

NEGOTIATING FRAGMENTS: IMPLICATIONS OF THE DIASPORIC CONSCIOUSNESS  
ON TEACHING AND LEARNING

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## **Abstract**

This paper aims to consider how the diasporic consciousness can be taken up in schooling as a construct that challenges multicultural and anti-racism frameworks. It looks at notions of identity and identities as fluid constructs that are contested, navigated and challenged as we consider student connections to their multiple narratives and journeys. In considering how the theory of diaspora plays out in classroom structures, we can envision how the curriculum can be used to open up spaces for this process to take place. Through connecting theory to practice in this paper, I hope to create a conversation for the possibilities of pushing teaching and learning beyond static constructs as we think about how all students can enact who they are becoming beyond the margins of conventional practice.

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My parents would have been thrilled to know that this step of my journey was finally finished. The writing of this paper sadly outlived both of them, but their constant support and love for me is a part of who I can be, always.

Finally, this is for the two most important people in my life, my children, Riyan and Amelia. You love, you are forever loved, and I give thanks for who you are becoming every single day. Your enduring love and joyful smiles keep me hopeful, and renew my passion to do what I do every single day.

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## **Introduction:**

In 2004, I began writing this paper after completing my course work for the Master in Education program. Throughout my courses, I continually grappled with the ideas around diasporic identities; ideas that spoke to the journeys of my ancestors and also, journeys of the students that I encountered in my work as a classroom teacher. The complex work of negotiating identity within learning spaces is difficult and emotional and what I found is that there was not enough discourse in schools around what that meant for teaching and learning. My original intent to frame this work was to use the medium of literature as a study of diasporic theories. Fludernik (2003) states that the "mythicizing of the homeland can best be performed through literature, which is thus both the creator and the critical analyst of diasporic consciousness" (xxix). Literature provides an emotive way to work with the dilemmas of belonging and exile and provides a metaphor for a personal exploration against a theoretical plane.

Exploring literature using a diasporic consciousness necessarily takes into account fragmented memories, identities and places. The fact of discontinuity from one's homeland, imaginary or real, provides readers with universal appeal (Rushdie, 1992). It also provides students with a way to negotiate their own ways of working with the now and present. Through post-colonialism, we have become attuned to the notion that culture, race and identity are socially constructed; through literature that addresses these themes, we can engage critically and emotionally with these concepts.

Exploring literature that stems from these concepts allow a reader to delve into new histories, new geographies and new homelands. People are not objects of these ideas; they are the subjects. And with these subjects come all the myriad of experiences that these stories allow. They are the tales of travellers who have braved many routes, willingly and unwillingly to find

their new place in the world. Of course this new place is ever shifting and sliding as life unfolds. Home becomes a shared space where memories and reality mesh and churn to create a delicate balance of here and now. Through a study of narrative, identities blur and spin to create the diasporic person that emerges.

When narratives allow for a multiplicity of voices and new ways to understand the world; thus, the reader becomes a participant in the reading and re-reading of text. And texts are the bodies of the students who sit in front of us. Through this participation, we can position ourselves against a backdrop of experience that may help to clarify our own dislocation of self. Beginning my writing with this in mind was challenged however by personal life events leading me to have to withdraw from the program. Some years later, I had the privilege to be able to revisit my original plan and think more deeply about my work. My own reflections on my personal narratives, and my subsequent research in schools and with students have become part of the discussion of my own questions and wonderings around the space for pedagogical change. Rather than use literature to engage in the discussion, I decided to use the narratives of students, as well as my own theories and practice, to engage my thinking around the ideas of the diasporic consciousness. The classroom narratives shared in this paper come from a report that I produced for the Literacy and Numeracy Secretariat branch of the Ministry of Education that explores how identity or identities are taken up in schooling. The research I conducted helps to frame how understanding the diasporan consciousness plays out in the conversations and thought processes of teachers and students. This work, conducted over three years, helped me to consider the relationship between diasporic discourse imply and theoretical frameworks such as culturally relevant pedagogy that have become the impetus for many schools and school boards in the province

Classrooms "provide the terrain for elaborating strategies of selfhood and communal representations that generate new signs of cultural difference and innovative sites of collaboration and contestation" (Bhabba, 1994, 269). Home is negotiated and identities are negotiated within that space. Location becomes forged through ambivalence and indeterminacy. Examining identities in this framework allows for students to explore the boundaries of here and there, outsider and insider, East and West, all the spaces and the margins in-between. These fluid constructions can naturally be applied to the human condition then for as Rushdie (1992) states, "our identity is at once plural and partial. Sometimes we feel that we straddle two cultures; at other times, that we fall between two stools" (15). And so as educators, how do we create spaces for students to forge and negotiate new identities out of existing ones? How does this shifting landscape impact our pedagogy, our praxis?

## Chapter 1: Starting Points

### *Negotiating Fragments*

*I hear them boxing me in*

*Their eyes create the entity that stands before them*

*Yet my language eludes them for it is the language of their people  
My clothes betray their idea of  
the woman I should be*

*My land is not the land of rickshaws and chai wallas*

*It is not even the land of my mother and father*

*For my journey is not what they think*

*Swahili and Dar-as-Salaam replace their notion of the Taj*

*I am a settler and I am from colonizers*

*But I will always one of the colonized.*

*I live in the land of the Maple Leaf but the Union Jack still bears more of my soul*

*My strength comes from being woman and yet I am fragmented with what that implies*

*For it is in the margins and the spaces in between that they divide me and name me and tell me  
who to be*

*So that I am all of those things and none of them too*

As I sit writing this poem, I am reminded that as I try to make sense of my fragments, they elude and play with my attempts to concretize them. As I am, I am also becoming. And as I become, where and who I am change. These identifications, for that is what they are in specific contexts, still do not capture the essence of my consciousness. So I start with my diasporic self to

anchor my theoretical framework. For when we renegotiate our own self-contradictions, we can identify conscious and unconscious processes at play (Farred, 1996, 92).

The condition of diaspora has extended discourses of race, identity and culture. As these concepts have evolved, been contested and re-evaluated, theories of diaspora have contributed to changes in their meanings. This paper engages in a conversation about the concept of diaspora and how it impacts changing views of identities. In particular, I explore how diasporic theory challenges traditional notions of anti-racist and multicultural education. Specifically, I focus on theory and narratives of experiences (mine and those of students) as a means for exploring and thinking about what this means for teaching and learning.

The idea that fuels my passion to explore notions of diaspora is the idea that we are always becoming and evolving. This fact is essential to cultural processes and culture being forged. So many of us have multi-place connections and have social networks that span many countries (Yon, 2000). How can theories of education reach and encompass all the identities we are and are becoming? Difference and continuity are continuously shifting and sliding to blur the edges of what forms a cultural identity. This "complexity exceeds the binary structure of representation. At different places, times, in relation to different questions, the boundaries are re-sited" (Hall, 1990, 228). Thus, students may feel a connectedness and disconnectedness to their selves, their peers, their histories, curriculum used in their classrooms, and to their families and teachers.

