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Beyond Measure: The Potential of Storytelling to Challenge Standardised English

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ABSTRACT

This essay uses storytelling as a mode of inquiry to explore how students with languages other than English and with diasporic experiences and identities negotiate a pathway for themselves in a relentlessly Anglophone environment. I share a story that provides a small window into the everyday work of an English teacher in a large, linguistically diverse school with a large Muslim community on the outskirts of Melbourne. I explore the contexts in which they work and the challenges of representing the affective and ethical dimension of English teachers' work. I reflect on my own situatedness as a researcher and how the methodological and theoretical choices I make are influenced by who I am and how I see the world. This reflexivity helps me understand why I see what I see as a researcher.

KEYWORDS

Storytelling; experience; English; language; representation; diaspora; colonisation

Introduction

This essay uses my representation of International Day at Melaleuca College to explore the potential of storytelling to represent the complexities of everyday life in the English classroom. I explore how narrative allows me to go beyond what is immediately visible through my standpoint and my construction of the events. Accounts of English teachers' work are often organised from a distance by policies, vocabularies and concepts that categorise and abstract practice from the history and contextual particularities in which that practice is embedded. I commence with a narrative account of my moment of entry to Melaleuca College, where I am to be part of the audience for International Day, as a way of highlighting the historical specificity of the standpoint from which I am observing what is happening.

I immerse myself in the local actualities of the people that I am observing as a way of highlighting how personal concerns, issues and perspectives during this school event resonate within larger political and social contexts. This is to emphasise the capacity of the personal and particular to interrupt the general and abstract assertions made by policy makers and researchers when representing the social world of the English teacher. It allows us to make visible how we are made and how we reproduce ourselves through the everyday ideological and

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structural relations that have emerged from the European colonial project. I invite the reader to consider what can be learnt from the stories I tell in this essay and the implications for how we represent the complexities of the Australian English classroom.

I have chosen not to italicise journal entries, reflections or languages other than English as a way of affirming their centrality rather than treating them as a deviation from the norm or the dominant essay form. It's a way of recognising that they contain their own philosophies and theories that arise from experience, and of affirming their equal status alongside more traditional forms of inquiry.

International Day: setting the scene (journal entry)

It's a mild September morning and I am driving through the streets around Melaleuca College (pseudonym), a large multicultural school in one of Melbourne's growth corridors. I am on my way to visit Emily, an English teacher who has invited me to her favourite day of the school year, 'International Day'. Over the past four months, as part of a study about the complexities of representing the everyday work of English teachers, I have been visiting Emily's English classrooms. We're both interested in reflexive practice, the possibilities and limitations, and I've been acting as Emily's critical friend, observing her lessons, and engaging in conversations with her about what it means to teach English in the current climate in Australia.

Emily has shared with me that for more than 10 years students at Melaleuca College have been coming together to celebrate their languages, faiths, cultures, traditions and customs through music and dance. She loves the event because she sees students from various year levels and diverse cultural backgrounds plan, organise, and choreograph every aspect of this all-day event.

On my way to Melaleuca College, I take a detour through the grid-like backstreets and observe how the dark green foliage of citrus, fig and other imported vegetation intermingles with the unruly powdery blue-grey and green growth of the indigenous flora. These gardens remind me that it was poverty and oppression that educated my mother in the skill of crafting a garden for life rather than art. In Temuco, a small town more than 600 kilometres south of the capital of Chile, she traded herbs and vegetables with Mapuche women, local Indigenous people who'd lost their ancestral lands in the first half of the twentieth century.

As a child I often accompanied my parents to the Melaleuca Market to buy lentejas, porotos, cilantro, albahaca, perejil, acelga – names for legumes and herbs that still come more readily to me in Spanish than English. Fragmented memories, seared in the flesh emerge: travelling from high-rise public housing in our own migrant zone to this one and finding ourselves lost in a real and imagined familiarity; the noise, sights and scents, refracting unexpected memories of ghostly people, things and places: stories of barefoot walks through the cerros to market in Temuco, of bueyes pulling carretas llenas de atados de trigo, leña, sacos de papa o de gente que se encuentra en el camino; of children playfully fighting for the cool heart of the sandía during the Summer harvest or of the menacing pull of the dark Río Cautín. My mother uses words that have no equivalent in English, particularly as her words come in part from her father, a Chilote man from the

deep south of Chile whose Indigenous language had been all but wiped out by Spanish colonialism. Her stories about her life in Chile are of hopeful sunrises and mean sunsets.

From my moving vehicle I see flashes of students walking to school in their Melaleuca College school uniform, red and two shades of blue. In 1919, the school's first Principal had served in the Light Horse Brigade of the First Australian Imperial Force in the Middle East and France. The colours of the school are those of his Regiment. Small things and often forgotten details linger as reminders of how cultural domination is maintained and re-produced through the tastes that prevail, either symbolically or materially (Said (1978) 1991). Despite the imposed uniformity I see how some students, like students everywhere, have made the uniform their own with the addition of items such as a set of earphones, a pair of white Nike runners, a non-school regulation haircut, jewellery, a takeaway coffee cup from McDonald's, or a pair of non-regulation leggings or a headscarf worn differently.

When I finally arrive, I park my car on a service road that runs parallel to the eight-lane bitumen highway that was once a dirt track and the main thoroughfare for hooved animals and their handlers on their way to the Melaleuca Market.

