Traveling tags: The informal literacies of Mexican newcomers in and out of the classroom

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Abstract

This article documents tagging as one of several informal literacy practices used by newcomer Mexican youth in a Midwest school and classroom setting. Specifically, it details how tagging travels into the classroom. Using the tool of interactional ethnography to analyze videotaped classroom observation data of an English Learner Science setting, I account for the instructional context in which three newcomer Mexican girls tag the whiteboard, focusing specifically on the social positionings they are able to construct in the classroom with and without these practices. Out of this analysis, I suggest that informal “literacies of display,” like tagging, might, in the classroom, be more productively regarded as “literacies of assistance.” They are proactive requests by newcomer youth for the help they need in developing cultural fluency between their transnational identity and the classroom context [Aikenhead, G. S. & Jegede, O. J. (1999). Cross-cultural science education: A cognitive explanation of a cultural phenomenon. Journal of Research in Science Teaching, 36(3), 269–287]. My account challenges facile interpretations of resistance that marginalize youth’s use of such informal literacies.

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Teenagers from Mexico enroll each year as new students at the high school in Captainville, Iowa.1 They do so because adult members of their families have come to that community to work at the Bensen meatpacking plant. Bensen’s reliance on a low-paid, unskilled Latino labor force, predominantly Mexican, has made it one of the Midwest’s most profitable hog plants. Enduring dangerous and exploitative working conditions (Human Rights Watch, 2004) is the trade-off these Mexican families make for a job that provides them an opportunity for long-term settlement and affordability in the U.S. while sustaining, with what’s left of their paycheck,
their families back in Mexico. Just as understanding their labor is an integral part of understanding a globalizing economy, documenting their children’s experiences in U.S. schools is an integral part of documenting schooling from a globalizing, transnational perspective.

When these teenagers enroll at Captainville High School, they take on the identity of a “U.S. Mexican” student, an individual of Mexican origin, either U.S. or foreign-born, who is attending American schools. This label conveniently allows scholars to trace and talk about the educational outcomes of the general U.S. Mexican student population, outcomes that are, by all accounts, distressing because they underscore persistent gaps in socio-economic opportunity and well-being that exist between dominant and non-dominant ethnicities. The number of U.S. Mexican youth, for example, who are not completing high school and college is higher than that of other major ethnic groups (Camarota, 2001; Portes & Rumbaut, 2001; Rumbaut, 1996). But the “U.S. Mexican” label, however, hides the important variability that exists within this group. The U.S. Mexican student population exhibits wide-ranging differences, among them language proficiency (in Spanish, English, as well as possible indigenous languages), educational history, and class, all of which can be related to length of residence in the U.S. Asking how newcomer Mexican adolescents position themselves with respect to U.S. Mexican identity affords us the opportunity to look beyond the label and attend to the lived experience of new hybrity, of learning to become “other” with respect to both the home (Mexico) and host (U.S.) cultures. This process, as Trueba (2004, p. 88) says, is the hallmark of transnational identity. If the 21st century stands to be one of continued “Mexicanization” of U.S. immigration (Lyman, 2006), this implies continued “Mexicanization” of U.S. classrooms. It behooves educational scholars, therefore, to pay close attention to the identity and literacy practices of newcomer Mexican students for how they inform understandings of the classroom as a heterogeneously constructed space (Kamberelis, 2001; Koole, 2003).

Three questions guide this article: (1) How do newcomer Mexican adolescents use informal literacy practices in acts of transcultural repositioning?; (2) How, when, and why do these practices travel into a classroom context?; and (3) What do these practices reveal about the identity processes of this particular student population? To address these questions, I draw on photographs, videotape, and interviews collected from my ethnographic research on and work with newcomer Mexican students at the high school in Captainville, Iowa. These data illustrate the varied ways that newcomer Mexican students use several informal literacy practices that, drawing on Guerra (2004), I will describe as acts of transcultural repositioning.

In the first half of the paper, I describe processes of transnational identity formation with respect to the phenomenon of globalization and the associated generation of informal literacy practices. I describe how I observed newcomer Mexican youth engage in informal literacy practices in the general school context as “literacies of display” (Hamilton, 2000) of their transnational identities. I raise the question of whether these practices travel or not into the classroom context and, if so, for what purpose. In the second half of the paper, I document how three newcomer girls engaged in tagging in a science classroom activity. Using the analytical tool of interactional ethnography (Castanheira, Crawford, Dixon, & Green, 2001), I detail the nature and sequence of interactions that led to the girls’ engagement in this practice, examining, in particular, the different social positionings they construct through both unsanctioned and sanctioned practices in the classroom. I suggest that when informal “literacies of display” travel into the classroom context, they constitute “literacies of assistance.” These are proactive requests by transnational youth for the help they need in developing cultural fluency between their transnational identity and the classroom context (Aikenhead & Jegede, 1999).

From this analysis, I put forth two significant claims. The first is that informal literacy practices of transcultural repositioning can and do travel from informal school settings to more formal
classroom ones, producing hybrid discourses (Kamberelis, 2001). The second is that these hybrid discourses are both the means and the end of the fluent movement between cultural frames that is not only characteristic of newcomer Mexican youth’s transnational identity, but essential as well to their student identity. What this latter claim means is that newcomer Mexican youth not only “bring along” cultural difference to the classroom as a by-product of their presence, but they “bring about” cultural difference in the classroom (Koole, 2003) as part of broader efforts to establish student-related social positionings that are meaningful to them. Viewed in this way, the informal literacies of transcultural repositionings are not evidence of students’ oppositional behavior, but of attempts at forging fluent or fluid connections between their cultural and student identities within a community context that does not readily articulate those connections. Recognizing acts of transcultural repositioning as such allows us to encourage teachers to affirm these practices as a way of enhancing the schooling experience of this population. It also helps us in our efforts to transform the ideology of homogeneity that, with or without us, the transnational student body is already subverting from below.

1. Globalization, transnational identity, and transcultural repositioning

Economic globalization refers to the internationalization of systems of production and the accompanying movement of bodies (through legal or illegal means) from one national sphere to another to serve in these systems. From participation in the globalized economic movement emerge new social processes in which individuals engage in ways of being and behaving that cross not only geographic and political borders, but cultural and linguistic ones as well (Brawley, 2003). The new social fields generated by such crossing are constructed out of “intricate webs” of new kinds of relationships (Goldin, 1999, p. 1). One of these is the necessary relationship of “becoming other” with respect to both the culture of origin and the host culture in order to successfully adapt to the transnational context (Trueba, 2004, p. 88).

Important to understanding transnational identity is recognizing the ways in which transnationals “take actions, make decisions, and feel concerns within a field of social relations that links together their country of origin and their country of settlement” (Glick Schiller, 1999, p. ix). This transnational orientation is distinct from that of the immigrant. Immigrants, as Trueba (2004) makes clear, have a “permanent affiliation with the host country and physical and emotional separation from the country of origin that provides them a clear adaptive strategy of assimilation to the mainstream society” (p. 41). As newcomers to the U.S., many without legal residency status and no long-term intentions of staying beyond what is economically necessary, most Mexican families in Captainville epitomize Trueba’s understanding of the transnational orientation. The field of social relations in which they move is dually linked to both the U.S. and Mexico. This dual linkage, as Trueba (2004, p. 88) suggests, is characterized by the process of “becoming other” to both national and cultural contexts. In “becoming other” to their country of origin and their host country, they become transnational, acting simultaneously within both Mexican and American social fields such that neither one alone (Mexican or American) is explanatory sufficient. Transnational identity, in this way, has unique “structures of feeling” (Williams, 1977); that is, it is construed through an individual’s experiences with “meanings and values as they are actively lived and felt” as part of a “practical consciousness of a present kind, in a living and inter-relating continuity” (p. 132, emphasis added). Importantly, understood as “structures of feeling,” the “practical consciousness” of transnational identity is social and historical. It arises out of human interaction influenced by relationships, institutions, [cultural] formations, and positions as they move into the always already-moving present (p. 132). Transnational identity, then, “cannot, without loss,
be reduced to belief-systems, institutions, or explicit generic relationships” (p. 133); it is not a
formed whole” but a “forming and formative process” (p. 133) though which individuals who are
“dually linked” to the U.S. and Mexico, “amidst the pressures and contingencies of everyday
practice” (Rampton, 2006; see pp. 344–345 for a helpful unpacking of Williams), experience and
act. One everyday way in which these transnational “structures of feeling” will be expressed and
reinforced is through linguistic practice. Guerra’s (2004) idea of transcultural repositioning is a
way of naming the linguistic practices of transnational individuals.