This project was initially fuelled by my own quest to understand the many routes and roots that encompass me. My grandparents, parents and brother were born in East Africa, the descendants of immigrants from the Gujarat province of India. My father came from a family of business people, the youngest of seven children. His father died before he turned one year old

and his mother was sickly; thus he raised himself, surrounded by the traditions of his ayah, the land, and tales from his older siblings. My mother's family saw the UK as the land of possibilities; my mother was sent to school there as a teenager and with the help of her sister, sponsored her younger siblings and her parents to join her. They were taught to blend in and be more "English" so that religion, language and dress became a blurred kaleidoscope of belonging and dispossession. My immediate family moved to England when my brother was three months old and seven years later, I was born. We lived in the UK until I was eight, whereupon we moved to Vancouver, British Columbia in the middle of the recession. It was there that I heard my first racial slur directed at me and had my racial and ethnic identities questioned. It was in Vancouver that I slid between working class and middle class and the economic aspirations of my parents. My educational journey subsequently took me to Montreal, back to Vancouver and finally Toronto. Home was and always is fleeting and contentious. Who I am and how I find connection is always a tapestry of threads; threads that extend to across the globe and take me to places I have only dreamed of.

I am not searching for an answer to my questions of identity, and I do not purport to provide answers to students who want me to guide them to fulfill their own identification quests. Identity is slippery and fragile and can be what it is in the time that it needs to be. Through my research, however, I have learned to accommodate my fragments and use them to shape different parts of me. Through transformation and difference, then, multicultural and anti-racist education needs to expand and make new spaces to reach those students like me, whose identities are not easily defined and pigeonholed.

The days when I was asked to be a spokesperson, to be the "other" should be long gone, yet today educators still call upon our students to celebrate their differences in the name of

appreciation and inclusivity. Multicultural days and festival of dance, food and art permeate the hallways of our schools though heritage month assemblies. I was once asked by my principal to bring samosas to a multicultural school barbecue. I declined replying that if I were to represent myself, I would bring Marmite (a bland sandwich spread generally found in the UK) sandwiches. I was met with a confused look and I left my principal contemplating all the constructs of Britishness. It is essential that if concepts of multicultural and anti-racist education is to succeed, then we need to move beyond appreciating this tired sameness/difference binary and instead move toward accepting, engaging and critically rethinking difference as a means to allow identity to encompass all the roots and routes that create them. As Brah (1996) asks, "how do we construct politics which do not reduce everything to the economy of the same and which do not essentialise differences?" (15). For in the end, our analysis of difference ultimately ends up categorizing our students in the same essential category of "other". Through this paper then, I hope to extend these conversations and present thoughts and challenges to the concept of how diasporic consciousness can be taken up in schools and the potential of curriculum to answer to and be an answer to these ideas.

## Chapter Two

The notion of diaspora has become a popular one. Since the proliferation of the multicultural movement in the 1980's, tales of emigration and immigration have focused around leaving home and leaving roots. As settlement took place, the diasporic consciousness combined with new locations and identities so that pluralism moved into hybridity, which moved into identity politics (Fludernik, 2003). In the classrooms of the world however, the ever-transforming concepts of race and culture elude most students as they are still taught, challenged and discussed under the umbrella of fixed attributes and essentialism. Examining the dynamic of diaspora entails examining how the way we think about multicultural and antiracist education should be extended. Globalisation has allowed for scattered routes and roots and it is these scattered belongings that are creating diasporic spaces. It is these spaces that have allowed for discourse around what race, culture and identity are.

Through providing a critical space for discourse, multicultural and antiracist education needs to expand to allow students to negotiate the slippery slope of identity. It is important to note here that contrary to popular consciousness, there should not be a need to define identities or culture in the first place. Identity and culture are constantly being negotiated. It is essential that if the concept of multicultural and antiracist education is to succeed, then we need to move beyond appreciating sameness and instead, move toward accepting, engaging in and critically rethinking difference. By engaging in the discourse of diaspora, a renewed way of understanding of multiculturalism and antiracist education can take place.

Diaspora in its original use referred to the dispersal of people from their homelands and the encompassing journeys and desires needed to return to such places, no matter what the odds were. These journeys encompass forced and voluntary migrations which could mean any number

and kinds of journeys: conquest and colonisation; capture or removal of a group through slavery or other forms of indentured labour; expulsion and persecution; being forced to flee in the wake of political strife; conflict and war; as part of the global flows of labour (Brah, 1996).

Robin Cohen elucidates nine features of all diasporas in *Global Diasporas* (1997). He states that all nine features intertwine and entwine to create different diasporic experiences. These features include a dispersal from the homeland that is often traumatic; an expansion from the homeland in search of trade, work or empire; a collective memory of the homeland; an idealistic notion of the homeland; a return movement; strong ethnic consciousness; troubled relationships with new homes and hosts; a feeling of solidarity with other co-ethnic members; and the possibility of a new life in a host country that is tolerant. These features all centre on the idea that there is a home or root and that new journeys begin at this root and end in a consciousness that harks back to this root.

Thus, where Cohen's features do outline many characteristics of diasporic communities, they do also limit understanding of how diasporic consciousness works today. As the global village gets smaller and smaller, and trends in immigration change, there are many movements of people that occur because of individual reasons. Fludernik (2003) refers to these diasporas as "self-styled diasporas" (xvi). Therefore, diasporas connote a history, a story, and a tension between here and there that often manifests in political organization in the host society. This tension also manifests itself in the politics of identity. The definition of diaspora, then, should not be limited to populations that have a historical collectivity of pain and suffering. It should be extended to peoples that "maintain, in spite of their dispersion in different political organizations, a reference to a collective identity and some form of solidarity-a matter to be analyzed in its complexity-should be extended to all such dispersed populations if it is to have a heuristically

fertile meaning" (Schnapper 1999, 249-250). Ultimately, I believe, that the notion of diaspora provides us with theoretical tools that makes it an instrument of knowledge, particularly in the realm of race, culture and identity.

One clear function of a diasporic community is the journey from somewhere to a new place of belonging. This image of the journey at the heart of the concept is about putting roots elsewhere other than just in the homeland. These journeys are neither casual movements, nor temporary stays. These journeys are about moving oneself into a new land, while still maintaining ties to a homeland. Thus, as previously established through the argument about Cohen's (1997) features, dispersal can take many forms. The situatedness of a group depends on the type of route a group has taken and how it then positions itself in relation to the new host society, as well as the homeland. Brah (1996) talks about the historical specificity of each journey and dispersal, however, the crux of the issue for my purposes is more about how the diasporic community now relates to its new host. As well, the travellers in the group will all have different stories of movement so that "the concept of diaspora centres on the configurations of power which differentiate diasporas internally as well as situate them in relation to one another" (183). Within each group diaspora, there is an interweaving of multiple stories and experiences.

These multiple journeys, then, provide an understanding that there is no set type of diasporic experience that can be pigeonholed into one definition. With different historical circumstances, the diasporic consciousness comes to mean the many routes and roots that have been taken. Each journey, as well, lends itself to a different reading. With each new generation that comes to have ties with the new land, there is a different acting out of the experience. Class, gender, race, religion all create different readings in the new land.

With each journey to a new host country, then, there comes a new home and the concept of home begins to take on different meanings. As each new journey involved new roots, the homeland is not the only place of home. Home can then refer to the place of desire found in the diasporic imagination so central to Cohen's diasporic experience. Home can also refer to the new lived experience (Brah 1996). A creative tension is created then between the trauma of separation and dislocation, and the site of a new hope and new beginning.