I'm early so I sit in the school car park listening to talkback radio and observe students arrive. Unfortunately, this is the morning after the nation's 'Biggest ever Counter Terrorism Raids' (*Herald Sun*, 19 September 2014, p. 1) and the media is full of anti-Muslim sentiment. This morning the headlines in the Herald Sun, the newspaper with the nation's highest circulation, are designed to provoke fear and alarm; 'Evil Within – Terror Alert' (19 September 2014, p. 1), 'Fears of Attack on Parliament' (19 September 2014, p. 1), 'Evil lives in Terror Australis' (19 September 2014, pp. 4–5), 'Keep Calm and Carry on' (19 September 2014, p. 3). Melbourne talk-back radio is saturated with similar sentiments.

Melaleuca College students arrive with different coloured bags on their backs in groups or alone. Many of the girls wear the school uniform with a headscarf and an ankle length skirt, while some wear their headscarves with a knee length skirt and other girls wear the uniform with long black socks or stockings, but no headscarf. When I first visited Melaleuca College, I realised that I didn't have words to name the sky-blue material that covered the heads of some students especially when there didn't appear to be a singular way of wearing the material, or even an imperative to do so. Some girls, as I later found out, are Muslim and practice Islamic prayers but don't cover their hair at all. Students disclosed the names they use for this garment, 'headscarf', 'hijab' or an Arabic word, 'khimar'. But, more importantly, from the conversations with these Muslim school girls, I have learnt that there are multiple, deeply personal meanings attached to clothing such as a headscarf, that even religion and politics can't fully explain.

A woman calls into one of the commercial radio stations and talks about what life is like for her at the moment as an Australian Muslim woman. She says, 'I'm a proud Australian, but I'm also a proud Muslim'. She tells us that she was born in Melbourne, but that because she wears the traditional Muslim dress people assume that she doesn't speak English and treat her like 'a migrant'. She explains that her three daughters were born in Melbourne and wear headscarves, but she has recently told them not to wear them in public because she fears for their safety.

I find myself thinking about the intersection between the 'personal dimension' (Said (1978) 1991, 25) and the larger social and political structures that dominate and shape

our personal and professional worlds. My mother often remembers that her biggest fear during her final year in Chile, before seeking political asylum from the Pinochet dictatorship in Australia, was of her own neighbours. The military regime spread a fear among the community that paralysed and silenced Chileans. It led to complicities and the erosion of trust between friends and neighbours, turning them into strangers.

I sense a similar climate emerging here in Australia as our current Liberal government commits to military action against 'Islamic State supporters' in Iraq (*Herald Sun*, 19 September 2014, 7) and increases the domestic alert level to 'High'.

In Australia we have a long tradition of demonising refugees and migrants, and any examination of Australian refugee policy over the past century will convey a strong sense of Australia's ambivalence (at the least) and racist attitudes (at the worst) towards new arrivals. This is something I experienced as a child in the school yard and later as an English teacher. I witnessed these racist attitudes from 'white' students towards their Muslims peers from Afghanistan in the classroom during and post 9/11 – another period in history when anti-Muslim sentiment was strong all around the world (cf. Illesca 2003). Sadly, this morning, I find myself wondering if Melaleuca Secondary College is in any danger of being a target of anti-Muslim sentiment.

(Bella Illesca, September 2014)

Storytelling as standpoint

Storytelling is at the heart of this essay because stories are at the heart of the English classroom. Stories are how we understand and make sense of our lives and relationships. Storytelling is a vital way in which we construct knowledge socially, one that involves thought and feeling, the intellect and the imagination. Therefore the 'truth' of a story is not a matter of its fidelity to the facts (cf. Miller 1995), but a matter of engaging with a particular standpoint, a particular set of values and beliefs in response to the world we hold in common. Harold Rosen writes:

> To tell a story is to take a stance towards events and, rather than reflect a world, to create a world. To begin a story is to make a choice from an infinity of possibilities, selecting one set rather than another. That is why it is not just fiction which is an exercise of the imagination, it is any construction of narrative coherence. From this all else flows. (Rosen 1986, 231)

I begin with this account of my entry into Melaleuca College as a way of situating this essay within a tradition of inquiry that emphasises how knowledge is constructed from a certain standpoint (Doecke 2013; Rosen 1986; Smith 2004b, 2005). Standpoint does not refer simply to a perspective or worldview that somehow floats above the contingencies of everyday life, but to a consciousness that emerges in response to the particularities of one's social, economic and cultural contexts. It is an approach to inquiry that begins with what the individual 'sees', but that is also mindful of the larger contexts that mediate that 'seeing'. It is simultaneously responsive to the richly particular nature of experience while seeking to understand the broader social conditions or determinants of that experience. When we tell a story, we are attempting to make sense of memory, experience and emotions in order to arrive at an understanding of the world around us. This always happens from a standpoint that is inextricably intertwined with the life of the author.

Crucial to this approach is an understanding of the way language mediates experience. The reflexivity required here is one that involves reflecting on the words I write in an effort to understand and act upon the world around me. The act of imposing order and giving coherence to experience through narrative is not a neutral or objective activity, but a political project that acknowledges the priority of language and the necessity of reflexively engaging with the political and cultural conditions of our own making (cf. Doecke and Pereira 2012).

This kind of attentiveness to language allows me to become attuned to details that are deeply personal but also represent the generalisable ways in which individuals reproduce their lives. The ways that we take up or resist social values and beliefs, the ways that we reason and process emotions, enact professional practices, or dream and experience joy, can be traced to pre-given structures through which we struggle and re-reproduce ourselves (cf. Haug et al. 1999). This is key to understanding the disjuncture between the stories we tell ourselves and those that are told on our behalf.