Transcultural repositioning describes the use of literacy practices to “move back and forth with
ease and comfort between and among different languages and dialects, different social classes,
and different cultural and artistic forms” (Guerra, 2004, p. 8). It is a skill, Guerra asserts, that
Latinos in the U.S. “self-consciously regulate and not simply enact intuitively” (p. 8). Transcultural
repositioning encompasses long-recognized literacy practices, like codeswitching, in which bi-
or multi-lingual individuals, in interactions with particular other individuals, purposefully take up
one of their particular languages under particular circumstances to achieve a particular pragmatic
purpose. While the use of these literacy practices in transcultural repositioning, Guerra says, is
key to understanding generalized U.S. Latino identity (p. 28), it seems particularly relevant to
examining the experiences of newer transnationals, of those who are learning to “become other”
to their communities of connection and to represent themselves as such.

When newcomer Mexicans arrive in Captainville, they often have no goals of a “permanent
affiliation” with the U.S.; most usually, their hope is to earn enough money to eventually return
to Mexico and buy or build a house. Yet, having come (and especially the longer they stay),
they are no longer puro mexicano (pure Mexican). Their children engage in literacy practices
that reflect and reproduce these transnational “structures of feeling” (Williams, 1977). These
practices constitute acts of transcultural repositioning that construct relationships of the “other”
to both home and host cultures.

2. Informal literacies, affinity discourse, and resistance

Globalization, to the extent that it is a phenomenon of a population on the move is, at its core,
a phenomenon of the body (Harvey, 2000). Sense-making about the place of these bodies in the
host culture and their ongoing connection to the home culture structures the way that transnational
individuals respond to their new social field.

One kind of sense-making has to do with how one identifies nationally. Claims of nationality
can be understood as part of a story people tell about where their bodies have lived or continue
to live and the meaning that body-location has held over time and distance, through both lived
and remembered/imagined experiences. In many cases, it is an acquired fictional narrative of
belonging in space and time to an imaginary community (Chavez, 1994; Trend, 1994, p. 225).
As such, one’s ability to write oneself into a particular text (or set of texts) of nationality constitutes
a form of literacy that is always in flux (Trend, 1994, pp. 234–235). This conceptualization of
literacy expands beyond the traditional understanding of language as revolving around the four
discrete skills of listening, speaking, reading, and writing. This conventional understanding of
literacy, when applied to classrooms, has served to limit attention to the sanctioned spoken and
written texts used by teachers and students in teaching and learning (Kress, Jewitt, Ogborn, &
Tsatsarelis, 2001, p. 1). Instead, understanding literacy non-traditionally as the ability to “write”
oneself into an acquired fictional narrative permits us to embrace multimodal forms of meaning-
making (Cope & Kalantzis, 2000; Kress et al., 2001; New London Group, 1996). In these, the
whole body is employed as a semiotic resource through dress- and gesture-based observable
actions of the body as well as unsanctioned written artifacts created by the body to signify spatial and temporal belonging.

These observable actions and objects can be used to ascertain how transnational individuals’ “structures of feeling” (Williams, 1989) have been drawn into the domain of communication (Van Leeuwen, 2005). This takes literacy to be both socially constructed and ideological. It is, as Castanheira et al. (2001) write, “a dynamic process in which what literate actions mean are continually being constructed and reconstructed by individuals as they become members of a new social group” (p. 356) and one in which “literate practices are developed as a collective develops and serve the purposes and goals of both the collective and the individual-within-the-collective” (Castanheira et al., p. 356). Acknowledging literacy practices as context- and power-embedded, and thus, multiple (Gee, 2000; Street, 1993) means foregrounding their situatedness (Barton, Hamilton, & Ivanič, 2000). The situated nature of literacies urges us to push past macro markers of race/ethnicity and to talk instead of the shared literacy practices of particular socially recognized discourse communities (Swales, 1990).

One kind of socially recognized discourse community organizes itself around the promotion of group affinity (Gee, 2000–2001, p. 99). In signaling one’s belonging to this particular discourse community, one is actively seeking to be “recognized as a certain ‘kind of person’” (Gee, 2000–2001, p. 99). One enacts identities and literacies that signal “allegiance to, access to, and participation in specific practices” (p. 105) that are meaningful to the target affinity group because of a shared interpretive system. This shared interpretive system may be based in culture or history and/or in other shared experiences. Individuals signal group affinity through “active bids” to be recognized as a certain “kind of person” by combining ways of speaking and writing, acting and interacting, using one’s face and body, as well as other tools in ways that denote or connote membership in the desired target group (Knorr Cetina, 1992, 1999; Latour, 1987, 1999; as cited in Gee, 2000–2001, p. 109). These “active bids” constitute Discourses, or socially recognized practices of “ways of being in the world” (Gee, 1996, 1999).

Much of the work on informal literacy practices as affinity-group Discourses has been done on gang-connected youth (see Hunt, 1996; Moje, 2000; Phillips, 1999; Smith & Whitmore, 2006). The major theme emerging from these studies is that gang-connected youth use, for example, graffiti tags to, as Phillips (1999) says, “create identity, share cultural values, redefine spaces, and manufacture inclusive or exclusive relationships” (p. 46). These authors collectively point to the importance of understanding gang-connected affinity-group Discourses in relation to these youth’s marginalized status vis-à-vis the dominant group. Only Moje (2000) and Smith and Whitmore (2006), however, squarely take up the question of what the literacy practices constitutive of these Discourses mean for schooling. Both authors gesture toward an understanding of a culturally responsive pedagogy (Ladson-Billings, 1995; Gay, 2000; Villegas & Lucas, 2002) that would thoughtfully integrate youth’s knowledge of these informal practices with those sanctioned formally by school.

The conversation about integrating informal and formal literacies, however, is not without controversy. This controversy entails differing perspectives on whether, in fact, informal literacy practices do indeed travel into more formal contexts and, on a related point, if they do travel, then once transferred or translated in this way, whether they remain recognizable to other members of the informal discourse community. Using Bernstein (1996), Moss (2000), in her work on media literacy, insists that informal literacies of the everyday home and community context, which are learned in a specific way in a specific context to serve a specific purpose, do not travel beyond their local zone of production: “[They do] not set out to travel beyond [their] particular setting and will not be conceived of as having currency beyond that” (Moss, 2000, p. 52). Even if they did,
other argument goes, they would be so substantially altered in making the trip into the authoritative context of school that they would become something completely different altogether. They would be “run over,” as she says, “by school routines and school ways of doing things.” (p. 59). However, Bloome, Carter, Christian, Otto, and Shuart-Faris (2005) allow for the possibility that literacy practices do travel across contexts even positing that such traveling is “a critical dynamic in the constitution of power relations among different cultural groups and different social institutions” (p. 54). Morrell and Duncan-Andrade’s (2002) example of using hip-hop culture to enhance academic literacy is an example of a kind of culturally relevant pedagogy premised on the idea that informal literacies do indeed have traveling potential.