The relationship with the homeland (imaginary or not), so central to the diasporic identity, becomes ambivalent. Bammer (1994) states that as we attempt to pin down our locale, our sense of identity becomes "marked by the peculiarly post-modern geography of identity" (xii). The idea of here and there becomes collapsed; therefore, the assumption that culture, identity and place are inexorably linked is undermined. A discourse of "roots" may invoke nostalgia but the home, through different routes, becomes multiple. A diasporic consciousness encompasses everyday life experiences that are "built in relation to stories of movement and displacement" (Yon 2000, 17). Through this consciousness, a negotiation is made between "back home" and the "now".

The concept of diaspora refers to multi-place associations and multiple social networks that span different countries. There is no fixed origin or essential set of attributes in a diasporic identity. One can be at home where one lives, as well have connections, histories, and memories from many other places. Therefore, the concept of home takes on a new meaning once again. Home is the place of desire and the new lived experience in one form of consciousness. Identity evolves with each new journey so that "roots" combine with "routes" to create a new identity or personal consciousness. Thus, acknowledging the place of diaspora in theory also means being

able to accept critique of claims that fixed identities are dependent on some sort of centre from where one came and to where one hopes to return. Identity is wrapped up in movement.

The ambiguity of the homeland allows it to be an ideological construct for many individuals. But that does not make it any less significant. Many communities may still be able to vote in their original homeland, or may make financial contributions to political causes back "home". Thus, the borders of home are limitless; they extend beyond the place of residence (Anderson 1998, 16). The borders of home can also be replicated in the new home. A "preoccupation with the homeland may express itself in attempts to replicate selected (real or idealized) homeland features, especially in urban settings where the diaspora population density is sufficient for the creation of institutions, so that the community is more than "imagined" (Safran 1999, 280). This often leads to ghettoization, a phenomenon that "can have all the social and emotional networking one needs without going outside one's own ethnocentric community" (Parameswaran 2003: xlviii). Home can be neither here nor there, yet still be here and there.

Cohen suggests that an essential part of diasporic consciousness is the desire to return to the homeland. I would argue that it is not the physical return to the homeland that is essential to the diasporic experience, but rather, the related sense of connection or disconnection. This connection can be conceptual, so that the myth of a homeland is evoked. In this way, we live both here and there simultaneously, sometimes without understanding desires for a home we have only ever heard of or seen in literature, art, music and dance. Rudolph, a student interviewed by Daniel Yon (2000) in his ethnography, *Elusive Culture*, is able to have his boundaries of "here" and "there" collapsed so that the imaginary homeland "out there" is brought "here". His home in Toronto has associations with his home in Jamaica; his friendships with those from outside Toronto are nurtured via the Internet, and stories from Jamaica are retold via

the television and the retellings of collective memories. A discourse of roots may invoke nostalgia, but the home, through different routes, becomes multiple -both Toronto and Jamaica are full of new relationships and connections. Diaspora encompasses "being at home in the place where one lives while still living with the memories and shared histories of the place from which one or one's ancestors have come"(Yon 2000: 17).

Safran (1991) outlines how the relationship between the diasporic community and the homeland will have a third dimension: the relationship with the host society. These relations can have advantages and disadvantages for the diasporan community. He notes that often diasporic communities are treated as the "other", or welcomed and exploited "for the sake of the domestic and diplomatic interests of the host country" (92). The homeland may exploit the community's place in the new place of residence, or the host country may exploit relations with the physical homeland. Ultimately, host country and homeland sentiments are reflected through expressive behaviour. Safran states that "the complex and flexible positioning of ethnic diasporas between host countries and homelands thus constitutes a prototype ... that [can be used) for defining, centering ... and that social scientists may use in analyzing the relationship between "insiders" and "outsiders""(95). Home, then, becomes intrinsically linked with notions of inclusion and exclusion and "it is centrally about our political and personal struggles over the social regulation of "belonging"" (Brah 1996, 192). Thus a power dynamic may be set up between the mainstream culture and the community in question.

Yon (2000) believes that diaspora essentially refers to the historical experience of movement, the dispersal of people. It also refers to the complex processes of making identities and cultures among a group of peers in the new home. It is in the diasporic space that these connections and associations are nurtured and juxtaposed. According to Brah (1996), a diasporic

space is a place where "multiple subject positions and identities are proclaimed, juxtaposed, contested and disavowed"(209). A school then becomes the ideal place for an enactment of identities. Here, through relationships with one another and through multi-place associations that are invoked by everyday encounters, individual subjectivities are forged (Yon 2000). These associations are kept alive through memories and friendships. The school becomes a place where immigrants from all countries can come together to create new histories in relation to where they are now. In addition, it is through the literature that is studied in the classroom that the emotional side of identity can be explored. Thus, the idea that there is an immutable link between place, culture and identity is again undermined; popular culture combines with first and second hand memories of other places creates new identities and associations. Post-modern literature that works with these notions are stories that engage new histories and journeys in a mythical way, appealing to the diasporic consciousness.

In the diasporic space, inhabitants are not only migrants and their descendants, but also those who are viewed as indigenous or native. The diasporic space becomes a converging point for the "roots" of dispersal and those who "stay put" (Brah 1996, 181). Each space is "an interweaving of multiple travelling; a text of many distinctive and perhaps, even disparate narratives" (Brah 1996, 183). Each space creates a new "we" (be it the "we" of a school or of a national identity), but the "we" is constructed by heterogeneous and contested individual experiences. Such a space addresses issues of multi-locationality through geographical, cultural and psychic boundaries (Brah 1996). It is here that the "boundaries of inclusion and exclusion, of belonging and otherness, of 'us' and 'them' are contested" (Brah 1996, 208 - 209). Ostensibly, there should be no "us" and "them". National identity becomes so consumed by the concept of outsiders and insiders, immigrants and natives, that it becomes something to own by a certain

group of people. Instead, identity is something that is ever evolving and with each new movement of people to or from a place, changes to encompass the myriad of experiences that result. However, as history has shown, culture becomes a contested issue that often involves claims of ownership under the construct of East and West. As such, "The right to this ownership always appears somewhat arrogated" (Handa 2003, 14).

What is at stake in the diasporic space are the "myriad processes of cultural fissure and fusion that underwrite contemporary forms of transcultural identities" (Brah 1996: 208). Brah (1996) articulates how in the diasporic space of a country, for example, England, the notion of Englishness becomes re-inscribed. Borders are crossed through language, politics, economics and culture. Crosscutting configurations take over from mutually exclusive entities. As such, a South Asian in England (as one of my fragments) creates a myriad of identities, all building and relating to one another. It should be noted, that a South Asian identity in England has historically been associated with Blackness, giving this social construct a whole new dimension. Thus, these identities are not part of a periphery; they are part of a challenge to what creates the centre of dominance.