For example, the account above of my entry into the school offers insights into the social conditions that produce some of the conflicting and consensual relations between Emily's professional values and beliefs and dominant institutional discourses and practices. The story also draws attention to the invisible determinants that people grapple with, such as the traces of colonial domination and militarism that, for example, cohere in the school uniform that now clads the bodies of children from war zones everywhere. Reference to the clashing and blending of the indigenous and non-indigenous flora on the suburban streetscape and grid-like streets is a conscious way of making visible some of the diffuse patterns that connect landscape, culture and language with ownership, dominion and control (cf. Said 1993). It is also a way of exposing the divided nature of my identity and any claim I might make to speak about 'my' country. At the same time, small details such as 'Nike runners', 'McDonald's', 'jewellery', the school uniform worn in non-regulation ways, and the stories on the International Day stage, as you will read below, gesture towards the potential of the everyday practices of students to give us insights into the co-existence of consent and force – of the complex interplay between agency and ideological conditioning (Bakhtin 1981; Pratt 1991).

I insert my own childhood memories as a way of recognising that I too am an ideologically constructed subject who arrived at Melaleuca College via the politics of high-rise public housing and that other 9/11 – the one that looms less large in the global consciousness than the events in the US in 2001, but which signifies the brutal and lingering effects of US Imperialism to those who were exiled from Chile with the brutal seizure of power of the Pinochet regime (cf. Illesca 2003). I consciously blend my personal experiences as an English teacher and 'displaced' person with my observations as a researcher in order to make my inheritance explicit and as way of showing how we co-opt, resist and re-write the cultural stories that we inherit through birth and those that are imposed on us (Anzaldúa and Keating 2002). It's another way of recognising how languages, biographies and memory are subdued by the hegemony of colonial languages. Yet it also highlights how we resist and re-make ourselves by telling stories from a particular standpoint in those same colonial languages.

International Day – the dress rehearsal (journal entry)

The dress rehearsal is in full swing in the cold and drafty hall. Emily is acting as sound technician and in between acts she tells me that some of her Year 9 Afghan-Australian students have been upset by representations of them in the media as 'terrorists'. She says she'll be on the look-out for potential 'flare-ups' but the energy and excitement in the hall makes it hard to imagine any trouble.

The hosts, Ahmed and Mashaal, are two self-effacing senior students born in Afghanistan between civil war and Taliban rule. They are running through their script and doing sound checks with Emily. Given Emily's concerns about student 'flare ups' in response to the media's characterisation of Australian Muslims as 'Evil' and 'Extremists', I find myself laughing out loud when the source of potential tension comes from the wit of the two diffident teenage hosts, both in oversized woollen-knits, when they introduce the 'Afghan' dance group with the following words:

> Next up is a group we saw backstage. These guys are explosive! They will blow you away! Put your hands together for (pause) the Afghans! (Mashaal and Ahmed, International Day rehearsal, September 2014)

I marvel at their wordplay as they pun in an accented English in what could be their second, third or fourth language. They have deliberately juxtaposed 'explosive' and 'Afghan', two words that at the moment are overpopulated with the damning intentions of others, and make the words submit to their own intentions by saturating them with their own socially and politically charged meaning. I admire their awareness of the potential of these particular words to both terrorise and entertain. By placing them within their own frames of reference they subvert their accepted meanings.

Yet later, during the live performance, I'm disappointed to find that they've edited their 'explosive' introduction to the Afghan dance group and instead say,

> Next up, are my cousins! Please welcome, the Afghans!

Later, I ask Emily about the change and she explains that she asked them to 'tone it down' because of the 'hot heads' in the audience, some of which her Year 9 Australian-Afghan students who have been angry about the media representation of Afghans in Australia.

'Who are we?' International Day – the live performance (journal entry)

The opening staccato beats of Michael Jackson's 'Billie Jean' fill the hall, signalling the start of the show. The hosts, Ahmed and Mashaal, moonwalk from opposite ends of the curtained stage until they crash into one another. The audience laughs as the two moonwalking, crew-cut and cardigan-wearing comedians disentangle their bodies from each other in a comic display of accentuated awkwardness:

Ahmed: Ladies and Gentlemen welcome to International Day 2014. I am Ahmed and this is Mashaal, and we are your hosts! (Cheering and applause from the audience)

Mashaal: Are you ready for performances that will be more entertaining than my nose? (Audience laughs. Ahmed feigns embarrassment.) You know, I once went to

a modelling agency and they told me, 'Sorry. No professionals'. (More laughter and whistles)

Ahmed: Guys, are youse (pronounced with a strong feigned Australian accent) ready for these fantastic performances? I can't hear you! (Audience cheers become louder)

The curtains are pulled apart to reveal the words on the stage's back wall, 'Unity and Diversity', each letter sparkles with multicolour glitter. (International Day, September 2014)

Ahmed and Mashaal's words are inflected with accents that blend known and unknown worlds. I find myself wondering, what do their words disclose about their sense of who they are and the relations that mediate their participation in the world around them. Especially when they deliberately parody in equal measure the Australian accent, their own appearances, and heightened socio-political fears. Their 'youse' is unacceptable in the writing they are expected to do for school, but it is a powerfully inclusive gesture within the context of International Day, even though it might also be interpreted as parodying the culture of Anglophone mateship that dominates Australian society.