Moje (2000) points out that, on this question of whether informal literacies travel out of their local contexts and into the formal classroom setting, we have a dearth of scholarship from which to draw. While research on literacy practices in and out of school exists, “we know little about how adolescents . . . weave their unsanctioned or alternative literacies together with academic literacies,” she writes (p. 653). We know that cultural- and linguistic-minority youth use their affinity-group Discourses to create “safe houses” (Canagarajah, 1999, p. 121) within an otherwise dominant and domineering institution. Whether to “de-toxify” (Taylor, 1996, as cited in Smith & Whitmore, 2006, p. 180) or “to be part of the story” (Moje, 2000) of schooling, marginalized adolescents use informal literacy practices to construct “a culture of underlife behavior” that is lived out “right under the teacher’s nose” (Canagarajah, 1999, p. 121).

Smith and Whitmore, albeit within a framework that examines the social construction of failure, ascribe the cultural underlife that marginalized adolescents create to intentional “not-learning” (Kohl, 2001, p. 10, as cited in Smith & Whitmore, 2006, p. 172). Moje (2000) cautions against this resistance-oriented explanation. Her concern is that such an explanation advances the idea that youth use these literacies in only reactive, oppositional ways (p. 634). Instead, Moje suggests that a more productive way for the conversation to proceed is to examine the proactive ways that marginalized youth use informal literacies in “exploring possible worlds, claiming space, and making their voices heard” (p. 1). Her discussion echoes that of Brown (1996) who lamented anthropology’s fetishization of the resistance concept. While acknowledging the continued salience of the ideas of domination and subordination in anthropological work, Brown reminds us that “The task of cultural anthropology remains, as it always has been, to illuminate how human beings use their emotional, intellectual, aesthetic, and material resources to thrive in a range of social settings” (p. 734). In what follows, as I examine how newcomer Mexican youth use informal literacies to make sense of their new transnational school and social identities and, more particularly, as I explore how their acts of transcultural repositioning constitute a kind of fluent movement between cultural frames essential to their student identity, I aim to be “resisting resistance” (Brown, 1996) and taking up Moje’s call for a proactive reading of the role of informal literacies in teaching and learning.

8. Observing transcultural repositioning in a “Mexicanizing” school

Captainville High School (CHS) looks like any other high school in Iowa. It is, however, distinguished by having an English Learner enrollment nine times the state average. Nearly one-fourth of CHS students are Latino, the majority Mexican and non- or limited-English proficient (Captainville Community School District Annual Progress Report to the Community, 2003–2004). The phenomenon of “Mexicanization” in Captainville is not anomalous. Over the last three decades, immigration from Mexico has come to account for almost 40% of the total national immigration increase, up from below 800,000 in 1970 to a swelling 8 million in 2000 (Camarota,
Increasingly, Mexican immigrants are bypassing traditional gateway states, like California and Texas, and moving instead to the American heartland (Lyman, 2006). Midwest meatpacking communities, like Captainville, are undergoing a rapid demographic transition for which local and state educational personnel are severely underprepared (U.S. G.A.O., 1998).

The Mexican youth whose informal literacies I document here were almost through their first school year in Captainville. They had ample time, therefore, to acquire an understanding of what being Mexican-in-the-U.S. or “U.S. Mexican” meant at CHS. It is out of a hierarchical social context in which newcomer Mexican youth were at the bottom of the “pecking order” of race-, class-, and language-based privilege, trying to be “steadfast to their ‘Mexicanness’ despite the ethno-racism of Chicanas/or and Anglos” (Bejarano, 2005, p. 33), that acts of transcultural repositioning at CHS emerged. These acts illustrate the process of transnational identity-making as one of learning to “become other” to both their home (Mexican) and host (U.S.) communities.

The data I present come from a larger ethnographic project, now in its fourth year, whose overarching purpose is to document the educational experiences of newcomer U.S. Mexican students and their families within the demographically transitioning context of Captainville. As a critical ethnographer, my work in that context has been guided by a fundamental understanding that structures of power and their traces exist, in a dynamic sense, everywhere and that, because of their ubiquity and variability, accounting for them and their power effects requires a multi-sited and non-linear research sensibility. Importantly, it is not attesting to the existence of the power structures themselves that interests me, but their influences in and on the lives of individuals. As Marcus (1998) writes, “The most venturesome works in the trend of ethnographies are profoundly concerned with the shaping and transformation of identities (p. 59). Thus, as a (venturesome) critical ethnographer involved with newcomer U.S. Mexican youth and seeking to bear witness to the lived experience of globalization within their schooling, my aim has been to detail their collective and individual identity negotiation within a transnational context.

I undertake this aim from a social location very different from that of the students and families I study. I identify, among other positionings, as white, middle-class, and a native-born speaker of English who has achieved fluency in Spanish. I have acquired my research interest and abilities through formative experiences, both personal and professional, that cumulatively nurtured a sense of cultural and linguistic exploration as well as advocacy. Among these my undergraduate education in “Hispanic Studies,” my high school and undergraduate study-abroad experiences in Spanish-speaking countries, and my pre-doctoral work, in the early 1990s, as both a bilingual instructional aide and an amnesty claims processor in Sacramento, California. This constellation of experiences prepared me to readily adopt the understanding, encouraged by my doctoral training in sociocultural studies of education, that among the identities-in-negotiation that ethnographers should attend to is, in fact, their own (Marcus, 1998). In the latter of the 4 years I have spent doing my ethnographic research in Captainville, I have come to know some students and families so well that I have been welcomed into their homes, not only in Captainville itself but back in Mexico. These relationships have undoubtedly had a transformational impact on my identity at both a personal and professional level such that my sense of self “in the field” in those communities has been radically altered and expanded since the time I began my project. The data I share here comes from the first 2 years of my involvement with Captainville. As I will reflect on in my conclusion, I have had no continuing interaction with Gabriela, Aalia, and Rosa, the featured students in this article, and so cannot draw on those to supplement my analysis. My discussion, however, has inevitably been influenced by the closeness I have come to feel to the newcomer U.S. Mexican community in general in Captainville and to the responsibility I claim, as their ally, to make visible their often unacknowledged and unaffirmed attempts to participate meaningfully in their schooling.
More specifically, I collected the data I use in this article over a 2-year time period. The first 2 years of my Captainville involvement, I was in the high school context in either a researcher (Year One) or teacher–researcher (Year Two) capacity. I collected Year One’s data as part of an initial seed-funded project on academic language instruction in EL Science contexts. My role in that EL Science setting Year One was limited to research – I was behind the videocamera or the audiorecorder and had little other interaction with the students. The data set I collected from Captainville Year One (Captainville was just one of five focal sites) consisted of five videotaped classroom observations of instruction in the EL Science classroom setting, one teacher interview, and three student interviews – one each with a teacher-identified “high-”, “medium-” (Aalia, who will be introduced later), and “low-” performing student. These were conducted and transcribed by a Spanish-speaking graduate research assistant from Mexico. Because of my growing interest in Captainville as a demographically transitioning community, I approached the EL Science teacher about doing follow-up co-teaching work with her in that setting the following year. The data set I collected Year Two, when I returned to that setting (with a different group of students) now in a teacher–researcher role, consisted of my field notes and the artifacts produced as a result of my interaction with the students (assignments, photographs, and videotape). More particularly, this article draws on photographs from Year Two and, from Year One, one videotaped classroom observation and the one student interview (Aalia’s).

