their stories of migration, and their feelings about their new environment are rarely included in the formal curriculum that they encounter. However, as has been demonstrated here, all of those factors remain at play in their learning, regardless of whether or not they are acknowledged. If those experiences are silenced then there is a limit to how connected students will feel with what they are learning, and by extension a limit on the learning itself and how useful and relevant that learning can be in their lives.

This work has aimed to demonstrate that the silencing that often occurs in ESL classrooms and in the immigrant experience in general is not a foregone conclusion. By co-constructing a space where students feel comfortable exploring aspects of their
immigrant experiences and identities, the ESL classroom can incorporate students’ previous knowledge and experience into learning. The use of pedagogical strategies that focused on student agency and collaboration, the incorporation of a diverse range of texts and the use of poetry as a tool for expression all allowed students to bring their own stories and voices into their learning.

In the first chapter of this thesis, I laid out the questions that guided this research, which related to the factors of students’ past, present and future realities and how those inform learning in ways that can be incorporated into the classroom context. The three chapters that laid out the findings from this research were a way to answer those questions, addressing both what students saw as important in their process as well as the way critical classroom conversations and narrative, autobiographical poetry can be utilized in ESL classrooms. In this final chapter I engage in a final discussion of these issues, briefly addressing the limitations on this study and how those limitations speak to opportunities for further study, followed by a discussion of the implications of this work. These implications are divided into those that speak to the field of study itself, and those that speak to pedagogy generally, as well as my personal teaching practice. Lastly, I elaborate on the further opportunities for study that this work presents before concluding.

These implications are varied and speak to the experiences of teachers and researchers as well as students and administrators. In addition to discussion of explicit pedagogical strategies, these implications can also be useful for teachers in terms of how they interpret and understand the forces and experiences shaping the way their students interact with English and their learning environment. These implications can additionally speak to students themselves as a way to understand the impact of different kinds of work.
and conversations, as well as for administrators to see the importance of exploration of identity and self within an ESL context.

**Limitations**

While I believe this study has reached some important conclusions, it is not without its limitations. A study like this one, which is situated within one classroom and looks at the interactions between students, the teacher and the texts and context, is by definition not generalizable to all pedagogical experiences. Teaching is a deeply local activity, informed by the context in which it is conducted and the realities and dynamics of its participants (Cochran-Smith and Lytle, 2009). In this case, the work was informed by the specific experiences of the students, where they were from and how they came to the United States, as well as the educational space we were in, which was one that allowed for this kind of class to take place, and gave me as an instructor the freedom to design it as I saw fit. This work is also locally situated in New York, and thus informed by the dynamics and diversity of that space.

Despite the inherently local nature of the work, it does explore the interrelationships and intellectual work of this particular group of students in ways that speak to the potential of this kind of pedagogy and that may be emblematic of certain dynamics within an adult ESL classroom and could be useful for further study. Additionally, Lather (1986) discusses the notion of “catalytic validity” (p. 5) as being the degree to which the research helps the participants actualize individual as well as social change. My experience has suggested that this community of language learners has been changed by this work, and that change had the potential to inform the way they engaged
with their learning in the future. I too, as a teacher and a teacher researcher have been changed by this work, in ways that will impact my pedagogy and the way I interact with my students going forward.

Additionally, as this work was predicated on the community created in the classroom, the size of the group has a profound effect on the way the class itself functioned. The way that students were able to interact with each other, and with me as the teacher was informed by the size of the group. In addition to an impact on the way activities were structured, the group size informed the ways that I was able to collect and analyze the data. A larger class size would have impacted the methods of instruction, and may have necessitated an emphasis on different kinds of group or pair work and may have impacted the research process. However, the pedagogical values and intentions at the heart of this work are not dependent on the size of the group, and the invitations to share experiences and opinions, to the writing and sharing of poetry and the collaborative co-construction of meaning would have remained the same and thus are able to speak to how these pedagogical turns would work in any type of classroom.