The stage is a place where I gain an insight into how through the telling and reception of stories students disclose a sense of how their unique and singular selves are constituted socially, in relation with others (cf. Arendt [1958] 1998; Cavarero 2000). Masshal and Ahmed can't stop the media from demonising Afghans, but on this platform they can use visual and political humour to lampoon the incongruities between ideas and reality, and thus exercise some agency.

When they introduce 'The Bollies' they create a visual caricature of the Indian classical dance, the Kathak, through the physical enactment of a story about a father teaching his son to pick mangoes from a tree. They use parody to tell a story that creates cross cultural connections in a way that imitates the nature of the Kathak dance; movements that embody the traditions of both Hindi and Muslim culture with the purpose of telling a story. Their self-effacing humour is as important as their intercultural and linguistic awareness of some of the traditions and customs of others; through their use of words such as, 'Namaste', 'Salam alaikum', 'youse' and 'explosive', it's possible to see how their words become multivocal, spaces for conflicting meanings to come together in dramatic acts of interpretation via a chorus of languages.

The music and dance of the Samoans similarly communicate a sense of how 'each word tastes of the context within contexts in which it has lived its socially charged life' (Bakhtin 1981, 293). The warm smiles and electric energy of the Samoan performers prompts spontaneous applause from the audience. The sonorous voice of Samoan song artist, Marina Davis (2012), fills the hall, 'Fa'amuanmua le Atua o ia o lo'u f'avaevae – A o mai I ni puapuaga', and the large group of dancers on stage in neat rows and columns, gracefully use their hands, faces and bodies to tell a story about Samoa's beauty, suffering and faith in God. In the next movement, the modest gentleness of the girls' gestures contrasts with the boys' energetic Fa'ataupati dance. More spontaneous cheers and laughter from the audience in response to the entertaining pantomime unfolding on stage. I am captivated as the performers build rhythm to the 1980s Congolese-Belgium hip hop artist, Ya Kid K's, 'Pump up the Jam'; act out Peter Andre's 'Mysterious Girl' with comedic sensuality, and gyrate with cheekiness to Nikki Minaj's 'Anaconda'. The medley and horseplay on stage continues to the lyrics of Lady Gaga's 'Poker Face' and finally ends

with synchronous slapping and clapping but this time to an upbeat traditional Samoan song.

As I look around at students on and off the stage I get a sense of how young people from different corners of the world pull apart and blend languages in complex ways to 'bear the burden' (Baldwin 2010) of their experiences. Through their choice of music and precise gestures they express carefully choreographed cultural and linguistic ways of being and knowing that communicate a plurality of irreconcilable worldviews: boys hold hands with boys; boys and girls gracefully twirl handkerchiefs; girls and boys touch each other with respect while their costumes and dance routines enact patriarchal ideals about gender and power.

These contradictory elements can also be observed through other acts of representation, 'The Sexy Mauritians', 'The Explosive Afghans', 'The Bollies', 'Africa', 'The Serbs', and 'The Croatians'; each an ensemble of music, colours, gestures and languages that combine contemporary and traditional music to create a concert of asymmetrical story threads, each sharpening my critical awareness of the diverse and distinct ways in which students name the world. In this sense the stage can be seen as a metaphor for the point of contact between students' home languages and English; a meeting place for the interaction of the 'legacies of subordination' with 'healing and mutual recognition'; and a place for students to 'construct shared understandings, knowledges, claims on the world' (Pratt 1991, 40).

Bakhtin's (1981, 1984) understanding of language as heteroglot and polyphonic recognises the dialogic quality of human existence and offers us another way to read and understand students' performances. The layered and textured voices within voices on the stage convey a sense of the potential for a polyphony of voices to emerge when the standpoint of the author or speaker is oriented towards 'a world of autonomous subjects, not objects' (Bakhtin 1984, 7). This multi-voicedness allows a diversity of competing voices and perspectives to interact with each other without entirely absorbing the consciousness of the other. In this sense, the dialogic relationship that emerges between consciousnesses and the audience or reader makes it so that not even the speaker or author has the final word. This conception of language recognises that meaning and sense are not located in an individual consciousness, but socially. Or, in the words of Volosinov ([1929]1973, 86), 'a word is territory shared by both addresser and addressee, by the speaker and his interlocutor'.

This understanding of language as social, polyvocal, relational and never neutral is helpful for understanding the interaction of the plurality of consciousnesses on the stage where students consciously and unconsciously embed voices within voices. For example, it allows me to see how the consciousnesses of Ahmed and Masshal interact with the words and actions of their onstage narrator: 'Are you ready for performances that will be more entertaining than my nose?'. The narrator's speech interacts with the authorial speech of the school: 'Tone it down' as well as the media: 'Evil lives in Terror Australis'. The consciousnesses of the hosts interact with their onstage narrators and other interlocutors: 'These guys are explosive!'. The speech of performers interacts with the voices of students in the audience such as when the Samoan dancers ask, 'Did you guys like it?' and 'Do you want more?'. And the blend of new and old-world music interacts with students' individual and collective histories, languages and cultures, showing us how students draw on various interlocutors in ambiguous ways to construct counterpoints from which to represent the world.