Referring to my involvement at CHS in terms of Year One and Year Two is simply meant to provide a chronological sense of my research; it should not, as I have alluded earlier, imply any linear approach to data analysis. In reality, I had nearly forgotten about acts of transcultural repositioning that I had videotaped Year One until, in Year Two, I began to witness more of, and different varieties of, these acts. It was only after my Year Two exposure to these students that I began to make connections across them and theorize about them as informal literacies of transcultural repositioning. This required going back into the Year One transcripts I had come to analyze for insights about identity negotiation (Vann, Richardson Bruna, & Perales Escudero, 2006), academic language instruction (Richardson Bruna, Vann, & Perales Escudero, 2007) and social and economic reproduction (Richardson Bruna & Vann, 2007), looking anew for evidence of students’ informal literacies and linking those to similar practices in Year Two photographs and videotape. Thus my ethnographic research process has been one of revisiting data collected and interpreted for one purpose and viewing it through a different lens. The result for me has been a richer sense of the data and a fuller appreciation for the complexity of the school context and its relationship to these students’ lives.

My presentation of the data mirrors this non-linear analysis. I start by sharing three major informal literacy practices I discerned from my Year Two involvement with the students: tagging, branding, and shouting out. Then I go back to my Year One data and analyze how I saw one of these practices in particular, tagging, enacted by three newcomer Mexican girls in the EL Science classroom during a pig dissection activity.

4. Tagging, branding, and shouting out

In this section, I address my first guiding question, “How do newcomer Mexican adolescents use informal literacy practices in acts of transcultural repositioning (Guerra, 2004)?” I do this by describing the three informal literacy practices I observed among these youth at CHS. I support and extend work by Moje (2000) that attests to how youth use a repertoire of written (i.e., graffiti, poetry), body (i.e., dress, gestures) and oral (i.e., accents, dialects) practices to gain access to “the particular space” (Moje, 2000) of desired peer group affiliation. In this case, that desired
space is transnational identity. My purpose here is not to provide a rigorous media analysis of these visual images, although I believe such an analysis (see Hamilton, 2000) could fruitfully be applied. My goal is to simply share the visual data I collected as part of the larger ethnographic context of informal literacies of transcultural repositioning at CHS. I devote more attention to the first informal literacy practice, tagging, than I do the other two, branding and shouting out, as tagging is the focus of the analysis that follows in the next section.

4.1. Tagging

The first informal literacy practice I document is tagging. I use the term “tagging” to refer to the way in which newcomer Mexican youth write the name of their country, region of origin, or themselves (often, though not always, in highly stylized form), in public spaces. While accounts of tagging in the literature associate it with gang-connected activities of marginalized youth, there was, in fact, no strong gang presence in the Captainville community. Therefore, my use of the term is meant to invoke the purpose of tags as announcing and reinforcing affinity-group identity and presence rather than to imply that a gang context was a central feature of newcomer Mexican group affiliation at CHS. I use this term, then, to deliberately connect to the literature on tagging in order to extend our understandings of the ways in and purposes for which this genre of informal literacy practice is employed.

The following photos provide examples of tagging at CHS. Photos 1 and 2 are taken right outside the front entrance of the high school. The first (Photo 1) is of a table on which a student has written in black permanent marker “Jalisco,” the name of a frequent sender state of Mexican immigrants to the U.S. Importantly, the backside of the table provides information on the territorial nature of tagging. Etched too lightly to show in photos, other students have written in, one place, “White Pride.” This has been crossed out and now reads, “Brown Pride.” Additional text says “Fuck White Boyz.”

The second (Photo 2) is of a bench on which a student has written, again in black permanent marker, “Mexico.” Notably this bench is positioned directly at the center of the school’s entrance right under a flagpole flying an American and Iowan flag.

Photo 1. Tagged table.
Evidence of tagging was also visible in the general classroom context. Students would tag the names of their hometowns on classroom whiteboards (Photo 3), bulletin boards (Photo 4), or even on the supplies I provided them (Photo 5). Note that Photos 4 and 5 bear the tag “Villachuato.” Villachuato is in Michoacán, a south-central state in Mexico. Like other central states, notably Guanajuato, Michoacán is one of the most frequent sender states of Mexican immigrants to the U.S. The ranchito (small rural village) of Villachuato, in particular, is regarded as the unofficial sister city of Captainville.

4.2. Branding

While other researchers have documented the informal literacy practice of tagging (Hunt, 1996; Moje, 2000; Phillips, 1999; Smith & Whitmore, 2006), the second major type of informal
literacy practice I witnessed at CHS has not, to my knowledge, been previously examined. It was a less conventional literacy practice in that it did not involve the written or spoken word, but was, instead, entirely gesture-based. I call this practice “branding” because it is an example of literacy on the body (Hamilton, 2000, p. 30). Newcomer Mexican youth engage in branding when they actively draw attention to the clothes or accessories they are wearing that bear any sort of Mexican
or Spanish-language reference. What is important to understanding the act of brandings is not the dressing style per se of these youth (which may be, in fact, not that different from what is typical in their communities of origin), but the fact that youth draw conscious attention to their dress through self-referential, deictic (Pozzer-Ardenghi & Roth, 2005, p. 278) gestures.

Unlike tagging, which apparently was produced as a more private act because it involved, in some cases, the defacement of school property, being publicly on-camera was a trigger in branding. When I brought out my camera, the students wearing such images engaged in conscious action to bring attention to their Mexican and/or Spanish-language imagery. In the following photo (Photo 6), taken outside my academic building during the visit of these students to my campus, note the way in which the students are intentionally engaging in activity that brings attention to the cultural imagery on their clothing. A boy on the left, Omar, is positioning a backpack, bearing a Mexican emblem, conspicuously right under the building sign which is the photo’s central focus. A boy in front, Eduardo, is holding out his Spanish-language t-shirt. The girl in front, Araceli, is wearing a soccer-style t-shirt, in Mexican colors, bearing an image of the Virgin Mary. What the picture does not capture is the fact that, when I asked the students to pose for this photo, Araceli deliberately removed her sweatshirt to make sure the t-shirt would be clearly seen. This intenctionality is reflected in her erect, pride-bearing posture, as shown in Photo 6.

4.3. Shouting out

The last informal literacy practice I witnessed is what I refer to as “shouting out.” In African American-derived popular culture, giving a “shout out” to someone means giving them special public recognition. Newcomer Mexican youth’s “shout outs” consisted of a particular kind of special public recognition, one not directed at a particular individual, but, instead, at their particular hometowns in Mexico. “Shout outs” at CHS were unsolicited, spontaneous vocal tributes to their communities of origin. Significantly, like branding, they were performed for the camera. To my knowledge, like branding, this informal literacy practice has not been previously examined.

The following photo (Photo 7) captures the instant right before this shouting out practice begins. The boy in the center, Javier, raised his arm and initiated the calling out sequence by
vocally recognizing his home state, “Guanajuatoooo!” The other boys quickly raised their arms in response and added their home states to the vocally created list of regions-of-origin.

5. Para honrar a la patria: informal literacies as literacies of display

When I asked the newcomer Mexican students with whom I worked why they tagged, branded, and shouted out, the answer was invariably the same: para honrar a la patria (to honor my homeland). In this way, the impulse to announce and celebrate their close ties to Mexico was a defining feature of their transnational identity that distinguished them from the immigrant, in their words, chicano, community at CHS. For this reason, I regard these informal literacies as “literacies of display” (Hamilton, 2000). According to Hamilton (2000), literacies of display are those that signify “individual or group identity” (p. 20). As such, they comprise affinity-group Discourse (Gee, 2000–2001, p. 99) and illustrate the salience, at CHS, of a transnational discourse community.