It is important to remember in reading this work that the group was largely self-selected. The students who signed up for this workshop were presumably already somewhat comfortable talking about these kinds of issues or they would not have entered a space like this. They also necessarily had already made some connection between their experiences as immigrants and their learning, or they would not have judged this class as a worthy use of their time. Had this been a required class, the results may have been very different. Exploring how issues of immigration and identity can be addressed within classes that are either obligatory, like settings where language education is tied to
government assistance, or a requirement of an educational program, would be an interesting extension to this work.

While the insider/outside dynamic facilitated by practitioner research (Cochran-Smith and Lytle, 2009) is crucial to this kind of work, it is also important to acknowledge the limitations due to the teacher and researcher being the same person, specifically in terms of how the participants view that dynamic. This is especially true as it pertains to conversations around the efficacy and success of the teaching methods. Because of the very community and relationship with me as a teacher and researcher that made this work possible, it is hard to imagine these students saying that the activities and methods used in the classroom did not work for them. However, this does not totally invalidate discussion of the efficacy of this work, as that can be gauged outside of simple student feedback and can be understood from the observations of participation and analysis of all of the contributions made, an affordance that insider/outside lens makes uniquely possible. Additionally, because this was a voluntary space, students were choosing to stay in the space because they felt supported and that the course was furthering their language learning.

**Implications**

*Implications for the field*

As I stated previously, my analysis was informed by Gee’s (2012) notion of Discourse, in which our language is understood to be a set of Discourses that are socially, culturally and politically informed and linked to our identity, and function as what he refers to as an “identity kit.” Within the field of literacy, Discourse is most often used as
a conceptual lens while talking about how we operate within one language, as opposed to navigating between multiple native and learned languages (Gee, 2012; Delpit, 1994). This work has extended that concept to look at how our multiple Discourses play out within both our first and our learned languages.

Discussion around the loss of professional Discourses was an important example of this, as it spoke to the ways that students’ multiple Discourses in one language impact kind of language they want to learn in another. For example, Amanda framed her interest in the class around wanting to increase her ability to get a job, hoping to learn how better to interact in a professional context. The work students did around how they were perceived in English and how those perceptions impacted their feelings toward learning are another example of the way that Discourses have been contextualized here in terms of a second language.

The understanding of Discourses as multiple allows for both students and teachers to have a more targeted understanding of exactly what kinds of Discourses they possess in their first language that they have not developed in their first, as well as what kinds of Discourses are uniquely necessary in their new context. This was apparent in conversations around when and how students learn English, and in what ways they were frustrated with their language skills. When learning a new language, and even when teaching a new language, there is often this idea of perfection, that there is an immovable, impersonal and neutral finish line that means that a student is done learning. An understanding of Discourses interrupts this notion of being finished because it establishes that even in our first language we have many secondary Discourses that we learn or acquire throughout our lives.
Framing second language learning in terms of Discourse also helps us disrupt this notion of perfection. By understanding our language as explicitly linked to our social context we can see how sometimes a less grammatically rigorous form of language can be valuable, and we can benefit from being able to move between contexts in a second language the same way that is done in a first. The work that was done with poetry and the focus on students’ lived experiences aid in that disruption. By including self-expression and sharing ones’ story as a priority in language learning, we open up space where different kinds of Discourses are both necessary and affirmed.

For those students who may not have possessed professional or academic Discourses in their first language, this allows for an acknowledgement of the rich and varied types of knowledge and social practices that they do possess, and helps them frame their learning of a new language both in terms of those Discourses that they do have and those that they could acquire in a new language. Practitioner research of this kind, in which theoretical concepts directly inform instruction, can be particularly helpful in terms of explicitly discussing with students the ways that their learning and literacy are socially-situated.

Research in adult education often speaks to the incorporation of students’ native cultures or stories from their past (Schwarzer, 2006), or to using students’ current circumstances as a site for learning (Martinsen, 2009; Larotta, 2009), or focuses on needs and future goals (Cooke, 2009). As established by the questions laid out in the first chapter, this research sought to incorporate all of these influences into one conversation, a decision partly influenced by the way students interacted with the material. When laying out the questions for this work and structuring the findings chapters, I attempted to
separate the factors and influences into three phases—past, present, and future, mirroring the three poems. As the student work and analysis of it demonstrate, these divisions, while helpful as a tool for discussion, also bely a great deal of overlap, as issues around language, both native and learned, around the acknowledgement of professional knowledge and around feeling at home in a community were embedded in all aspects of this work.