I see this when the Samoan dancers cast themselves in the first-person plural, 'we' as they perform an uplifting story about faith and 'staying strong' in the face of hardship. When they transition to the upbeat music of Ya Kid K's 'Pump up the Jam' the girls sit and become observers of the boys, shifting the performance into two narrative points of view, two voices. During the dancing the boys address the audience directly through song and mime, 'Can you believe this guy?', shifting not only the narrative point of view, but also inviting further voices into the story. The stage also discloses the contradictory consciousness of each representation by showing us how students are both subject and object. In this space students don't need to reconcile the juxtaposition of their Samoan call to 'put God first in my life and journey': 'Fa'amuamua le Atua o ia o lo'u fa'avaevae' with Ya Kid K's 'Pump up the Jam'. It is because this is what has become subjectively meaningful to them, their choices making visible some of the complex institutional processes and contexts in which their experiences are embedded.

Through this event I catch a glimpse of how students living in diasporic communities in Melbourne continue to celebrate their languages and cultural heritage but also how even in the anglophone world of schooling they take English language and culture and inflect it with their own languages and cultures to represent experience differently. In fact, on the stage, English is no longer at the centre of experience as a chorus of different languages take centre stage. The interaction of the speakers and their interlocutors makes visible some of the ideologies that inhere within them conveying a sense of the instability of meaning as students on stage demonstrate how upon contact, languages and cultures shift, blend and co-exist in contradictory consciousnesses.

Contexts within contexts

Melaleuca College is one of Melbourne's largest and most ethnically diverse government secondary schools with a large Muslim community. It is located on what was once the outskirts of the city in one of Melbourne's largest industrial centres. It's a region that has a long history of providing cheap housing to migrants and refugees, and in turn they've provided cheap labour to the local industry and manufacturing, including the iconic but now defunct car and food manufacturers. Each time I approached the College on my visits, the landscape around the school reminded me that it was not just the Indigenous Australian presence but nature that was subdued and controlled over time by imperial pride and the imperative to conquer, carve up and civilise 'new' territories through the recording of land ownership and the building of roads, bridges, power and railway lines, trade and commerce.

The College itself is in a region that more than 100 years ago was a creek flood plain that was thickly covered in river red gums and stringy barks. It was once home to the large black eel and waterbirds that clustered in schools in the undergrowth that lined the creek. This creek was also once an important natural source of life for the local First Nations people. These days the flood plains and natural water courses no longer exist. They were never a match for the concrete and human engineering that appeared after colonisation. Over time, stubborn local creeks have been re-routed and swamps drained as part of the long-established colonial practice of appropriating and engineering the landscape through roads, bridges and buildings. Continuing the tradition of the early European surveyors who, regardless of the Indigenous presence, marked out the

landscape in the township of Melaleuca in 1852, the streets surrounding the school obey patterns imagined on the other side of the world. These square and rectangular grids were given British names such as Edward, Charles, James, David and King; physical and symbolic vestiges of imperialist expansion, ownership and land rights that not only map out the past, but also determine the routes for the future.

These newly named routes remind me of the local and distant social relations that coordinate and govern our everyday lives. The maps of colonial surveyors and cartographers named the world anew, deciding who and what came into being.[1] Through their 'imperial eyes' (Pratt 1992) they only saw what the political imagination of European imperialism allowed them to see. They did not notice the markings that already existed in the imagination and practices of First Nations people – markings that told stories of pre-existing human experience and physical and spiritual relations. Instead, they imposed 'new' stories on the human and physical landscape through words and actions that displaced and dispossessed that which already existed, reinforcing expansionism and the power and authority of the white, middle-class heterosexual male who only saw through 'imperial eyes' (Pratt 1992). It is significant that some of these influential map makers had not even been to Australia (Graves and Rechneiwski 2012). Yet, their second-hand accounts of that which they did not know and had not experienced were not considered works of fiction. To the contrary, they carried the full weight and authority of the white European observer (Said [1978] 1991).

There is no small irony in the fact that, although more than sixty percent of the student population of Melaleuca was born overseas and speak other languages, English is the public language of instruction. So you might read the imposition of English on these students as an extension of the Imperial Project, even see the work of 19th century cartographers as a metaphor for what Anglophone educators are doing in classrooms, as they attempt to impose another mental geography on these students, regardless of the diversity of their cultures and languages. Rather than seeing those cultures and languages as a resource that might facilitate authentic dialogue within classrooms, educators act as though those cultures and languages can be effaced. Except for Emily, and the ritual of International Day, though there is surely an irony here, in that the excess of meaning of International Day hardly becomes a feature of everyday classroom life.

Emily's students

> Melaleuca College is in a low socioeconomic area with a transient population . . . where our students come from depends on the last war. At the moment it's Sudan. That's the biggest wave coming through. As well as Afghanistan and Sri Lanka. Years ago we had a large Albanian, Serbian and Bosnian student population. It depends on the conflict zones and what happened about five years ago because then we start seeing them filter through to us. It changes fairly regularly . . . (Emily, June 2014)

Words such as 'war', 'conflict zone' and 'the next wave' are usually applied when describing common themes in texts studied in English, but for Emily and other English teachers working in schools with migrant and refugee populations, they signal the contexts of their students' formative experiences. For Emily to talk about her practice as an English teacher inevitably means using words that represent the extraordinary

circumstances that have shaped her students' lives. For example, when she talks about the difficulties her Year 7 student, Thiery has concentrating she also tells me a story about his older brother, Chibuzo:

> I taught his older brother, Chibuzo and they originally came from Congo, I think, or they went through the Republic of Congo to Tanzania. There was a lot of trauma relating to Chibuzo and his older brothers getting forced to become soldiers and stuff like that. Chibuzo had come to us because basically we were the last school in the area who would have him . . . he'd been kicked out of so many . . . I know it was a severe situation. I don't know how much of that Thiery would know or remember, but certainly it's part of the family history and that obviously has its ripple effects and occasional flare ups. (Emily, September 2014)