Through the enactment of a new identity in a diasporic space, then, comes the diasporic identity. This identity is constantly "reworked with meaning and images drawn from the rapidly changing circuits of popular culture" (Hall 1999, xi). Diasporic identities are constantly changing under circumstances of globalization. Globalisation "ask[s] us to ... pay attention to 'cultural flows', 'creolisation', and 'deterritorialisation' of culture (Yon 2000, 15). Globalisation, combined with the notion of diaspora, is a dynamic that creates identities that are hybrid. Here, a person can transcend fixed ideas of nationalism and culture and instead, identify with a set of experiences that connect him or her in a meaningful way. A sense of belonging is created

through difference as opposed to assimilation. Such identities are renewable and are sustained by desire, memory and discovery so that all parts and histories of our selves are recognized. The whole becomes a shifting and changing combination of parts. Histories provide contexts for diasporic identities, but this is always in relation to where one is now.

So it is that identity becomes hybridized. Minority and majority cultures become undermined and how the body gets read enters a state of flux. It is not possible to use an essentialist notion to pinpoint identity and culture. And indeed, one must always ask why there is a need to categorise. People are not merely objects of history; there are multiple ways of belonging. Homi Bhabha (1994) asks us to focus on the interstitial moments, rather than the initial categories and placements of race, culture and identity. Not all people who have "shared histories of deprivation and discrimination [will have the same] exchange of values, meanings, and priorities" (270).

Many diasporans will have an investment of identity with their homeland and their new place of residence. Some may feel identity to only one or the other. In the end, though, it is through loyalty to a feature of an association that someone ultimately has identity ascribed to him or herself, rather than through giving meaning to existence by the place or locale. One's identity may take the form of simple, superficial expressions such as participation in cultural events. Other identity associations may take the form of a political banner. Thus, Derrida's notion of differance is brought into play; "how this identity is expressed is dependent upon how the differance is conceived and experienced"(Vasu 2003, 20). What is deferred and what is strategically actualized depends on the context.

So with the condition of diaspora, notions of race, culture and identity change. Race and culture, mutually intertwined concepts, have always been thought of as fixed and essentialist

notions. The beginnings of racial categorisation, craniometry combined with scientific discovery set in motion the idea that race was purely genetic or biological. With that, came the idea that culture was something that belonged to specific groups of people. However, physical meanings attributed to race use the body as a text. It is much more appropriate to see race like a language as physical meanings are subject to change depending on the context, history, stories, culture, events and so on. Language changes and so does the concept of race. It is a highly discursive subject.

The concept of race has also been intertwined with the language of culture and ethnicity. The notion of inherited culture needs to be challenged as it creates a sense of static, homogeneous entities. Instead, culture should be seen as a resource and something to be shared and nurtured. When discussing race and culture in terms of the fixed individual, there are discursive restraints placed. It is much more beneficial to discuss race and culture in terms of the place of the social, for example, in terms of issues of economic exploitation, social justice and collective agency. As history has changed, and the movements of the diaspora have shown that, so have race and culture. Race and culture are not isolated concepts; they are inherently joined with world issues and should be viewed in context of world events, theories and progress. As race and culture masquerade as each other, one might consider what it means to be Canadian, given circumstances of migration and immigration. What is a Canadian culture and how do the multifaceted elements of culture, depending on who is enacting the culture, affect how the body is read?

Through globalisation, many of the old, homogeneous cultures have been displaced. When exploration and empire began, there was a "clash of cultures, the beginning of hybridity, the mutual crossings, the opening up of internal spaces"(Yon 1999, 93). Rather than race and

ethnicity being grounded in a set of fixed, essentialist attributes, there is a great deal of diversity and differentiation in the cultural and historical experiences of both. Ethnicity, as well, "acknowledges the place of history, language and culture in the construction of subjectivity and identity as well as the fact that all discourse is places, positioned, situated, and all knowledge is contextual" (Hall 1988, 226). Difference is important idea here. The ethnic identity is central to our subjective sense, but differences between ethnic identities do not make it possible to make a blanket statement of what the subject should be. We all come from a particular place in history, out of a particular experience, or a particular culture. It is impossible to be contained by that identity in a group sense. Each identity is personal; each diasporic experience is personal. Groups can be united through the common journey of movement and relocation; however, each movement and each individual contains its own stories, histories and memories.

When the diasporic subject is no longer seen as an essentialised subject, a change in diasporic consciousness takes place. Essentialism denies the idea that identity is constantly becoming and that identity construction is a discursive space and instead, fixes identity within a set of grounded attributes. Stuart Hall refers to this idea as a "closed" ethnicity where ethnicity "depends very much upon an essential conception of group, tradition or homeland" (Yon 1999, 89). Thus, there is the notion of uniformity. Essentialism is ultimately bound up in structures of racism.

A diasporic consciousness ostensibly implies that there are ties within the diasporic community. This idea includes a 'recognition of the unique community existing between members of the diasporan group" (Butler 2001, 208). In England, the arrival of South Asians appeared as one mass and was referred to in a variety of racist slurs. But, "there are striking differences between the early and later immigrants, and a continuous narrative of white

identification cannot accommodate either the diversity South Asians bring with them from their homelands or the caste, gender, generation, and class differences that shape their racial positioning in the United States" (Koshy 1998, 288). However, a form of self-essentialising, or strategic essentialism has allowed South Asian group consciousness to bond under the notion that they have been othered. Colour, in all its shades, will always be the language for reading the body. Therefore, calling oneself a South Asian can connote a tradition of Bhangra music, Bollywood films, ethnic dress and the like; it also allows a group to mobilize politically and lobby for status in a host country, or in a diasporic space like a school. The Indian subcontinent represents a multitude of people, however, "it is precisely on account of the great variety of native customs, religion and beliefs that South Asian identity in the USA cannot be anything but ethnic in orientation: i.e., ultimately undefinable" (Fludernik 2003, xx). As such, something such as South Asian music, specifically Bhangra music, which has provided a brown signifier for youth, falls within a unifying construct as it remains essentially related to Punjabi and Hindi constructs. Thus, this form of South Asian music, still reproduces nationalist forms of identity, and does not allow for a discursive space (Handa 2003). As well, it challenges notions of Canadian and South Asian identity "by drawing on Western popular music, mixing in "back home" references and African- Canadian traditions" (Handa 2003, 143).

What should be remembered are the differences within, not just the differences between. In that sense, individuals are seen not merely as objects of structures but as subjects who are producing and acting upon structures even as they are constrained by them (Yon 2000, 126). Individuals within a diasporic group do not need to subscribe to a particular set of attributes, other than the fact that they are part of a community with various roots and routes. Identity categories may be claimed in order to distinguish oneself as a member of a perceived group, such

that "brown emerges as a category to differentiate people with claims to a South Asian diaspora from those who might claim an African diaspora" (Yon 2000, 57). However, brown does not necessarily connote the same feelings and desires such that "desires here seem split ambivalently between being the same and being different" (Yon 2000, 58). In naming oneself, one necessarily limits oneself.

As it is then, the notion of diaspora dispels such archaic ideas as the beginnings of biological racialisation and notions of culture as a set of immutable attributes belonging to one group. The notion of diaspora allows for identities to be constructions. In an ever-evolving concept of race, culture and identity, there is a balance between traditions and new situations. The concept of diaspora takes into account the memories of a homeland, imagined or real, and combines them with the knowledge of a new space. Again, a tension is created between "here" and "there", "now" and "then", "us" and "them". "Cultural identities are the points of identifications, the unstable points of identification or suture, which are made, within the discourses of history and culture" (Hall 1990, 226).