By utilizing practitioner research in an environment where the class itself was shaped and designed by the research, this work demonstrates the way that critical, intentional discussions of students’ identities and experiences can be incorporated into the fabric of one’s pedagogy. Much of the empirical research cited in the second chapter speaks to the incorporation of critical, identity-focused practices into traditional classrooms. While this kind of research is very valuable as it speaks to the conditions of many English language students and teachers, I hope to convey through my research the value in centering students’ narratives of their own lives at the heart of pedagogy. Throughout the course of the workshop, it became clear that the students were learning as much if not more from each other and from themselves and their own writing as they were from me or the texts I had provided. Moments like Ariana’s “Where I’m From” poem drawing inspiration from Mercy’s representation of violence in Colombia, or moments when students would refer back to each other’s previous comments are evident of that.

The incorporation of discussion and theoretical analysis of identity into this work has implications for the ways that we see and approach English language education. If we acknowledge the inherent link between language and identity, we can understand that
the act of exploring and expressing oneself in a language class is crucial to learning a language. Also, if we see language as inseparable from identity, we can better understand how destabilizing it is to navigate one’s surroundings exclusively in a new language. This study speaks to the ways that explicitly critical understandings of identity (Anzaldúa, 1987; Mohanty, 2003) can be incorporated into discussions of literacy and language learning to support our understanding of language education as a socially-situated, culturally-informed process of identity negotiation.

To go back to Gloria Anzaldúa’s (1987) words, which appeared here previously “so, if you want to really hurt me, talk badly about my language. Ethnic identity is twin skin to linguistic identity—I am my language” (p. 81). The students themselves, as demonstrated by comments by Belle and Wendy around passing language on to children, or by Ariana and Angeline about emotions they felt that English was inadequate to convey, echoed this sentiment. By opening up a space in which students’ experiences, their stories and their struggles are a part of their language education, we are allowing for this idea that we are our language, and allowing who students are and how they see themselves to be as intrinsically linked in their second language as they are in their first.

The critical race and feminist theories that have been used here are a way to further contextualize the work of the participants into an important conversation around the positionality of the immigrant and student experience. These are issues that are often silenced in classrooms, but are playing out regardless of whether or not they are being acknowledged. Student discussion of how they saw themselves being racialized, be it encountering the term “Latina” for the first time, as was Ariana’s experience, or feeling like an outsider because she was Chinese, as Wendy discussed feeling, speak to how
present these realities are and the theoretical work presented here helps to frame these discussions. These classroom conversations serve as a way for students to ask questions, to make sense of the new racial and nationalistic landscape in which they find themselves and to speak back to some of the forces they are confronting.

The combination of Gee’s (2012) work on Discourse, Anzaldúa’s (1987) work on the mestiza consciousness and DuBois’ (1903/1994) discussion of double consciousness work in concert here towards an understanding of the immigration experience as its own Discourse. By understanding immigration as possessing a unique set of linguistic, cultural and social practices, we can see the ways that it has important ramifications on consciousness long after the specific moment of migration. It also allows us to see how learning a new language is not just informed by identity but actually informs the way we see and understand ourselves, and the way that we interact with the world around us. That understanding allows for a conceptualization of the ESL classroom as more than just site of learning but a way to build community and solidarity based on a shared experience. It additionally allows us to see the positive impact that a constructive ESL environment can have on the larger success of immigrant learners in their new country.

Pedagogical Implications

Gerald Campano (2007) asks, “can there be genuine and open conversation when children feel vulnerable to authority?” (p. 54). The idea that a feeling of vulnerability hampers open conversation impacts adult learners as well and is vital to how educators think about shaping a pedagogy that is conducive to conversations around identity and experience. One of the guiding questions for this study was focused on the pedagogical
tools that make explorations of identity and immigration possible. Throughout this process, multiple pedagogical moves were found to be crucial to this work.