Similarly, as Emily reflects on Leila's test results from the National Assessment Program – Literacy and Numeracy (NAPLAN[2]), she recalls that earlier in the year Leila threw a chair and put her fist through a classroom wall in frustration that she could not meet the requirements that standardised forms of assessment such as NAPLAN impose on students, regardless of whether they are using English as a second (or third or fourth) language or whether they can be classified as so-called 'native speakers'. The assessment practices embodied in the NAPLAN reading and writing test inevitably position students who do not have mastery of dominant cultural language and literacy practices as deficit. Emily expresses her frustration at having to respond to her students in a way that reduces English language practices to a set of linguistic and structural conventions especially given the inequalities her students experience.

> We have 64% who are technically EAL (English as an Additional Language). Under the current guidelines, 90% of our kids don't speak English at home and more than 60% were born overseas. Simple assumptions such as access to reading materials at home or that they have parents who can read or engage with their learning in any way is completely gone . . . (and) many of these kids look after younger siblings, work alongside parents after hours, act as translators, carers, etc.

> And, then some of our families are quite transient in nature . . . it's quite hard to get accurate or clear information. There are a lot of broken records and it's about how much we pick up along the way. For instance, we know that the Department of Human Services are heavily involved in Leila's case. So, it's hard to try and untangle all of that to work out what I can effect change with. According to the data from NAPLAN and the VCCA On Demand Testing,[3] Leila is operating at a Grade 2 or 3 literacy level and is not performing at the standard . . . Her life is tough, and I think that with Leila it's about social belonging and being safe and feeling cared about and slowly building confidence, as well as doing some literacy work with her.

And although Emily understands that her students' 'progress' cannot be neatly graphed by data, especially given the interrupted schooling and trauma that many students have experienced, her capacity to respond to her students' linguistic and cultural diversity is undermined by data-driven approaches that narrow the focus of learning and seek to standardise and assimilate the experiences of students like Leila and Thiery, instead of responding to them as human beings.

> I have a love-hate relationship with data. I'm about qualitative methodology and I'm a social constructivist, a feminist and I am all of those things, but this year I have been using data to help inform my teaching strategies. For example, knowing that Leila doesn't process words

> quickly means that I have to build in strategies so she can engage with the work differently. But, I find it hard because it's not just about reading, spelling and essay writing, it's also about confidence and trust and time.

Emily's description of her 'love-hate relationship with data' conveys a sense of the 'bifurcation of consciousness' (Smith 2004a, cited in Harding, 25) that occurs through language that produces an estrangement between what one knows and feels in the body and what one knows and feels outside of the body. She recognises that she is being interpellated by evidence-based discourses that compel her to talk about her students in ways that conflict with her 'social constructivist' and 'feminist' self. Emily finds herself using words that serve someone else's intentions – 'data', 'literacy achievement', 'performance' - and she finds it hard because she must engage in mediating work to reconcile the disjuncture between the pregiven structures contained in this discourse and the lived experiences of her most vulnerable students. The words she uses show us how her work is deeply organised by language that seeks to manage and make visible what is often visceral and unmanageable, causing estrangement between what she knows in her mind and feels in her body, and the world around her. Emily's pedagogy reflects a different set of understandings about motivation, learning, and progress; one that recognises that building 'trust', developing 'confidence' and feeling 'safe' and 'cared about' takes 'time'. These affective aspects of her work problematise political constructions of what counts as 'literacy achievement', 'growth' and 'progress' in language learning. Ironically, Emily must invest in an education system that objectifies her students and reproduces educational inequalities through the marginalisation of her students' ways of being and knowing.

Emily's account of analytical essay writing with one of her Year 9 students, Andres, communicates a sense of some of the complexities and challenges of working with multilingual students within the constraints of an Anglo-European Australian schooling system.

> Essay writing is hard . . . we are working towards writing a persuasive essay about homelessness. Breaking the essay structure into parts and colour coding works for some . . . If they get the formula it helps them. It doesn't get them doing much deep thinking, but it helps kick start them. Some kids are great at identifying quotes when they're talking, but it's another thing when they have to write it down.
>
> Today was a good opportunity to work with Andres who I could see was really trying to concentrate. He is incredibly disengaged all the time and he finds essay writing really hard. Most of the time, getting him to sit down and put a pen in his hand is incredibly difficult. So, today to actually have him listening, talking with me and see the wheels turning in his head is quite something.
>
> At one point he said, 'Oh Miss, I'm sick I wanna go sickbay'. He usually uses sickbay to get out of being in class and I said, 'Look Andres you're not sick. You're afraid of the work because it doesn't make sense to you. I'm gonna make it make sense to you one way or another and then you're not gonna feel sick anymore. So, let's sit down and let's do this together'. If I can get Andres to switch on to the lesson that's a pretty big deal for today.

[*I ask Emily to tell me a bit more about Andres*]

> Andre is from the Philippines. He misses Manila and he only speaks Tagalog. He won't speak English at home. He struggles to associate with anyone who doesn't speak Tagalog. He is upset about leaving Manila and is still trying to hold on to his life in Manila where he has family … He's been here about four years and has struggled with school.
>
> Last term we were doing 'Identity' through a film study, and this is when he told us some of this stuff. It was a fun topic and important because we got to find out about students' histories, backgrounds, family, and knowing students this way helps in volatile situations in the classroom … Getting him out of his mood was a positive thing today, but it's about coaxing. He genuinely wants to learn … I was a bit worried at the start of the lesson that things were going to get out of hand. Thankfully, they didn't.