In the making of culture, there is a continuous splitting and splicing. Identity is always being produced and reproduced. If identity is a production, and is always in process, the very authenticity and authority of cultural identity should be questioned. Thinking about identity is important to think about in the sense of "becoming" or "being". In this sense, there are "points of similarity, there are also critical points of deep and significant difference which constitute 'what we really are', or rather, 'what we have become'" (Hall 1990, 225). Cultural identity is constantly transforming and evolving.

Identification for diasporans, especially students in classrooms, becomes problematic at times. In many classrooms, the differences within are not acknowledged and essentialist forms of

representation are reiterated. Discourses of culture and identity are continually seen to be represented by those who speak for "their people". Curriculum that stresses tolerance, diversity and multiculturalism continues to use a model of culture that is seen as fixed attributes of communities. From multicultural education that focuses on racial signifiers, foods, lifestyles, clothing and so on, to antiracist education that stresses the need to address power inequalities between groups of minorities, the problem of representation persists.

Curriculum seems bound up in new forms of thinking about groups of people that are not so new after all. As opposed to placing negative stereotypes of groups of people, positive stereotypes are attributed. However, this still acknowledges notions of essentialism. Differences between communities are addressed, not differences within. Education that is viewed as inclusive still denies identification to those students who may not fit into a neatly decided mold. Identification often involves "privileging a particular cultural practice (or set of practices) as the constitutive principle of the community - such as language, religion or common historical experience" (Prasenjit quoted in Handa 2003, 57). For students of the diasporan experience, this holds particular problems for where they see themselves in their immediate communities as well as the school community.

Culture, through globalization, "becomes" rather than "is". The pedagogical idea of inclusivity shuts down discourse on the idea of an evolving culture and instead focuses on communities as same rather than inherently made up of differences. Communities and cultures are seen in binary opposition to one another. This multicultural idea of difference negates any chance to examine what "makes" a community. Thus, in a school, students of diasporan communities are compelled to fit into whatever idea of group attributes is dominant at the time. This does not allow for individual identities to bring what is culturally relevant to the discussion.

Texts that are used today in classrooms reinforce this concept in "teaching" students about how cultures are different, again focusing on the differences between rather than the differences within. Literature that claims voice of representation for diasporan students will instead be created as "not actual cities or villages, but invisible ones, imaginary homelands: (Rushdie 1992, 10). These imaginary homelands will appeal to the nostalgia and disconnectedness to old roots and evoke a critical look at how here and now can become home, as much and there and then.

The diasporan student, in the classroom, may feel excluded from talk of identification and cultural groups because "the delineation of membership depends upon, for example, notions of territoriality and geographic claims, ethnocentricities, gender centering, sexual identities, age-delineated subcultures, professional and class-specific forms of identification, and so on" (Britzman et al. 1993, 192). This idea privileges one type of social marker, one that a diasporan may not identify with. Universal categories that are declared isolate someone who understands their experience to be more complex than what the collective consciousness allows. In a discussion of identity, culture or race, whether in a classroom or not, it is essential to allow for the dynamic of diaspora. It is important to discuss how knowledge is produced and offer strategies for engaging in critiques of representations, for any representation inherently denies something else. Any move to neatly package an identity, culture or race denies the idea of movement, elusivity, and evolution; ideas that are central to the concept of diaspora. Thus multicultural and antiracist education need to evolve once more from discourse of appreciating differences between, sameness and representation, to differences within, difference as necessary and identification as evolving.

Diaspora is merely one dynamic that lends itself to thinking about and rethinking ideas of culture, race and identity. The idea of diaspora, once defined as the movement of people from

their homelands, and now used to encompass the multi-place associations and multiple social networks that so many of us have, redefines identity. A diasporic identity involves living the home that is "here", as well as living the home, the memories or the imaginings that are "there". In the process, the boundaries between "here" and "there" are collapsed. Identity evolves with each new journey; each "root" is supplemented with a new "route". Thus, the idea that culture, identity and place are mutually exclusive is undermined. An understanding of diasporic consciousness, then, is important to help educators think about how they can address, trouble and interrogate multiculturalism and antiracist pedagogy in the classroom. Identity, or identities as they are presented through curriculum, become complicated. Their traditional one-dimensional representations are taken up in multiple ways. Pedagogy necessarily needs to allow for such a discursive space so that these wonderings can be grappled with.

### **Chapter Three: Snapshots of Learning**

During the years that I withdrew from completing my Master of Education, I had the privilege to be a part of thirteen classrooms as a Student Work Study Teacher (SWST) with the Toronto District School Board (TDSB). I would spend two consecutive days in each of five schools over the time period, witnessing the results of teaching and learning in multiple curriculum areas. I collected artifacts, in the form of transcripts through observations and interviews with students and teachers on the complex negotiation of identity within learning spaces. My own analysis and my subsequent co-analysis with my collaborating teachers and the students whose voices I was privileged to hear from, became part of the discussion of my own questions and wonderings around the process of collaboration, implications of the Student Work Study initiative, and a space for pedagogical change. This chapter speaks to this work and how it connects to my previous questions and wonderings around the diasporic consciousness and is taken from a paper I have previously presented to the Student Achievement Division, Literacy and Numeracy Secretariat, Ministry of Education (Kassam 2010).

My work as a SWST took place over three years (2010 – 2013) and through it, I have been able to move my own professional learning through capacity building and reflection. The more I listened and documented student voice, the wider my lens grew. I began to look not only at the technical aspects of teaching and learning, but also at the adaptive pieces. This means that more than examining the “how” of pedagogy, I have begun to look at the “why” (praxis). Student voice, for me, is not just about listening to students, but really having an opportunity to dialogue with students about what I observe so that I do not create a narrative on their behalf. It is about bringing student identities into the narrative so that together, in collaborating with classroom

teachers, we can provide spaces for leadership and influence. My theoretical questions through this work became how could we use the complexities of identity construction by students in learning spaces as a source of strength and knowledge building?

One of my conversations with a mentor teacher involved discussing how students' lived experiences and culture can become part of the learning and knowledge construction in the classroom. As a result, I began to investigate deeper into the use of home culture in the classroom. This led me to a richer theoretical conversation about the identities of the students we serve. How can we use the complications of student identities as part of our explicit pedagogy? How might we think about in Toronto how to envision a curriculum that is mindful of diasporic sensibilities? Part of my bias in this research was my own grappling with how visible and invisible parts of my identity are read by others. Upon reflecting on my own narrative of schooling, I was constantly misread because of the colour of my skin, or asked to be a role model for an aspect of my identity that I was not completely aware of or comfortable with. How do these same experiences affect students who live in a space made up of settlers, the colonized, the displaced and the replaced? This new world is where fateful/fateful encounters take place (Hall 1990, 234); encounters that position us despite our desires to be recognized as such, or not quite, or nothing like.