In each of above-documented informal literacy practices, the students use the artifacts they had available in the setting – school grounds, bulletin boards, white boards, supplies, clothing, accessories, and their voice, posture, and gestures (and in the cases of branding and shouting out, the camera) – to position themselves as a mexicano “other” with respect to their new U.S. context. What is important here is not whether or not these practices are markedly different from what Mexican youth do in Mexico (indeed, the avowal of regional loyalty, for example, is common among Mexican nationals), but the meaning construed by these acts given that they are in the U.S. context. All of these practices take elements of the immediate U.S. context and, onto those, inscribe youth’s membership in the imagined transnational community of Mexicans living outside of Mexico (Trend, 1994). This repositioning marks these youth against the norm of “American,” but also positions them as “other” to their context of origin in Mexico. (Indeed, these practices would not make sense at all in the Mexican context for their purpose is to mark their identity against the dominant one.) In generating these practices for this particular purpose, these youths are reflecting transnational identity as a salient feature of the CHS context and also reproducing transnational identity as one of meaning for them. In this way, they are constructing
their new hybridity, writing themselves, as Harvey (2000) says, into the text of their acquired transnationalism.

6. Tagging travels to the classroom

In the second section of this article, I address the second of my guiding questions: “How, when, and why do informal literacy practices of transcultural repositioning travel into a classroom context?” I start by providing contextual information about the EL Science class and the pig dissection activity. Then I present my approach to the videotaped classroom observation data. Finally, I share and examine a narrated excerpt from the observation data that features the informal literacy practice of tagging. My interest here is in demonstrating how tagging can travel from the school to classroom environment, and to illustrate the purpose served by such traveling. From my analysis, I will restate Moje’s (2000) claim that resistance-based orientations to informal literacies are insufficient in understanding the uses to which youth put these practices in their school lives.

6.1. The research warrant and interactional ethnography

Bloome et al. (2005, p. 29) insist that there must be a warrant for attending to particular social processes in schools. In this regard, to go looking for transcultural repositioning simply because he research on Latino literacy says it happens (called enumerative referencing, Ellen, 1984, as cited in Bloome et al., 2005, p. 39) is misguided. Something must emerge from the setting to warrant a particular social process as the focus of examination. For me, the Year Two images of transcultural repositioning presented in the previous section constitute the warrant for my return to and reanalysis of my Year One data.

Given the repeated acts of transcultural repositioning I observed in my teacher–researcher relationship with Mexican newcomers at CHS, I returned to the previous year’s five classroom observation transcripts of the EL Science classroom interested to find what I thought I recalled seeing—acts of tagging being carried out in the middle of classroom activity. In the fourth transcript, approximately 25 min into instruction, I located the literacy event I was interested in: three newcomer Mexican girls, some simultaneously, others consecutively, and one repeatedly, tagging the white board. While I recall that it was not uncommon for students to tag the whiteboard before or after class, this event was unique in the data in that, as I will show, the informal, unsanctioned literacy acts are so clearly juxtaposed against the formal, sanctioned literacy acts required by the class lesson.

After identifying the tagging event in the fourth transcript, I began to construct a data table out of that transcript that would capture elements of the classroom context I anticipated would be important to my analysis. To do this, I drew on the theory and method of interactional ethnography. As Castanheira et al. (2001) describe it, interactional ethnography examines “what is constructed in and through the moment-by-moment interactions among members of a social group; how members negotiate events through these interactions; and the ways in which knowledge and texts generated in one event become linked to, and thus a resource for, members’ actions in subsequent events” (p. 357). Since I had become interested in transcultural repositioning as an affinity-group practice of transnational identity, the focus, in interactional ethnography, of the individual in interaction with other people (Bloome et al., 2005, p. 7) mutually constructing each other’s social identities seemed particularly promising. Reviewing the videotape of the classroom observation multiple times, I generated a data table, examining achieved social positionings and interactional uptake as modeled in Bloome et al. (2005, pp. 124–125) and discourse genres as modeled in
Kamberolis (2001, pp. 98–104). This intense review process allowed me to see how the three girls’ achievement of a particular social identity through tagging was accomplished within larger structures of classroom discourse. The result was a 35-page data table of the 50-min pig dissection activity in which the tagging practice occurred. Due to page constraints, only a narrated account of the segment of the data table corresponding to the tagging event will be shared here.

While I identified this transcript, and a particular segment of this transcript, as the primary data source for analysis because it contained, in the tags, the informal literacies of transcultural repositioning with which this article is concerned, I have elsewhere (Richardson Bruna et al., 2007; Richardson Bruna & Vann, 2007; Vann et al., 2006) used other transcripts in the larger data set to describe aspects of teacher–student interaction in this classroom setting. Thus, I bring into this analysis more insights, gleaned from a broader examination of this context, than can be accommodated here. In this respect, I have a significant advantage. Castanheira et al. (2001) note in their work that not being familiar with the larger instructional context in which particular classroom literacy events take place is a significant disadvantage (p. 357). Because I am familiar with the larger instructional context and can situate the events in the transcript within a protracted series of interactions, I will share relevant information as it serves to further the interpretive process.

6.2. EL Science and the pig dissection

As indicated earlier, I observed the traveling tags during a pig dissection activity in the EL Science classroom at Captainville High School. The symbolism of these nested contexts (Captainville, EL Science, pig dissection) merits some remarks. Captainville is a hog plant community so pigs are vital to its economic well-being. Many members of Captainville’s Mexican population, the majority of them undocumented, work at the plant “cutting pig.” The EL Science classroom consists nearly exclusively of newcomer Mexican students whose families have just settled in Captainville to work the plant line. In sum, in this classroom and community context, to have Mexican students dissect pigs is to evoke a highly race-, language- and class-segregated social and economic situation (Richardson Bruna & Vann, 2007). The segregated status of the Mexican community is further evoked due to the fact that the students are asked to do the pig dissection without the necessary equipment or conceptual framework for a “scientific” reading of the activity. Because this is the “EL Science” classroom and not a “real” science setting, students have had to push their desks together to create a long dissection “table,” and are working without any lab coats, gloves, or specialized tools. The teacher, Linda Crabtree, made explicit her awareness of the symbolism inherent in the activity at the start of the pig dissection when she announced to the students that the pig dissection would prepare students for future work at the plant. Linda was a white, middle-class, native-born English-speaking female with limited proficiency in Spanish and limited formal preparation related both to work with linguistically diverse students and to the teaching of science. She was, however, generally well-liked by the students who regarded her as one of a few teachers at CHS who, because she spoke some Spanish, was interested in and wanted to be informed about their lives. Since I have written extensively elsewhere about the problematic context of the EL Science context and Linda’s problematic framing of the pig dissection, despite her good intentions (Richardson Bruna & Vann, 2007), I will limit my preliminary remarks here to the context immediately relevant for understanding the tagging practices as acts of transcultural repositioning.

Students, on previous days of the pig dissection have engaged in different kinds of acts of transcultural repositioning (the tagging takes place on Friday and the pig dissection activity has
been going all week.) Up to this point, however, these acts of transcultural repositioning have not involved the kind informal literacy practices documented in this paper. They have consisted, instead, of verbal interactions, with the teacher, about the experience of tending to pigs as farm animals or doing dissections in high school, or, among the students themselves, of working as butchers. All of these verbal interactions have Mexico as their spatio-temporal referent. Three examples of these acts from previous days of the pig dissection activity are the following:

1) **I used to work** a lot with those animals in Mexico.
2) **I used to work** with that kind of trays but in you know like a in la prepa . . . the high school in Mexico.
3) Me recuerda cuando era matancero. *(This reminds me of when I was a butcher.)*

Linguistically, these acts of transcultural repositioning are achieved through explicit reference signaled by the words “in Mexico” and/or implicit reference signaled by use of the habitual past tense. In effect, all these acts make a connection between the pig dissection activity and the students’ Mexican frame of reference; that is, they reposition the event transculturally, building bridges between the immediate act in the U.S. classroom and the students’ previous experience in Mexico. Thus, the tagging practices employed by what I will now refer to as the “tagging trio” are consistent with acts of transcultural repositioning that have taken place previously in this context, albeit attained through different means and, as I suggest, for different purposes.