Through this exchange we catch another glimpse of the tension between Emily's beliefs as a 'social constructivist' and 'a feminist' and the imperative to respond to the system of schooling that values the analytical essay. The formulaic approach to essay writing that is imposed on Andres and all secondary school students in Australia represents the normative Anglo-European values and assumptions about 'literacy achievement' that underpin the English curriculum. The appropriation of this mode of communication in the English classroom reinforces the use of certain discourses to represent 'reality' and 'experience' and measure success. In some ways, the privileged position of the analytical essay in the school curriculum conveys a sense of how certain cultural practices maintain their dominance in the classroom and wider society in ways that leave unchallenged the cultural and linguistic inequalities that they reproduce.

What is being described by Emily is intellectual work that is raw and messy. Nobody could accuse her of not having 'clarity' about what she wants her students to know, understand and be able to do. Her intentions are complex, diverse and not always visible. Emily tells us that language is more than just 'reading, spelling and essay writing' and her encounters with Andres illustrate some of the tensions between her attempts to create spaces in the English classroom for language to emerge from the mind and body of her students and the imposition of practices that make her students physically ill. For example, Emily 'coaxes' Andres to share some of his struggles since arriving in Australia because she knows that 'he genuinely wants to learn'. She consciously enacts this relational work at the same time that she imposes practices that estrange and marginalise. Emily recognises that this formulaic essay writing is silencing his tongue, making him 'afraid' and 'sick'. And although she wants to help free him from his prison, the keys she offers him are another kind of imprisonment, 'I'm gonna make it make sense to you one way or another and then you're not gonna feel sick anymore'. Both Emily and Andres must find a way out through the very school discourses, structures and hierarchies that incarcerate them. There is no resistance to dominant constructions of English here. Emily knows that to successfully pass Year 9 Andres must master a particular repertoire of linguistic and cultural practices; the kind reinforced by high-stakes testing programs such as NAPLAN and the final written school leavers exam. Emily also understands that her school's government funding is tied to her students' literacy performance on the NAPLAN at Years 7 and 9, and that these results also pass judgement on the 'quality' of her teaching.

'Resistance', however, arguably lies in Emily's willingness to engage with Andres's biography. At the same time that Emily was rehearsing formulaic approaches to essay writing with her students, she also enacted practices that gave her students opportunities to connect with the curriculum via their own experiences. It's significant that despite Andres's refusal to speak English, the conversation about identity and belonging allows him to share his story. And although Andres spoke in English, by talking with Emily and his classmates about his life in Manila, he spoke from his standpoint, making sense of his past and appropriating the English language for his own purposes. His story provided Emily an account through which she could understand his experiences, as well as her own. It also allows me to see that Emily's story is not just 'personal', but always something that is realised through her relationship with others and the social structures that mediate their interactions. In this sense, storytelling offers a form of 'Resistance' that acts as an intervention into existing practices in the world, highlighting the potential of stories to move beyond oppositional understandings of hegemony.

Ayers (2010, 137), amongst others (Anwar 2016; Britzman [1991] 2003; Doecke, 2013; Doecke, Anwar and Illesca 2017; Doecke and Parr 2009; Doecke and Pereira, 2012) have described English teaching as an 'encounter with autobiography', reminding me that Emily's biography is not simply an individual project, but is always a function of the contexts within contexts in which she is situated. Reflecting on her own practice gives rise to stories her students have told her, illustrating that it's not just a matter of Emily and the world, but of Emily within the world in which she finds herself responsive to the call of everyone around her. Through these stories there is the potential to enact an alternative understanding of language learning in the English classroom. These are excerpts from some of the stories that Emily's students shared during lessons.

> I was born in Afghanistan we had a perfect life. Suddenly one day we heard that the Taliban were looking for my dad to arrested him because they think that my dad was espial and accessory with American people . . . When the Taliban came and catch us we screamed and plead them to leave my father but it was of no use. They told us to leave if not we will kill all of you right there. (Meerza, Year 9)

> At home I was only allowed school friends . . . cause Talibans put mines on the ground so like if you go somewhere out of sight like you might step cause you never know where they are . . . My auntie's neighbour, um their house got bombed so my dad got really scared because the street was three streets away from our house so we went to Pakistan. In Pakistan we just sit there and wait. My Dad came by boat to here. A refugee. (Mohammad, Year 7)

> You know, I was born in the middle of a war. I was born in Pakistan when my parents had to move to Pakistan because of the wars in Afghanistan. So, I was basically born during the war, the Afghan and Iran war. (Shahzadi, Year 7)

Many of her students are refugees, who live with the uncertainty that comes from being on a Temporary Protection Visa (TPV) and who find themselves living in imagined spaces beyond the norms of the Anglophone world. Their stories challenge the linguistic and cultural constraints imposed on students by an Anglo-European curriculum. Emily's efforts to place her students' biographies at the centre of the English classroom inevitably come into conflict with the imperative to respond to the system of schooling that abstracts and displaces students through practices such as, NAPLAN, the dominance of the analytical essay and English only instruction in the classroom.