George Sefa Dei (1996) discusses the notion of understanding the human condition and our connections to one another in *Anti-Racism Education*. He states that as members of a collective, we are unable to reach our full potential unless we can create opportunities for all of us to achieve our goals and dreams. The individual is only as good as the collective that has to share in the belief that each of us has duties, rights and responsibilities to work for the common good. "One responsibility of educators is to ensure that all students develop a shared sense of

belonging, a sense of connection and a sense of identification with the school. Every youth in school has the right to be exposed to the diverse experiences, accounts and histories that have shaped, and continue to shape human growth and development. Every student must be able to claim ownership of her or his school and be able to say: ‘This is my school, I see myself here, and I belong here.’” (Dei, 1996, 17). These are powerful statements that speak to the essential need for educators to recreate the ideals of a just society within their classroom spaces. But what makes a just society and whose justice is just? If school is a discursive entity, then is it identification with a school we are looking at or the challenge to curriculum consciously use and be used to infuse ideas of a diasporic consciousness such that students can see school as a place that adds to their becoming?

Within this very broad belief of practice, we can begin to ask ourselves what is seen as valuable or legitimate knowledge for teachers and students if they are to reach these ideals. Ordering of knowledge can naturally occur within the school curriculum as we look at explicit and implicit practices and procedures. An inclusive curriculum would allow for exploration of, valuing and questioning the diversity of identities. Dei (1996) states “schools should develop learning environments that are inclusive and caring, and foster respect, encouragement and self-worth among all students. An inclusive school environment must inspire a commitment to learning and ground such learning in the cultural heritage and ancestry of historically marginalized students and in their relation to dominant oppressive histories” (22). As Allingham (1992) states, “The curriculum is textbooks and storybooks, the pictures, the seating plan, the group work, the posters, the music, the announcements, the prayers and readings, the languages spoken in the school, the food in the cafeteria, the visitors to the classroom, the reception of parents in the office, the races (or race) of the office staff, the custodial staff. The teachers, the

administrators, the displays of student work, the school teams and sports played, the clubs, the school logo or emblem, the field trips, the assignments and projects, the facial expressions and body language of everybody, the clothes everybody wears...it is the whole environment” (20). If students are able to see themselves in the knowledge that is being constructed around them, then perhaps the learning will be more meaningful. The learning, and the process of knowing not only who one is, but also who one could be, becomes a process rather than a fixed entity. If curriculum is the whole environment then, then we must acknowledge this environment as fluid.

Antiracism asks us to view students from multiple social locations. As identity is fluid and links with gender, race and class, sexual orientation (to name a few), it asks students to locate themselves with and against multiple identifiers. As such, within the learning space, students and educators can ask how the curriculum is relevant to them. Therefore, Dei (1996) challenges schools “to develop a more critical understanding of how the varied identities of students and teachers affect the processes of schooling and ways of knowing, teaching, learning and understanding the world. In sum, the notion of identity is intertwined with the processes of knowledge production” (32). And so considering the diasporic consciousness in our teaching and learning means addressing a “dialogue of power and resistance, of refusal and recognition” (Hall 1990, 233). It means we speak to the fact that one experience does not mean it is the experience of the whole group; “those who identify in particular ways with specific cultural or geographical borders should be able to articulate social identities that speak directly to their experiential realities, without necessarily having to defend the universality of such experiences.” (Dei, 1996 90). As such, we challenge the notions of fixed binaries and “disturb the classical economy of ... representation ... what is then constituted within representation is always open to being deferred, staggered, serialized” (Hall 1990, 229).

How does antiracism work affect student learning? When students are trying to anchor themselves to a school setting by searching for an identity that fits them best (either within or in contrast to power structures in place), the curriculum is the place for teachers to embed the lived experiences, contributions of multiple perspectives, and cultural histories and heritage. Lisa Delpit (2012) speaks to the importance of connecting curriculum to culture when she states, “If the curriculum we use to teach our children does not connect in positive ways to the culture young people bring to school, it is doomed to failure” (21). In connecting curriculum positively to culture, we can help students to overcome negative stereotypes that may manifest in internalized oppression and a lack of connectedness with identity and culture. Delpit (2012, 134-135) describes the classrooms that reflect critical thinking in urban schools. She lists some of the following as examples:

- Whenever students are involved with issues they regard as vital concerns, good teaching is going on
- Whenever students are involved with applying ideas such as fairness, equity, or justice to their world, it is likely that good teaching is going on
- Whenever students are directly involved in a real-life experiences, it is likely that good teaching is going on
- Whenever students are asked to think about an idea in a way that questions common sense or a widely accepted assumption that relates new ideas to ones learned previously or that applies an idea to the problems of living, then there is a good chance that good teaching is going on

- Whenever students are involved in reflecting on their own lives and how they have come to believe and feel as they do, good teaching is going on

This list addresses how when students and their making meaning of their selves and their lives are part of the learning, then there is something good going on. In a previous chapter, Delpit (2012) addresses how educating poor African American children requires teachers learning who the students are rather who we think or assume them to be; “this means developing relationships with our students and understanding their political, cultural, and intellectual legacy” (38). In referencing Theresa Parry, Delpit (2012) shares some interesting questions that address identity and schooling: “Why should one make an effort to excel in school if one cannot determine whether the learning will ever be valued, seen, or acknowledged? Why should one focus on learning in school if that learning will not affect, inform, or alter one’s status as a member of a oppressed group?” (38). When we use culture in classrooms, when we use culture from an asset based stance, we focus on what students know as opposed to what they do not know. Asking what a student brings to the learning space allows us “to see all that is invisible in the child before us. This is the question that will allow us to begin, with courage, humility, and cultural sensitivity the right educational journey” (Delpit, 2012, 200).

When student identities are used as part of the curriculum and the model of teaching moves from the practice of naming differences to understanding how particular moments may heighten or blur identifications, we can see greater student engagement. “Ensuring students are listened to and valued and respected for who they are leads to greater student engagement which, in turn, leads to greater student achievement” (Ministry of Education, 2011,1). In fact, the research states that “while the exclusion of identity and voice from classroom learning and school experiences can lead to student disengagement and behavioural issues (such as defiance,

silence and poor attendance), paying attention to them can be transformative for students and teachers” (Ministry of Education, 2011, 2). Getting to know our students should be enacted through curiosity and authentic caring. This curiosity can lead us to that critical discursive space where the diasporic consciousness can be enacted. As the intricacies of identity construction are quite complex; students may position themselves in relations to ethnicity, gender, race, language, socio economic status, which creates multiple possibilities for inclusion. Teachers can begin to make relevant and authentic connections to learning as they draw from each of their student’s strengths, needs and interests to “build a bridge of relevance between what matters to a student and curriculum concepts and content” (Ministry of Education, 2011, 2). Through all this, learning can be personalized as it connects to student contexts and interests. Where before “disengagement was once thoughts to be a function of low literacy performance and conversely that high literacy scores would indicate higher levels of performance ... [we now know] that learning, development and identity formation ... are interactive and shape each other as they evolve” (Ministry of Education, 2011, 3). As identity construction is not linear, neither is the engagement of students in meaningful tasks. “Student engagement must be constantly negotiated among students, their families and advocates, teachers, community members, and the decision-makers in education” (Ministry of Education, 2011, 4). And it is precisely this negotiation that allows students to both belong and feel apart from how home is constructed.