I found throughout the course of these six weeks that often the most effective, meaningful conversations happened when I stepped back as an instructor and let students negotiate their own learning. The students’ experiences and opinions were the core of the class, were in fact the primary “text”. They were the experts, and so they were able to rely on themselves and their peers in order to make meaning. While I was still involved in the class discussions, many of the key moments of the course, for example the collaborative work done for the “What I Will” poem, happened when I was the least hands-on. Pedagogical moves that gave space for students to question the instructor and use each other for help and guidance, that eased restrictions on the use of first language, and that encouraged input on activities, allow students to guide their own learning and in turn share more of themselves and their experiences because they have a degree of control over their learning. The results that have been discussed here show the ways that these moves can lead to positive results for the students involved.

Many of my participants discussed feeling infantilized and discussed specific learning incidents in which they felt that their knowledge and abilities weren’t being recognized. In the context of an ESL classroom, often the “distinctive sort of who” (Gee, 2012, p. 152) that they are being seen as is only a student, without further interest in their background. By acknowledging this we can make room for important conversations around how we as teachers interact with our students, and how we encourage them to incorporate what they know into their learning. We can also interrogate how specific
classroom practices or interactions silence students’ multiple Discourses and fail to recognize all that they bring.

Conversations around the way students are perceived, like those where students discussed feeling ignored or incompetent, also address the toll that living in a second language can take. The artist Guillermo Gomez-Peña states, “To cross the linguistic border implies that you decenter your voice” (Fusco, 1995, p. 156). The effects of that kind of decentering do not disappear just because a student has walked into a classroom, no matter how supportive that classroom may be.

The use of poetry, specifically that which was narrative and autobiographical in nature, and served as a way to address past, present and future realities, was one of the key questions for this study. As shown here, poetry has multiple implications for the ways that educators try to incorporate students’ experiences as immigrants into the classroom. The use of poetry meant that students could express themselves in ways that were free from some of the restrictions of academic writing. Many of the students had never used poetry as a tool for self-expression before, though they had previous understandings of what poetry was. Students reported that for the most part they had encountered poetry in schools where it was something to be read and analyzed, not a medium for expression. During this workshop most became quite involved in the process, either writing multiple drafts, completing assignments before they were done in class, or continuing to write poetry after the class had ended. Poetry served here as a tool unique to their learned language—a way to interpret and express their new experiences in ways that can contribute to private and personal Discourses in a new language, as well as a way to communicate their stories to others.
Additionally, poetry gave the chance for every student to interact with the activities despite a difference in language level. Before this workshop began, I believed that poetry was by-and-large too difficult, and too structurally separate from prose writing to be a good fit in the ESL classroom. That hesitance around poetry, and the extent to which it was proven wrong, speaks to the way that our expectations as teachers end up limiting our students’ opportunity to utilize the language they have, they are not given the space to rise to a challenge because it is assumed they simply cannot. Stepping back and allowing students to work together, both in conversation and in their writing proved that these kinds of difficult conversations and writing were very much possible with adult English language learners.

When I initially told my students that the class would include poetry, they seemed quite intimidated by the idea of entering into a style of writing that they believed to be so challenging and disconnected from their realm of experience. However the type of poetry that was being asked of them, since it was so rooted in their experience, in fact entirely derived from their own knowledge, proved to be quite accessible. The structured poetry activities that were used in the beginning and the ways that students responded to the invitation to share their ideas through poetry gave students the guidance to feel comfortable with the new mode of writing, but not so much structure that it distracted from the expression that was at the heart of the activity.

While the poetry itself acted as a way in for those students who may have had less confidence with the language, the collaborative nature of this workshop also demonstrated how collaboration allows for the participation of students with different ways of expressing themselves in English. Often in traditional classrooms, students who
are deemed low achieving are simply left behind (Campano, 2007; Nieto, 1999; Cummins 1996). In a space where the premium was put on the students’ life experiences and self-expression, as well as on their collaboration, that tendency was disrupted. Watanabe and Swain’s (2007) study looked at how pair work across level differences could mediate learning, and this study has extended that to look at how collaborative writing in groups, as well as the sharing of individual writing can achieve similar ends.