In fact, this is what Shahzadi reminds us of when in response to an invitation to share her story she pointedly states, 'You know, I was born in the middle of a war'. This is not only a sharp reminder that 'who' she is cannot be abstracted from the historical and political conditions of her birth, but it is also telling in relation to the tendency of other, more institutionally powerful discourses to marginalise people such as Shahzadi. For her, she is firmly in the 'middle' of the story she tells. Similarly, Meerza's words, 'I was born in Afghanistan we had a perfect life' are a poignant reminder that for many students, the West has not always been the centre of the universe. Meerza, Shahzadi and Mohammad bring with them valuable knowledge and experiences that create different entry points for responding to the lives of others. The tension between the imperative to teach formulaic writing practices and writing that seems to be driven by an autobiographical impulse conveys a sense of the potential of the English classroom as a site for the intersection of multiple biographies; a space where the multi-voicedness of storytelling allows competing ideological perspectives to enter the classroom and interact with each other without entirely absorbing the consciousness of the other.

What have I learned?

Education has always been a site of struggle and contestation; a terrain where politics, culture and the economy have waged an ongoing war over what knowledge matters, and therefore who matters (Freire, 1970; Giroux, 1997). Gramsci (1973) reminds us that consent and force always co-exist, and therefore Emily's professional practice and students' performances on International Day are as much the effect of the process of agency as they are of ideological becoming.

A focus on the rich particularities of everyday life through storytelling does not preclude inquiry into the larger contexts or determinants that shape the everyday. My experience of International Day not only demanded a response on my part to the stories the students were enacting but required me to think about the larger significance of this event as it might resonate within Australian culture and history. It also made me think about the relentlessly Anglophone character of Australian culture and the way this is reinforced in schools through curriculum and pedagogy that privilege standard Australian English and systematically ignore languages and cultures that students bring to school. And this is not to say that those languages and cultures should be constructed in a deficit way, that they should be acknowledged only to 'correct' students in their use of standard English. To the contrary, International Day brought home to me the rich linguistic and cultural resources that students bring to school, making me wonder how these 'funds of knowledge' (Moll et al. 1992) might provide a resource to enrich the experience of schooling for these students.

The dialogic and ideological 'fiction' created on stage showed me that it is not only in fiction and verse that authors blend languages, voices, perspectives and cultures to construct meaning. The plurality of voices and interweaving of discourses, creatively and imaginatively designed by students on the stage, challenged the linguistic and cultural constraints imposed on them by an Anglophone curriculum; a complex machinery involving standardised literacy testing and other forms of regulation and control. The students were speaking back to the narrative underpinning standards-based reforms, namely that education is all about giving them the skills and

knowledge to participate in the Australian economy. The creativity, good humour and irreverence of the students showed that they were deeply sceptical about that narrative.

This is not to say that they were openly rebellious or defiant. Their performances showed a subtle play with language and the other semiotic resources available to them that prompted me to use Bakhtin's (1981, 1984) understanding of heteroglossia and the dialogical character of language as a theoretical resource in order to understand the complexity of what they were doing. By 'heteroglossia', Bakhtin (1981) refers to the way words mean different things depending on how the speaker populates it with her own context and intentions. A word without context is 'a naked corpse' from which 'we can learn nothing at all' about the meaning of a social situation (Bakhtin 1981, 293). In this essay I attempt to highlight the multi-voicedness found in the biographies that emerge from Emily's classroom and the Melaleuca College stage by reconceptualising storytelling as a form of heteroglossia, as a continual ideological struggle over meaning through language. This Bakhtinian understanding of language as dialogic allows me to recognise how narrative encompasses the ideologies inherent in language used to represent experience.

The stories in this essay show how language can become a kind of dogma, a 'monoglossia' (Bakhtin 1981, 67) that ensnares the individual. However, Bakhtin's (1981) view of language as not only dialogic, but also by nature plural (heteroglossia) reminds me that all words are saturated with ideology and, as such, can both imprison and/or liberate. This is evident in the undercurrents of social and political commentary contained in detail such as the comment that Andres's essay writing induced sickness, Leila's fury in response to NAPLAN testing and the irony and humour prompted by racist language in the media.

Reconciling the similar with the different is a dilemma that confronts English teachers everywhere. This becomes more complex when we consider the ways that the historical, contextual and specific effects of diversity exist alongside the hegemonic effects of globalisation and specifically standards-based reforms in education. In this essay I have stepped away from the traditional stage of the English classroom to observe students at work on a different kind of stage as a way of interrupting the way that we currently think about language learning in the English classroom. For too long the focus has been on the setting of standards about what English teachers and their students should know based on 'data' and 'evidence' at the expense of the 'ways of knowing' (Heath 1983) and the 'funds of knowledge' (Moll et al. 1992) that students and teachers bring with them to the classroom.

Notes

1. See Graves and Rechniewski (2012) for an account of the cartographer, E.G Wakefield's influential proposal for a systematic approach to colonisation in *Letter from Sydney* (1829).
2. NAPLAN is an annual standardised testing program run by the Australian Curriculum, Assessment and Reporting Authority (ACARA) that measures reading and writing achievement of students in Years 3, 5. 7 and 9. In 2008 the Federal government introduced NAPLAN as a program aimed at increasing accountability and promoting quality teaching. Results of NAPLAN tests have been made public via the Myschool website since 2010 where the public can compare results (ACARA 2021).

3. On Demand Testing is a free and optional online test service provided by the Victorian Curriculum and Assessment Authority that teachers can use to assess students' literacy and numeracy skills. The tests are scored by the system and teachers receive feedback via computer generated reports (VCAA 2023).

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