My research into how identities are re/constructed has been impacted by the work I did with various teachers I worked with in my role as a SWST. One teacher I worked with wanted to have students work with texts, specifically legends that would allow for multiple perspectives and narratives of characters and histories. As the unit progressed, my collaborating teacher would keep me updated and commented quite frequently that he found the students to be quite

engaged, more focused and more willing to share their ideas. One of our focus students, selected because she typically did not appear to be engaged in learning, provided me with much to consider when it comes to what happens in classroom spaces. This student, named hereafter as M., shared with me her delight at learning about Lucia, the protagonist of a legend called The Woman Who Outshone the Sun. She spoke about how she liked learning about different cultures. She told me that the beauty of learning about these types of texts are that “I can learn about my culture if I read a story about where I am from. And about other people in my history in Mexico and what they have done before. And then I can use those. Because like living in Mexico it’s not really easy because you see, Mexicans are dangerous” (Kassam 2010, 8). As we went on to discuss what stereotypes were, and how these kinds of statement were essentializing, she finished by stating emphatically that her mum told her these things were true. It should be noted that both M. and her family identify as Mexican.

The more I reflected on the conversation, the more I was drawn to her comment about “dangerous Mexicans”. When I shared the findings with her teacher, he too was curious as to why she would have said that. He wondered if she actually knew what a stereotype was. Elrich (1994) states that his students accepted their fate and their place in society and that within this paradigm, it was not that they lacked pride, but that they had accepted who there were (14). On Community Toolbox (2016) it states that people can “turn the experience of oppression or discrimination inward. They begin to feel that the stereotypes and misinformation that society communicates are true and they act as if there were true”. In essence, falsities become truisms.

The student had clearly connected on a surface level to the character, Lucia. She was drawn to her long black hair as she saw herself physically in the character. However, what had not been addressed was her reiteration of a stereotype that had negative connotations. How could

the teacher address this through the curriculum and use this as a starting point for discourse that challenges the positionality of these identifiers? If we want students to be able to use their identity as a source of knowledge building, we must allow students to be able to challenge and question what the power that comes with identities and what that means for them. More than having students connect and celebrate their identity as Community Toolbox (2016) suggests how can students use the complexities of what identity means in the context of schooling in positive ways? Kumashiro (2000) cites Ellesworth who states “there is a ‘space between’ the teacher/teaching and learner/learning, between, for instance, who the teachers thinks the students are and who they actually are, or between what the teacher teaches and what the students learn” (31). The teacher had a specific intent for the activities and M. walked away with different learning. How could we use this learning to engage the whole class? As well, what is the intent of using identity to infuse learning and how can we connect the lived experiences of the students to the learning? Could the student have had an opportunity to discuss why she was drawn to Lucia and what that meant for her in terms of how she identified with being Mexican? What does it mean to be of one place and also of another? Do students necessarily need to name their geographical position? What significance does it hold in regards to how students relate to power structures such as those that are reinforced by stereotypes? As Brah (quoted in Hua, 2005, 194) states, “diaspora needs to be understood as embedded within a ‘multi-axial understanding of power’”. Hua (2005) goes on to use Gilroy’s ideas about how diasporic identities are often creolized, syncretized and hybridized. As such, identity formation within diasporic consciousness creates anti-essentialist understandings (197).

As I continued to reflect on what had transpired with this student and what identity construction meant for teaching and learning, I had the occasion to interview a focus student

from a Grade 3 class in another school. I had noticed that she was often isolated during the learning and that her teacher made excuses for this because she might not have been familiar with Canadian English even though she had been educated in Bangladesh through the American School system. During one of our conversations this student, now referred to as A., shared with me that she had been in Canada for one year. I asked her if she ever shared about Bangladesh or talked to her class about where she and her family used to live. She told me that here they show bad things that happen in her country. (The factory collapse in Bangladesh had happened one month prior to this interview). She wanted to share about her country but her mum had told her not to because it would be embarrassing for them. When I asked her what she would have liked to share A. stated, “there’s more stuff I could say. I could say that in my country I have a big house and I don’t have one now” (Kassam, 2010, 10).

At the time, I reflected on what this student had told me in terms of her identity and how the media and her mother were constructing it for her. She had also articulated that she wanted to share positive information about her country and that in doing so, I believe she would have been adding another layer of student voice to her identity. This interview also caused me to wonder about what knowledge is valued in the classroom and what knowledge is taught or reinforced. Kumashiro (2000) states “lessons about the Other should be treated as both catalysts and resources for students to use as they learn more. Disruptive knowledge, in other words, is not an end in itself, but a means toward the always-shifting end/goal of learning more” (34). Having this student speak about her ways of knowing and her story of her home country would have disrupted the status quo; something the classroom teacher did not seem to desire. Dei (1996) speaks about culturally relevant teaching and references Gloria Ladson-Billings who believes that home culture is to be used “as a basis upon which to critically interrogate ‘school

knowledge'. It subsequently renders the school a site of social and political struggle that can be empowering for students and teachers as they collectively engage in social criticisms and a destabilization of the status quo. Students are able to question both what is passed on to them as valid knowledge, and the inherent contradictions of receiving an education that is not appropriately grounded in their lived experiences and cultural knowledge" (94). Again, we come back to the questions of what is culture. Whose culture is used in classrooms? Who determines which layer of the narrative is used? Is it the student who may still have a fixed notion of what it means to be from "there"? Is it the teacher who decided which version of the story is worthwhile to acknowledge? How can the curriculum be used to challenge these wonderings?

When I began to analyze my observations and wonderings based on what I had captured with these students, I wanted to know more about how to move forward after witnessing the reiteration of imposed stereotypes and understandings of these students and their identities. As I shared my findings with the collaborating teachers and spent some time discussing identity and how it could be used to positively impact knowledge building in learning spaces, I recognized that a discussion of identity naturally leads to locating oneself. And really, does the location of self have to occur within a static space? What are the implications of all these ideas when it comes to teaching and learning then? When we think about the two students and how they are negotiating classroom spaces, one (M.) is rooted in the idea that she comes from somewhere else where she is distantly connected through ethnicity and the other (A.) is told that she can only be from one place and must be read a particular way. M.'s essentialism of her own connections to Mexico reiterate the same dangerous discourse that creates a binary between "us" and "them". If we think about the diasporan consciousness as a place where multiple identities can be negotiated at different times, how can the classroom be used to critique why we use certain

identities at particular times? What forms of connection to hegemonic practices are at play? How can M. be both of Mexico and Canada without feeling a sense of dislocation? A., as well, became the object of discourse rather than the subject. She becomes who others tell her to be in the classroom. Diasporan consciousness provides a space where students can enact who they are in particular moments but her story was told through the media and through her mother. The knowledge that was shared about who she was did not allow for her to inscribe her own narrative and collapse here and there such that she did not have to be from only one place. What these two narratives illustrate is that much work must be done in how teaching and learning must be able to move into spaces that allow for productive tension in thinking about identity and identities.

Much of classroom discourse is situated in frameworks of essentialism and binary constructions of who we think students are. We continue to speak as if culture and identity are “rigidly fixed as the attributes of social groups and “community” is considered to be stable, neatly bounded and capable of being represented by its spokespersons and role models.” (Yon, 1999, 623). As a result, “a persistent tension concerns how both culture and community continue to be reduced to stable and knowable sets of identity attributes” (Yon, 1999, 624).