Many of the theoretical and empirical studies that were referenced here look specifically at the value of critical pedagogy and multiliteracies practices in youth and adolescent education (Campano, 2007; Christensen, 2000; Cummins, 2011; Nieto, 1999). While research in adult education (Baynham, 2006; Cooke, 2006; Larotta, 2009) was also influential in positioning this research, it was explicitly influenced by teacher research that pedagogically centers students’ lived experiences are incorporated into classroom learning, demonstrating the rich and valuable linguistic, cultural, and social resources and expertise that all young people possess. That objective was the inspiration for this work—to show that adult language learners need to have those resources acknowledged and incorporated into learning as well.

It is not enough to assume that educated adults will naturally transition into a new context, or that they cannot be harmed by having their previous knowledge ignored. By looking at what these students have to say we can clearly see the challenges associated with trying to reposition oneself after immigration. This work demonstrated that those same kinds of catalytic, transformative incidents that are so crucial in the education of young people were just as possible and valuable with adult learners.
Christensen’s (1999) pedagogy incorporates various kinds of texts and types of writing into the classroom in order to provide a space wherein various experiences and contexts are included, affirmed and valued. By including a range of texts in different styles and representing different experiences, I intended to offer an alternative vision of English to students who may have been previously exposed to a more homogenous set of texts. Featuring various different types of vernacular and cultural references these texts served as a way to include many different options of how an English speaker expresses themselves, students were thus confronted with a multifaceted, complicated portrait of English that was inclusive to them, and was not just a standard of perfect grammar, formal syntax, and a homogeneous “American” experience. By representing a diversity of voices, students were able to see how could belong in English.

What was clear throughout the conversations had with students is that, despite the fact that they spoke English and were living in an English speaking country, English had not yet become a part of the way they saw themselves, it had not been incorporated into their identities and thus continued to feel foreign. This may have been for many reasons, and this is not to say that students have to incorporate English into their identities, but rather that as long as English is presented as being opposed to their native language and their past experience, as long as the message is being sent that to fully learn English students have to give something up, the language will be kept at arms’ length. Because of the way they have been presented with English before, where it was something removed from their realities, students may have decided that they did not want to incorporate English into their identities for fear that would necessitate a sacrifice.
By opening up space for intentional conversation around students’ stories and allowing for some student agency over the learning process, the assumption of distance between the learner and the language can be interrupted. As has been discussed, many of the participants rarely used English outside of school. If the school Discourse that students develop cannot be used outside of the classroom, and is not based on their experiences or interests, it will forever feel foreign, and will never be mastered to a point where students can feel that their language belongs to them. By giving space for students to discuss their lives a connection can be made between English and themselves, a connection that is vital.

*Implications for my personal pedagogy*

This research has been shaped by my teaching experiences from the first time I entered an English language classroom in Minnesota. The research questions came out of questions I had been asking myself as I attempted the best I could to teach in a way that respected and involved who my students were, where they were from and what they were facing. Many of the discussions and teaching tools that this research necessitated however, were things that I had been concerned about incorporating into my teaching before, out of a fear that students or administrators would not see the value in them, or that they would be too difficult, or would put students in too vulnerable a position. By taking that risk as a teacher, I have been able to see the potential for the kinds of pedagogy I used here to be incorporated into various teaching contexts.

This research experience has a lot of implications for me as a teacher, especially as pertain to risk and expectations. I believe that I have always had high expectations for my students, but I have also always had a strong desire to make sure students felt
supported in their learning, and to make sure that I did not create a learning environment that was difficult in ways that were counterproductive. The choice of texts here were challenging in ways that I usually stay away from, but by providing texts that contained difficult vocabulary but relevant topics, students were able to see the abilities they already had, and were able to engage their knowledge and their own analysis in English. By engaging in conversations around their personal experiences, those challenges became engaging and motivating as opposed to demoralizing.

An important part of the collaboration that I have discussed at length here was the fact that the focus shifted from myself as an instructor to my students. As much as my students had to trust me enough to share their personal stories, I had to trust my students enough to give up some of the control and allow their collaboration to take over. By standing back, especially in moments such as the “What I Will” poem, or in moments of peer editing where I did not facilitate at all, I was able to see how much these students were able to accomplish given the freedom and space to do so. That is something that shapes the way I will approach my classes in the future.