5.3. **The tagging trio: Gabriela, Aalia, and Rosa**

The observation of the last day of the pig dissection documents how three girls, Gabriela, Aalia, and Rosa, move in and out of that activity as they come to, repeatedly, in the case of Aalia, tag the whiteboard. The following narrated account details a 5-min segment of class time, approximately 25 min into the activity, in which this tagging trio executes their tags. It captures the moments right before Gabriela does the first act of tagging and ends after the last of Aalia’s three tags.

The teacher, Linda Crabtree, spends the beginning of the pig dissection lesson encouraging students to get started, explaining the purpose of the day’s activity (to measure the pigs’ intestines to determine whose pig may be the oldest), and demonstrating the required procedures. The dominant participant structure up to this point has been full group. Approximately 25 min into the activity, Linda moves into a dyad structure with Claire, one of two non-Spanish-speaking girls in the class, both from Sudan. The conversation they have returns to questions raised earlier in the week by the students about the origin of the fetal pigs they are dissecting and the fate of the pigs’ mothers (Richardson Bruna & Vann, 2007).

The segment of interest begins with Linda’s conversation with Claire about the pigs. This conversation immediately precedes the tagging trio’s literacy event. Linda has moved away from the whole group participant structure and the discourse genre of demonstration that launched the activity, and has moved into a mode of teacher–student duolog, characterized by a more “true dialogue” genre, with Claire. Claire gently challenges Linda about her reason for obtaining the fetal pigs by asking, “And you just want to collect them?” Marco, who has been listening, takes up Claire’s line of question, asking Linda how many mothers were killed, “¿Cuántas mamás
mataron? [How many mothers did they kill?].” When Linda tells him that the pigs are not from the same mother, he makes a joke, another kind of gentle challenge, out of her response. “¿No? El mío se parece y aquel se parece. Eran de la misma mamá, yo creo [Really? My pig and that pig look alike. They’re from the same mother, I think].”

It is while Linda is involved in these interactions with Claire and Marco that Gabriela and Aalia first tag the whiteboard with the words “Mexico” and “Guanajuato.” Gilberto, who happens to be at the front of the room where the whiteboard is, immediately erases both tags. Rosa, who has taken notice of the tagging activity while engaged in the pig dissection, walks away from the task and produces, with Aalia, a second set of tags—“MEXICO” and “Guanajuato.” When Rosa erases hers, Aalia immediately moves to the center where Rosa had been and reproduces another “Guanajuato.”

Now Linda turns her attention back to Marco, gently admonishing him for moving away from the dissection, “Where is my partner? Marco? Tenemos más [We have more].” Getting back into the activity, he mimics the demonstration genre Linda has just used in a previous interaction with a student to show her he knows what to do: “Primero mimo este y luego mido lo demás [First I measure this and later I measure the rest].” It is in this mode that Marco registers Aalia’s tags with a shout out – “Guanajuato!” Marco’s shout out serves as a boundary signal for Linda who closes down that interaction and returns to a dyadic structure with Claire, checking in with her by asking, “Claire, are you doing OK?” Aalia produces yet another tag, her third, on the very left-hand side of the white board. It reads, again, “Guanajuato” (see Photo 8). As she finishes, Aalia immediately returns to the table and becomes interested in something about the pig dissection, saying something, unfortunately inaudible, to the students there.

Linda returns again to Marco, who has asked her if he is finished: “¿Ya es todo, maestra? [Is that all, teacher?]” She replies within a dyadic structure, revoicing the directions to measure the intestines. Marco uses that interaction as an opportunity to make a joke, another gentle challenge to Linda’s statement. “¿Y los amarro? ¿Los amarro? [And I tie them together, I tie them together?]” Linda, reacting to Marco’s joke as another boundary signal, moves away from him and calls out
to the full group, “Write it down, Write it down.” As she does so, she walks past the tagged white board and taps her finger where Gilberto’s first measurement has been written. Simultaneous to his, Aalia moves back to the white board, underlining her “Guanajuato” tag that is already on the right-hand side. While Aalia does this, Ana is writing her pig’s intestine measurement under Gilberto’s. Next, Aalia writes her name above the underlined tag as Estela is adding another intestine measurement to the list. The transcript segment ends with Aalia walking away from the whiteboard, looking, for just a slight moment, directly into the camera.

These tags remain on the whiteboard as students continue to add other intestine measurements. Gabriela, Aalia, and Rosa participate in the lesson activity, removing their pigs’ intestines and measuring them with meter sticks. At the end of class, Gabriela, who initiated the unsanctioned tagging practices, erases them from the whiteboard, leaving untouched the sanctioned literacy practices of the official classroom activity. Her act of erasure indicates a negotiation of difference between these sanctioned and unsanctioned practices and of their institutionally desired “permanence” and “impermanence.” My videotaping served to subvert the differentiation that Gabriela enacts with her erasure by archiving both practices, thus making it possible for us to bear witness to the tagging trio’s tags long after they are “gone.”

5.4. Positionings and personhood

The tagging trio’s activities take place during a time in the lesson when Linda’s interactions were predominantly with two students, Claire and Marco. In these interactions, through more individualized participation structures and less authoritarian discourse genres, these students had gained footings (Goffman, 1981, as cited in Kamberelis, 2001) with Linda that closed the distance between her teacher positioning and their student positioning. One way they did this was by engaging in instructional conversation with Linda about very real issues at the heart of the social practice of science, those related to the ethics of using animals for science’s sake. Another way they did this was by posing gentle challenges to Linda by expressing incredulity at or making jokes about what she had said to them. They enacted agency, connected the activity to a broader context, and, in so doing, integrated themselves actively into the classroom activity. According to Bloome et al. (2005, p. 4), these three elements are important for examining “personhood” in classroom language and literacy events. Importantly, none of the tagging trio had opportunities in the lesson to engage with Linda in the way we saw Claire and Marco doing.

The difference between Claire and Marco, on the one hand, and the tagging trio, on the other, is that Claire and Marco were able to construe their personhood through a sanctioned form of classroom interaction—conversation with the teacher. Gabriela, Aalia, and Rosa achieve their personhood through unsanctioned means. An examination of the quality of these girls’ limited interactions with Linda indicates the constrained nature of “personhood” achieved through those interactions.

For example, during the entirety of the 50-min lesson, Gabriela had two interactions with Linda. Both of these were admonitions and position Gabriela as a non-compliant student. Twice, at the beginning and end of class, Linda calls out to Gabriela to get involved in the activity. Notably, Gabriela does what Linda asks her in both instances and it is she who, without being asked, erases the tags, which she in fact initiated, when the lesson is done.

Rosa, of all the tagging trio, comes closest to getting the amount of attention Claire and Marco receive, but the nature of that attention is strikingly different. She shows perseverance in trying to get Linda’s attention when her pig’s intestine breaks by repeatedly tugging at Linda’s sleeve and saying, “Ayuda” [Help]. Important in understanding Rosa’s decision to solicit help is that,
earlier in the lesson, she has commented to Pedro that she doesn’t understand how to do the pig dissection (“No sé cómo hacerlo [I don’t know how to do it]”). Significantly, Linda is engaged in one of her duologs with Claire when Rosa tries to draw her away. Eventually, Linda does turn away from Claire and gives Rosa her full attention, but instead of discussing key content-related issues about the social practice of science, as was the case with Claire and Marco, Linda simply tells Rosa what to do, using a series of imperatives (i.e., use a paper towel, lay the intestine out, see whose is longest). Rosa’s social positioning in both of these interactions with Linda is that of an ashamed or incompetent student. Still, Rosa respected Linda’s teacher authority and, as the end of the class drew near, she approached Linda three separate times requesting permission to put her pig away before that permission was granted.