## **Conclusion: Implications for Teaching and Learning**

Kumashiro (2000) states that “learning that that which society defines as ‘normal’ is a social (and contested) construct” (36). He goes on to speak about critical consciousness as “unlearning what one had previously learned is ‘normal’ and normative” (37). If through the topics that are being discussed, students are able to share their thinking in respected ways, then “the classroom setting can help students to understand the workings of positional dynamics in their lives, ... then they begin to challenge them and to create change” (37). Critical consciousness, one of Ladson-Billings’ (1995) three tenets of Culturally Relevant Pedagogy, is defined as when “students must develop a broader sociopolitical consciousness that allows them to critique the cultural norms, values, mores, and institutions that produce and maintain social inequities” (162). The students whose thoughts I shared in Chapter 3 here expressed in their own ways how moving to a space for critical consciousness as part of the learning gives them power to speak about who they are, where they are from, and why it matters. My own experiences speak to the need for a space where we can recognize “the ironic and sometimes antagonistic relationships students hold when imagining who they are in relations to others and in relation to the representations that are made of them” (Yon, 1999, 626).

Upon reflecting upon the students’ experiences, I wonder about what it is about their identities that can be used for strength and knowledge construction. Kumashiro (2000) speaks about “one’s identities, experiences, privileges, investments, and so forth always influence how one thinks and perceives, what one knows and wills not to know” (39). How can the negative stereotypes that the first two students are grappling with (unconsciously) be turned around so that the stereotype is deconstructed for its ability to teach about the other layers of stories and narratives that exist for identities? Dei (1996) suggests “teachers engage in issues-oriented

teaching to help students recognize social oppression and institutionalized inequality and determine how to act conscientiously to address and remove social injustice (84). Both of these students discuss how they would like to either share another narrative of their country or the perceptions of the country they identify with. I can imagine the power that can come when that lived experience and alternate perspective is shared and validated and presented in contrast to the perceived norm. The Ministry of Education (2011) suggests the following: “Every student lives within other communities: the family, a cultural community, a social community and perhaps an international community as well. These are the support structures that lend strength to the education of each student. Sometimes, these communities can be outside our personal comfort zones – languages we don’t understand, social networks we may not be familiar with or norms we may not understand or find difficult. It is particularly at these times that stepping out of our comfort zone can help. How we interact with others, our students, matters” (2). Sometimes these communities are imagined, held on to by memories or by folklore.

When we think about implications for teaching and learning, then, we necessarily must address how to interrupt our practice. In order for us to think about interrupting practice we must think about disrupting what we think of when it comes to identities and how they are constructed. The “old trope of culture that underpins much multiculturalist thinking is concerned with both similarity and continuity with respect to different cultures, the conditions of the “third space” of diaspora ... call[s] for an engagement with ruptures, difference, and discontinuity” (Yon,1999, 638). In this theoretical framework, we can consider how the naming of self, or the naming of self by others, can create anxiety and ambivalence. Instead, if we question our selves, our identities that are fluid and changing and constantly in flux, we can ask who we are in that moment. We can recognize the “limits of the name” and be “open to the contests that naming

produce” (Yon, 2000, 149). As schools (and school boards) have moved to the framework of culturally relevant pedagogy, we must be mindful that we are not reproducing sameness in new terms. As culture, and how we identify with the many aspects of culture, is fluid, we must necessarily critique how cultural competence, Ladson-Billings’ (1995) second tenet, is taken up. More than building on students’ funds of knowledge, we must allow for inquiry into what these funds of knowledge represent in given moments. We cannot continue to use different terminology to reinscribe fixed notions of self on our students or on their families. Hall (1990) names the diasporic experience as the “recognition of a necessary heterogeneity and diversity; by a conception of ‘identity’ which lives and through, not despite, difference; by *hybridity*. Diaspora identities are those which are constantly producing themselves anew, through transformation and difference” (235). If we are to consider Ladson-Billings’ (1995) third tenet of critical consciousness, then, this is where we can come back to my initial question of how to create spaces for students to forge and negotiate new identities out of existing ones.

How we take up the narratives of our students, and our selves in classroom spaces, can lead us into conversations of power and practices that reiterate these power structures. When we acknowledge the “confusions, contradictions, ambiguities, fluctuations, and transitions that are part of [our] lived experiences (James, 232), we can engage identities in their ‘complexity, their incoherence and the incompleteness without attempting to domesticate the messiness of the everyday workings of culture and discourses” (Yon, 2000, 155-156). If we do not consider how “sociohistorical factors and power relationships that have operated as barriers to effective education for all students” (James and Schecter, 2000, 36), then we continue to do a disservice to our students, particularly those from marginalized communities. The space of diasporic consciousness allows for the negotiation of fragments, rather than the naming of the whole. And

it is within this framework, we can exceed categories through which curriculum imagines us (students and teachers). We allow for becoming rather than reading what we want students to be. This necessary rupture of practice takes us beyond what is imagined and read, and it moves us into the spaces in between all our narratives where fragments reside in the diasporic consciousness.

As I reflect on the subject of this paper, and in particular the work that I engaged in with the Ministry of Education and the Toronto District School Board, I am aware of the difficulty of breaking with the dominant and persuasive discourse of identity that underpins multicultural and anti-racist education. This dominant discourse enters my own work through the conversations I had with students, through the conversations I had with teachers, and with the thought processes that we as educators go through when we are thinking about how to connect theory to practice. We can debate how the fragments of identities interact and morph and change depending on where we are; the diasporic consciousness takes us to multiple places of who we could be based on where we define home. The reality is that schooling continuously asks us who we are now based on where we are now. The idea of cultural competence as taken up by educators included families and communities in the conversation without considering the multi-place associations each community, family and student might have. We celebrate heritage months with the impetus being the disruption of traditional Eurocentric learnings; we neglect to disrupt the homogeneity of such practice and in doing so, reinforce the same binaries of us and them. Gloria Ladson-Billings (2014) revisits her original framework to extend it and renames it culturally sustaining pedagogy so that students are seen as subjects rather than objects as she has “grown increasingly dissatisfied with what seems to be a static conception of what it means to be culturally relevant. Many practitioners, and those who claim to translate research to practice,

seem stuck in very limited and superficial notions of culture. Thus, the fluidity and variety within cultural groups has regularly been lost in discussions and implementations of culturally relevant pedagogy. Even when people have demonstrated a more expansive knowledge of culture, few have taken up the sociopolitical dimensions of the work ...” (77). My work with students and teachers, while well meaning and intending to move beyond traditional notions of antiracist and multicultural education, has fallen into that trap.

Thinking forward to how I can continue to extend this discourse both practically and theoretically, I come back to student M.’s comment (in Chapter 3) about being interested in other people’s stories. Her desire to know can push us to really consider how thinking about diaspora can open up ways for stories to be told and heard. What if we really made space for stories to be stories as opposed to representations of peoples? What if we had students and their families tell their stories and then consider the similarities of how humanity has been both colonizer and colonized rather than focusing on the similarities of race or place? What if these sociopolitical dimensions could help us to find ways to “consider the global identities that are emerging in the arts, literature, music, athletics, and film” (Ladson-Billings, 2014, 82) such that we truly see identities as complex and negotiated? It is through this, that we can provide marginalized students with ways to reclaim and retell and reshape their fragments; we also provide ways for those who are mainstream to critique and understand their impact on creating those fragments, their privilege, and their access. The diasporic consciousness as a framework for theory and practice, then, holds possibilities and hope for a new envisioning of who we could be within the structure of teaching and learning.

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