In my traditional teaching practice, I am often quite strict when it comes to prohibiting the use of languages other than English. One of the reasons for this is that I am concerned with students feeling excluded when they are surrounded by languages that they do not speak, and because I believe that English is a tool through which to create community. However, the space that existed here, where translation and discussion of first languages were permitted, demonstrated that by affirming first languages, community can be constructed. Additionally, I often fear as a teacher that if students are translating they will be making mistakes that I am unaware of. By having students rely
on each other instead of electronic translation however, language was mutually
negotiated, and students’ knowledges and perspectives became the tools by which they
could mediate their own learning, instead of having to rely on me as the teacher.

As mentioned previously, I had long dismissed poetry as too difficult a writing
method for adult ESL students. Additionally, I feared that students would feel it wasn’t
useful in their daily contexts, since it is different than traditional academic or professional
writing. My initial experiences with teaching very low-level students focused on English
as a means of survival, where basic communication was often all that was seen as
necessary and my later experiences as a classroom teacher have had me teaching English
as a tool for academic success, where writing is often bound by formal rules and
guidelines. This work however, showed how poetry focused on students’ lives was a
valuable way for them to practice language, and was a way to refocus my language
pedagogy on English as a means of self-expression and transformative engagement, no
matter the context and level of the student.

**Opportunities for further study**

In this kind of work, each answer is in a lot of ways the start of another question,
and a study like this has implications not just for work inside the classroom but also for
further study. This study discussed issues of immigration and identity with a group of
adult learners who were mostly professional, educated and living in the United States of
their own volition. The same type of study would yield very different and equally
valuable results if conducted with students that may have less of an educational
background or were in their new country because of economic or political necessity.
Additionally, conducting a workshop such as this in a school that had a more defined curriculum would also speak to the ways that these issues can be incorporated into traditional classrooms instead of merely providing an alternative space.

I have discussed at various points throughout this work Freire’s concept of praxis (1970) and the principle that stands at the heart of his work and the scholarship of critical pedagogy education and dialogue must be connected to action. This is an ongoing process, and it is something that was by no way fully achieved here, but the need for transformative pedagogy and praxis within language education is something to be continually worked towards. The kinds of conversations that happened here began the work of using a new language as a means of challenging one’s environment. Conversations around the stereotypes that students encountered are one example of this, but further exploration of how these conversations can more intentionally move towards praxis would also be valuable.

**Conclusion**

This research set out to answer questions about what factors in students’ pasts, presents and futures informed their learning, and how those could be incorporated into a classroom. The students in this workshop discussed at length how important it was to them to be acknowledged as being “whole adults,” to use the words of one student, to have their backgrounds, their previous professional experiences and their intelligence acknowledged. As has been discussed throughout this thesis, students’ previous knowledge and experience cannot and should not be separated from their experiences as speakers and learners of a new language. Through this work I have hoped to make
visible that which usually remains unseen, to highlight what informs students’ learning that often goes unrecognized in classrooms.

As much as these experiences are silenced in classrooms, they are even more hidden in the larger discourse around immigration. Hopefully studies like this can serve to open up a dialogue around the individual complexities of the immigrant experience and the ways that education and the English language can ameliorate instead of exacerbate the challenges of living in a new country. An educational space in which immigrant adults are invited to tell their truths and incorporate those truths into their learning can benefit not just the participating students but can inform the way we frame discussions around immigration, learning, and identity. Through a critical, socially-situated and collaborative approach to ESL education, learning English can hopefully become a tool for students to gain power over their circumstances in a new country, to articulate the challenges they face, their goals and priorities, to speak back against stereotypes and misconceptions about where they come from, to express their knowledge, their histories and their stories.
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Appendix A
Workshop Curriculum

*** Note: This curriculum has been revised to reflect the class as it actually happened. Changes and their rationale are noted below each weeks’ entry. The order that they are listed in here is the order in which the material was presented. The general questions listed were conceived of prior to the workshop and, while not every question was asked they all remained as the framework for discussion.