Very notable is the fact that, Aalia, the primary tagger, had no interactions with Linda whatsoever until the very end of class. Just as Rosa deferred to Linda’s teacher authority before putting her pig away, Aalia, immediately after Rosa, approached Linda to get permission to wash her hands. Aalia had expressed revulsion at the pig dissection from the very beginning of the day’s activities, holding her shirt over her nose to shield herself from the smell and holding her hands to her throat as if to keep herself from vomiting. “¿Puedo lavarme las manos? [Can I wash my hands]?” she asked, repeating it once again because Linda did not hear. In Aalia’s case, however, her request is denied. Linda insisted she wait until class was over. Thus, in her only interaction with Linda, Aalia is positioned as a deferential student whose wish, despite her deference, is not granted.

6.5. Tagging intertextually

These interactions (or lack thereof) between Linda and the tagging trio take place in a context rich in intertextual connections. Intertextuality refers to the ways that “knowledge and texts generated in one event become linked to, and thus a resource for, members’ actions in subsequent events” (Castanheira et al., 2001, p. 357). Marco, for example, takes up Claire’s instructional conversation with Linda about why she got the pigs by asking how many mothers were killed to get the pigs. Through his humor, he even takes up her gentle challenge to Linda’s teacher authority. Marco also takes up the directions Linda has been giving to another student about how to do the measuring to respond to her in a way that shows that he knows what is expected. In fact, general classroom activity on this day begins with a striking sequence of intertextual uptake involving the tagging trio.

As Linda asked the students to get their pigs out of the plastic bags, Gabriela, who, as we now know, Linda had to press to participate, started rolling up her sleeves. Within seconds, Aalia was rolling up her sleeves as well. Moments later, Linda cautioned the class against spills and Rosa subsequently sealed her plastic bag. Gabriela walked to the back of the room to get some paper towels, followed shortly after by Aalia. These girls’ movements, at this point in the activity, were clearly in sync with Linda and with each other. There seemed to be an unspoken agreement among them that they were, as Linda says, “getting with their pigs.” In this way, there was a tacit understanding that they were positioning themselves as students during that phase of the lesson.

Similarly, when the tagging began, there was a tacit understanding that the three girls involved were engaging in transcultural repositioning. The recognizability of this practice to them, traveling as it had from the general school context into this classroom, is made evident through the very intertextual way they took up each other’s tags. It is epitomized in Marco’s coupling of their tagging, as one act of transcultural repositioning, with another—his shout out. The girls’ agency, contextual connection, and classroom integration, their “personhood,” is achieved through the intertextuality of their and Marco’s informal literacies of transcultural repositioning.
7. Resisting resistance

What is important about the previous discussion is that the nature of the tagging trio’s interactions with Linda and their intertextual uptake does not position them as resistant students; these girls, though able to achieve very limited sanctioned social positioning vis-à-vis Linda, are willing to follow Linda’s lead and stick with the pig dissection, albeit reluctantly, until the end. The fact that the tagging starts during Linda’s instructional conversations with Claire and Marco may create the impression that these girls, without structure, become off-task and use the freedom of the relaxed participant structure to play or resist. But, following the tagging, when the tags are still on the white board, these girls remain on-task while Linda takes a 4-min phone call. While Linda is on the phone, these girls have the most liberty of all because Linda has been drawn out of the activity all together. Yet it is during this time that these girls do the measuring and recording of their pigs’ intestines that is, indeed, the required objective of the activity. This leads me to believe that a different interpretation, beyond resistance, is needed.

Further, in truth, these girls are a trio in name only; the videotape data does not suggest any close friendship ties between them that would easily explain the intertextuality of their behavior. The tagging, for example, is carried out without conversation, comment, or other overt coordination amongst them. For this reason, their act of informal literacy in the classroom requires an explanation that doesn’t dismiss it as the clever machinations of a few girl friends.

In this pig dissection activity, we see the juxtaposing of different languages, participant structures, genres, and frames of reference, some of which get taken up by other participants. For this reason, it makes sense to understand informal literacy practices of transcultural repositioning, emerging as they do from students who have new hybrid identities as transnationals, as part of a larger hybrid discourse practice in the classroom (Kamberelis, 2001). Informal literacies of transcultural repositioning are just one way that teachers and students work together in contexts “juxtaposing forms of talk, social interaction, and material practices from many different social and cultural words to constitute interactional spaces that are intertextually complex, interactionally dynamic, locally situated accomplishments” (Kamberelis, 2001, p. 86). The tagging trio’s tags are just another stratum in this layering of cultural frames (Goffman, 1974 as cited in Kamberelis, 2001, p. 90). They are not on the margins at all, but embedded within and arising out of those multi-cultural, multi-discursive interactions. As part of a hybrid discourse practice, as Kamberelis (2001) points out, they have the potential “to help children forge productive linkages between the disparate worlds of school and everyday life” (p. 120). From this standpoint, I suggest that newcomer Mexican students’ informal literacies of display, when they travel into the classroom, serve, additionally, as informal literacies of assistance, indicating the need to attend to the cultural fluency between their transnational identity and the classroom context (Aikenhead & Jegede, 1999). To say this doesn’t mean that their display orientation goes away. Indeed, the data show Gabriela, Marco, and Aalia to be conscious of the videocamera, looking at the camera at various points in the lesson; in this regard, they may be using the camera, as noted in the practices of branding and shouting out, as a deliberate part of the semiotic resources of their transcultural repositioning, as a way of saying, “Look at me, I’m mexicano and I’m here!”

But tagging, as an informal literacy of display, takes on additional meaning when it travels into the classroom. It can serve as a “pivot” in classroom instruction, signaling the need for the

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3 When I gave a presentation on this research in Mexico, a man approached me afterwards and said that, when he crossed the border illegally to work in the U.S., he felt this way whenever he had his photograph taken. “Because you never know who may see it,” he said, “and you want them to see that you made it.”
teacher to attend to these learning-identity relations (Kamberelis, 2001, p. 120). In other words, when informal literacies travel, they can be read as proactive calls for help. Rosa explicitly voiced her need for help when she approached Linda, asking “Ayuda [Help].” What does it mean to understand Rosa’s tagging as a similar request for assistance?

8. Ayuda [Help]: informal literacies as literacies of assistance

Conceptualized from a literacies of assistance standpoint, what does the tagging that takes place in this EL Science classroom tell us about teaching Mexican newcomer youth? What, to invoke my third and final guiding question, does the hybrid discourse practice resulting from traveling tags reveal about identity, literacy, and learning involving transnational student populations?

To answer this question, I want to turn to what I know about Aalia that might help us see, from her perspective, where her tags are coming from. Aalia was identified by Linda as the “medium-ability” student in the EL Science classroom. She arrived, at age 17, in the July before the current school year, with her cousins. She was shortly thereafter joined by her father and brother. They had been working at the plant in Captainville for several years prior to arriving, apparently, for first Aalia, then her mother, who joined them in January, to come. Aalia said she spoke no English when she arrived and spoke just a little at the time of her interview. She liked being in Linda’s class because Linda switched between the two languages and this helped her understand what was going on. Aalia was not bothered at all by Linda’s lack of grammaticality in Spanish and seemed unaware of it until it was called it to her attention in the interview.

Although both of her parents never finished elementary school, Aalia had been attending a preparatory high school in Mexico. According to her, she was taking coursework in the social but not the natural sciences. She said that science in general was boring, but that Linda sometimes made it fun. She admitted she did not pay the best of attention. When asked about her literacy practices at home, Aalia said she did not read much for pleasure but she liked to write poems. She did this on the weekends because “no tengo nada que hacer (I don’t have anything to do)” (Interview, May 3).

Aalia’s story is typical of newcomer Mexican students in Captainville. They come, a few members at a time, as part of larger community and familial networks (Winters, de Janvry, & Sadoulet, 2001). Parents have low levels of education and see their children’s ability to learn English as a valuable skill that will serve them well both here, if they stay, and back in Mexico, if they return. Coming to the U.S. as an adolescent, Aalia already has her literacy dispositions in place. For her, writing is a tool she uses imaginatively to brighten her dull weekends. Similarly, we could say, Aalia uses tags to brighten her dull coursework.

There is nothing about Aalia to suggest that she is defiantly oppositional. As newcomers to the U.S., she and her transnational peers are not aware of the distressing outcomes associated with U.S. Mexican youth, outcomes which point to a relationship between length-of-time in U.S. schools and lower levels of achievement (Groger & Trejo, 2002; Portes & Rumbaut, 2001). She has not been saturated yet with the routine symbolic violence U.S. Mexican youth encounter (Bourdieu, 1977), although we see what form that can take for transnational students in Captainville in Linda’s framing of the pig dissection as preparation for work at the plant (Richardson Bruna & Vann, 2007). Aalia does not seem oppositional . . . yet; she just seems bored. And she is using her tagging, her transcultural repositioning, as a way, as Moje (2000) says, of “exploring the possible worlds of” (p. 1) her transnational identity in the EL Science classroom. She is making herself at ease as she negotiates, through her fluid or fluent movement between the sanctioned pig dissection and the unsanctioned tagging activities, a potentially “hazardous” border crossing
between the cultural worlds of her home community and school science (Aikenhead & Jegede, 1999, p. 273).

Aikenhead & Jegede (1999, drawing on Costa, 1995; Phelan, Davidson, & Cao, 1991) note that one important factor in students’ successful border crossings into science is the assistance they receive from teachers. Linda assists Aalia by speaking in Spanish (to the extent that she can), but as is clear from previous accounts of this classroom (Richardson Bruna et al., 2007; Richardson Bruna & Vann, 2007), she does not take cues from students’ acts of transcultural repositioning. She never says, “I see that you are showing me how important your cultural identity is to you. Tell me more.” She never asks about their science learning in Mexico. Aalia and other students are left to do that work alone.

Tobin (2005) argues that students’ cultural enactments in science, like acts of transcultural repositioning, are places where adaptive science teaching can happen. Teachers can, instead of shutting such practices down or ignoring them, incorporate those into their teaching and nurture, in this way, students’ fluent movement between the “everyday” cultural spaces of their homes and hat of science (Warren, Ogonowski, & Pothier, 2005). In this way, traveling tags are instructionally significant as signposts. By “bringing about” in the classroom the differences they “bring along” to the classroom (Koole, 2003), students’ use of these informal literacy practices in the classroom exemplify the work they do, in the absence of teacher work, to make themselves at ease and develop, out of the resources available to them, cultural fluency. Regarding the traveling tags as informal literacies of assistance allows us to move away from, in this case, unfounded ascriptions of resistance, and to focus instead on the proactive work newcomer Mexican youth do affirm their personhood and to make their student lives matter.

9. Meeting in the middle: toward a transnational pedagogical space

This article provides an interactional ethnographic account of the informal literacy practices newcomer Mexican youth employ to reflect and reproduce their transnational identities. It documents how this identity construction is carried out not just at the margins of school life, but through the “the daily life of classrooms” (Bloome et al., 2005, p. xvi). “Every event,” as Bloome et al. (2005) write, “provides opportunities for people to create new meanings, new social relationships, and new futures” (p. xvi). Through tagging, branding, and shouting out newcomer Mexican youth are re-writing their interpretation of themselves, their connections to others, and their lives. Returning to Williams’ (1977) “structures of feeling,” these informal literacy practices are elements and evidence of a cultural process, of “specific feelings, specific rhythms” that construe “specific kinds of sociality” for transnational youth that educators need, as Williams says, to acknowledge and welcome, and scholars to more fully discern and understand (p. 133).

The “Mexicanization” of U.S. immigration means that classrooms will be increasingly filled with transnational students, like Gabriela, Aalia, and Rosa. Understanding classroom discourse from the standpoint of heterogeneity that hybrid discourse practice provides (Kamberelis, 2001) means not relegating these girls’ informal literacies to our peripheral vision as something tangential to “real” teaching and learning. As Kamberelis (2001) points out, hybrid discourse practices can serve as “powerful scaffolds” in contextualizing learning and provide “productive linkages” between the home and school contexts. They also have the potential to serve as “disruptions” to traditional power relations (p. 120) because they highlight how transnational students’ literacy, learning, and identity development is generated out of a context of having to negotiate competing subject positions in different Discourse communities, home and school among them. The account I have given here helps attest to such negotiations, filling in just a piece
of a larger hole of evidence that plagues the extant scholarly accounts of schooling (Canagarajah, 1999, p. 117). As most studies of the schooling of U.S. Mexican youth have been carried out in traditionally “EL states,” such as California and Texas, that have a long history of educating this population, this work is among few others (see, for example, Lincoln, 2003) that contributes data from a different region. The Midwest context is timely given this is where we witness Mexican immigration, more than anywhere else, on the rise (Lyman, 2006).

“The body,” as Harvey (2000) writes, “is an unfinished project.” “[It] continues to evolve and change in ways that reflect both an internal transformative dynamics . . . and the effect of external processes” (p. 98). If we take Harvey’s words as a charge, then researchers with an interest in transnationalism need to be attending to the “internal transformative dynamics” that accompany the transnational experience and how these will shape the acquired narrative of identity and manifest themselves in transnational literacies. The transnational experience is, for these students I introduce here, part of the language environment. This language environment must be attended to within ecological frameworks of language practice, pedagogy, and policy (Van Lier, 2000, as cited in Hornberger, 2003, p. 322).

A promising pedagogical movement aligned to the ecology of transnational literacies is the “third space” movement in the educational literature (see Cook, 2005; Gutierrez, Baquedano-Lopez, Alvarez, & Chiu, 2006; Gutierrez, Baquedano-Lopez, & Turner, 1997; Moje, Ciechanowski, Kramer, Carrillo, & Collazo, 2004; Pahl & Kelly, 2005). Drawing on geographic (Soja, 1996) and postcolonial (Bhaba, 1994) perspectives on the spatial and the cultural, this “third space” literature shows great potential to take the pedagogical lead on questions related to the teaching and learning of transnational students because it speaks to the in-between-ness of the dually-“other” identity that characterizes transnationality as well as the interpellation of that social hybridity into the physical school and classroom environment, including the literacy practices of and in that environment. Moje et al. (2004), contributors to the “third space” movement in the educational literature, call for school policies to reflect an understanding that learning for non-dominant students is more than just about acquiring content knowledge itself; it is about acquiring the ability to “navigate and negotiate the oral and written texts of multiple Discourse and knowledge communities (p. 68). In this way, a “third space” pedagogical framework can accommodate the understanding that, when tags travel into the classroom, they do so as informal literacies of assistance, signposts of the work students do, and the help they may need, in making the crossing.

To close, research on transnational populations can be characterized by a “now you see them, now you don’t” disadvantage: the students whose actions the researcher attempts to interpret and explain so carefully one year are not around the next to provide confirmation. With this research then comes an amplified risk, as Brown describes it, of “violating the complex and creative understandings of those for whom we presume to speak” (p. 734). Regrettably, I do not know what Gabriela, Aalia, and Rosa would make of this account. However, if one simple purpose of tags is to leave a record of a presence, then the tagging trio’s tags achieved a fortuitous purpose. Had the camera not captured these tags, they would have been fleeting; instead, they were imbued with permanence, first on the videotape and now in this written account. This experience, if nothing else, is testimony to the productive force of attending to students’ informal literacies from a proactive standpoint (Lankshear & Knobel, 2002, p. 9). Just as returning to my data to examine informal literacies has even further enriched my understanding of this context and the writing I do about this context, so too do the hybrid discourse practices they generate stand to enrich what we know and how we participate, as researchers and teachers, in school and classroom life.
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References