Week 1: How I see myself


Creating Text: The Story of My Name

1. First meeting—community building, safe space creation, etc.
   • Expectation setting
   • Goals, concerns, etc.
   • What drew you here?

   My Name
   • What is the meaning of my name?
   • Does my name have any connotations in my primary culture that it doesn’t have here? (vice versa)
   • Has moving to a new country changed the way I see my name?
   • Have I chosen a different name/nickname now that I am here?—meaning, difficulties, how is your name seen? (exotic, ordinary, etc.) pseudonyms and nicknames.

Writing Task: Based on the Cisneros piece and the related conversations the participants will write a short piece talking about the significance of their names.

2. Self-Perception
   • How would you describe yourself?
   • How has that changed since moving to New York?

Activity: Identity cards activity: Students choose one card labeled with words like “woman”; “man”; “student”; “Latina” and discuss why they picked them.
   • Would you have picked this word had you done this activity in your home country?
   • Which words do you think your teacher knows about you?
   • Which should they know?
   • How do you feel about these categories (referring to Latino, Asian, African, etc.)?

Writing Task: Found poem based on day 1 writing activity and the question “who am I”? ***Comment: This writing activity was added in response to student concerns about writing poetry.
Week 2: How I speak
Created Text: First Day in America stories
3. Native Languages
   - How is my first language(s) connected to my identity?
   - When I am speaking English, are there words or ideas that I feel are missing or that I am unable to express without my first language(s)?
   - Do I feel different when I speak different languages? Or when I mix languages together?
   - Are there certain times/situations/etc. when I feel I need to use one of my languages instead of the others?
   - Do people judge me when I speak one of my native languages? Wither here or back home?
   - How does the way I speak my native languages affect the way that people see me?

4. First day in America stories
   - Discussion about first experiences in New York
   Text: A selection of first memory in U.S. stories from Journeys, a collection of student writing from the Minnesota Literacy Council.
   Writing Activity: First day in New York stories. Students wrote and peer-edited their work in class. This activity was done collaboratively with very little input from me until the very end of class.

Week 3: Where I’m from
Given Text: Where I’m from Poems
(drawn from Linda Christensen’s work)
Created Text: Where I’m from Poem
5. Reading and Discussing Where I’m From Poems
   - Discussion of sample poems
   - Brainstorm around the categories presented Linda Christensen’s Reading, Writing, and Rising Up.

6. Writing and Discussing Where I’m From poems
   - Students wrote and then shared their poems
   - How does where your from effect how you deal with NY?
   - How does it inform how you learn?
   - What helps you learn? Does an activity like this help you learn?

Week 4: Where I am
Given Texts: Jay-z’s “Empire State of Mind” Billy Joel’s “New York State of Mind”
Created Text: Where I am Poem. (adapted from Christensen’s Where I am Poems)
7. Finding Community in New York
   - Do I mostly speak my language(s) outside of classes?
• What have been some of the hardest things to adjust to in New York?
• Where do I feel most connected to my life back home in New York?
• When I am feeling homesick, what do I do?
• What communities do I feel a part of here in New York?
• Does New York feel like home?

Discussion of the differences in the songs

Brainstorming of second worksheet

8. Writing “Where I Am” poems
Completing worksheets, students decided to write their poems at home
• What were some of the factors in my deciding to come to the U.S.?
• Was the decision an easy one or a hard one?
• How did I feel when I first moved here?

This class also featured a conversation about employment culture in the United States.

Week 5: “What I Will”

Given Text: “What I Will” (Hammad, 2011)
Created Text: “What I Will” jigsaw poems

9. How do I see my future?
• What are my plans for the future?
• How will English help me with those plans?
• Do I plan on staying in New York?
• When I picture my future, do I see myself speaking English more than my language?

Reading/Discussing “What I Will”

Brainstorming list

10. Writing “What I Will” jigsaw poems

While there was always going to be a third, future-based poem in the curriculum this text and collaborative activity were added based on the tone of the class.

Week 6: How others see me


11. People’s Perceptions of me.
• How do people see me here in New York?
• What are some of the ideas people have about my country/culture(s) that have surprised me?
• Have I been surprised by the way people see me in the U.S.?
• How do people react when I speak English?
• Do people see me very differently here than they did in my country?
• How does this make me feel?

12. Last day, student potluck, course evaluations, etc.
Appendix B
Interview Questions

Basic Information
1. Where were you born?

2. Have you lived anywhere else before moving to the United States? Where?

3. What is your age-range? 18-30  30-40  40-50  50-60  60+

4. What languages do you speak?

Language Use
5. Which of these language(s) do you consider your first language(s)?
   [Rephrase: which of these did you speak at home or in your community, which did you learn in school?]

6. Is your first language(s) the main language in your country? If not, what do people say about you when you speak it?

7. Did you learn any English before you moved to the United States?

8. How did you use English before you moved to the United States?
   [Prompt: only in the classroom, with English speaking friends, at work, etc.]

9. How did you feel speaking English when you first came to New York?

10. Where do you use English now that you live in New York?

11. Where do you use your language in New York?

12. Do you think you are able to show your personality in English?

Immigration Experiences
13. What were some of the reasons that you decided to move to the United States?

14. When you moved here, did you come alone or did you come with family?

15. What did you do to prepare before you moved here?

16. Did you know people before you came here?

17. What did you know/think about New York before you got here?
Community in New York
18. What has changed in your every day life since moving to New York?

19. Do you mostly spend time with people from your country or culture?

20. Do you find yourself homesick in New York? What do you do when you get homesick?

21. What have been some of the biggest challenges or adjustments since moving here?

Identity and Perceptions
22. What are the most important parts of your identity? How would you define yourself?

23. Has that changed since you moved here?

24. How do people see you here in New York?

25. What are some of the ideas people have about your country/culture(s) that have surprised you?

26. How do people react when you speak English?

27. Do people see you very differently here than they did in your country?

Learning Experiences
28. Where have you studied English in New York? What kinds of schools?

29. How do you learn English best?

30. What do you do to practice your English?

31. When do you feel the most confident speaking English?

The Future
32. What are your future professional plans?

33. Do you plan to stay in New York?

34. Do you see yourself speaking mostly English or another language in your future?

Classroom Learning
35. How do you feel when you are in an English class?
36. What do you think teachers should know about you before you start taking a class?

37. In general, do you feel supported or understood by your teachers?

38. Do you participate a lot in class?

39. If yes, why? What makes you feel comfortable doing that?

40. If not, why not?

41. Do you find that teachers know a lot about your culture?
Appendix C
Participant Consent Form

To Whom It May Concern:

My name is Emma Sheppard and I am a student at the University of Toronto in Toronto, Canada. I am working on a project called “Telling Our Truths: Exploring Issues of Immigration, Identity and Literacy with Adult Language Learners.” As a part of this project I will be teaching a six-week class called “Exploring our Immigration Stories.” The purpose of this project and the class is to understand how your immigrant experience, and the communities you are a part of in New York affect the way you learn and use English. In the class we will read, speak and write about these issues. This class will meet 2 times a week for 6 weeks. If you miss a class that is ok, and you can continue to participate in the project.

If you decide to take this class, the writing that you do in the class, as well as what you contribute in conversations might be used in my study. I will also do at least one short interview with you to talk more about some of the issues that we discuss in the class. In the class and the interviews you will be asked to speak and write about your experiences as an immigrant to the United States, both before you moved here and after you arrived. I will be audio recording the classes and the interviews. Recording will help me be actively involved in teaching you, and will help me respect your ideas and words when I write about them later.

I will not use your name, or any details about you that would make it easy for someone to know who you are. I will instead ask you to choose a name to be identified by. I will not share anything you say or write in the class with any of the staff, volunteers or other members at the International Center.

You can decide to stop participating in the project at any point, by telling me, or talking to Mira Erickson. If you decide to stop participating I will not use any of your information in my work. If you want to contact me to withdraw, or you have any questions you can call or email.

Thank you very much,
Emma Sheppard

By signing, you are indicating that you are fully understand the above information and agree to participate in this study. If you decide to take part you are free to withdraw at any time.

Participant’s name (please print):____________________________________________________

Date: ___________________________