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“We are not terrorists,” but more likely transnationals:

Reframing understandings about immigrants in light of the Boston Marathon bombings

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Abstract

The Boston Marathon bombings in April 2013 created a new kind of discomfort in the U.S. about “self-radicalized” terrorists, particularly related to Muslim immigrants. The two suspected bombers, brothers with Chechen backgrounds, had attended U.S. public schools. News media portrayed the brothers as “immigrants” and often showed them as having a struggle between their Chechen and U.S. identities. This article proposes that educators consider reframing the talk and discourses about immigrants and immigration toward a more complex understanding of transnationalism. The author demonstrates her work as a former English language learner teacher and her current research in the area of transnationalism to argue for educators to teach meaningfully about this concept. The goal, the author argues, is to help create a deeper understanding of newer arrivals to the U.S. so that the more newly arrived have greater choices about who they become and the identities they perform.

Keywords: transnationalism, immigration, Boston Marathon bombings, English language learners, transnational English learners

“We are not terrorists,” but more likely transnationals:

Reframing understandings about immigrants in light of the Boston Marathon bombing

The day of the Boston Marathon bombing, April 15, 2013, I texted a close friend who lives in the Middle East. While I am not Arab, Muslim, or an immigrant to the U.S., I’m all too familiar with the fear struck into people who identify any of these ways when any kind of civilian attack occurs on U.S. soil or to people with U.S. backgrounds. “Please don’t let it be a Muslim,” I typed, hoping neither Muslims nor Arabs would have to endure further insults to their identities in the U.S. I wondered, like most people in the U.S., how innocent people had been injured and died that day, but I also worried about the repercussions for innocent communities, especially anyone associated with—however accurately or inaccurately—Islam. “I know, I know,” she texted back.

In this article, I argue for a reconsideration of the way educators frame, talk with, and teach learners whose backgrounds are not squarely “American,” and generally referred to as “immigrant,” drawing into focus what is arguably the most derided group of newcomers to the U.S.—those who identify as what has been conflated inaccurately and synonymously as Arab/Muslim. I begin with my own experiences as an English for Speakers of Other Languages (ESOL) teacher and then shift toward analyzing the discourses surrounding “immigrants.” I show how these discourses are both limiting and damaging in terms of the scope of possibilities afforded to these students by these constricting discourses. Highlighting media coverage of the Chechen brothers who are accused of the bombings, I show these discourses at work. Next I offer an alternative discourse surrounding immigrant youth, one that invokes the concept of transnationalism,

or how people live and do daily activities which cross national borders, ranging from physical visits to countries to daily messages and communications with people across borders. I show how this term can allow more space for youth to explore their own senses of hybrid identities (Bhabha, 2004; May, 1998). I use examples of how classrooms are beginning to implement senses of transnationalism with their students and also suggest a host of new ways to make this work in K-12 classrooms. Finally, I appeal to our common humanity as we struggle to situate ourselves in an increasingly globalized world, pointing toward how understanding transnationalism can benefit all students, regardless of background.

Reflections from post-9/11 classrooms

My sensitivities are in large part the result of my seven years of teaching who are commonly referred to as immigrant learners but who I reframe as transnational English learners (Author & Co-Author, In Press) in U.S. public secondary schools, beginning in 2002, following living and working in Mexico for a total of five years. I don't suggest that merely teaching youth from Afghanistan, Iraq, Egypt, Pakistan, Iran, and other countries *or* having lived abroad makes a teacher sympathetic to students who are positioned as outsider in a post 9/11 world. I began to know my students only by listening and researching their stories, using their stories as curriculum from which to both strengthen their English as well as help them situate their own identities as they navigated their new lives in the U.S. Indeed, as a teacher of students whose families or they themselves had moved from other countries to the U.S., all of them shared senses of being outsiders to a less-than-welcoming U.S. climate. This article, however, amplifies a most extreme example, those students who feared their new positioning as potential

“terrorists” because of how many in the U.S. viewed them. After the events of 9/11, the ways Arabs and Muslims were perceived due to media portrayals and common discourse shifted dramatically (Sarroub, 2005).

The first year I assigned my high school students a multi-genre writing project related to a unit exploring personal and cultural identities, I was struck by how many predominantly Muslim students wrote several of their pieces in the defensive. While many students from other regions of Asia, Africa, and Latin America wrote descriptively about who they *were*, several Muslim students felt compelled to write about what they were *not*. While non-Muslim students wrote in the first person, Muslim students often used the pronoun for a collective and then the negative identity construction: “We are not terrorists,” read artful bumper stickers and the titles of diary entries, for instance. I was struck by the pressures these students faced and carried with them as an additional burden in the U.S., the results of an increasing worldwide Islamophobia after 9/11 (Sheridan, 2006). As a white person with multiple points of privilege, I haven’t felt much pressure to construct myself in the negative when asked to describe myself by others. On some level I may be able to relate as a woman and as a working class person reared in West Virginia; I’ve had to show in some instances that I’m not “weak” or “meek,” characteristics often assigned to women to limit their roles in society, or somehow “less intelligent” by hailing from West Virginia. But these experiences are absolutely not the first things I would point to in order to describe my identity.

I began to learn more about my students’ experiences and struggles. Many who identified as Muslim yearned to be “good Muslims” and at the same time to fit in inside the U.S. Of course, not all students fit the same type of story. Some of my Pakistani

students were Catholic; some Arab students were also Christian. Many Afghanis had lived through horrific war and refugee camps; Palestinian siblings were daughters of a doctor who was only granted entry-level pharmacy work in the U.S. Their stories were each as unique as all people ultimately are. As far as I can tell, not a single one of my students was a “terrorist,” and based on my relationships with them, I refused to consider it a possibility. After all, the chances that they were terrorists were slimmer than my chances of dying on the freeway driving home from work on any given day. I found myself eager to learn more about Muslim and Arab students, like my students from all regions of the world, a yearning which eventually led me to six weeks’ study on a Fulbright-Hays seminar to the Middle East during my years as an ESOL teacher. Drawing on the funds of knowledge of *all* my students and their families (González, Moll, & Amanti, 2005) and my increasing knowledge made our classroom richer in terms of creating a safer community for learning and in terms of the texts my students created as part of the processes of their learning language through content. I’ll return to the point of improving the classroom again, framing it differently through the lens of transnationalism, a lens I wish I had accessed at the time I taught these youth.

After the Boston Marathon bombing and the revelation of the suspected bombers’ identities, I felt a sympathy not only for my former students, but for the millions of Arab and Muslim families in the U.S. These families understand that because they look a certain way or are thought to practice a certain religion—whether they represent or do what others imagine of them being irrelevant—must both protect themselves from unwarranted surveillance and questioning and even harassment. Should two Somali siblings I taught have been subject to Department of Homeland Security investigations

simply because they were spotted in the Washington, D.C. area, *where they lived*, taking photographs of the national monuments while wearing hijabs? Should a Saudi Arabian student really be the subject of an FBI inquiry and told to be more careful after preparing a traditional rice dish in a pressure cooker (Jay, 2013)?

Restricting discourses surrounding immigrants

There is a long tradition of research and commentary which shows how people who are understood as falling outside the definition of mainstream culture are often considered both less-than and suspect by their majoritarian peers (DuBois, 1994; Foley, 1997; Moraga & Anzaldúa, 1981; Valencia, 1997). Drawing on Foucault's (1977, 1978) notion of how discourse can both limit and proscribe possibilities of action, discourses help police the boundaries of who is normal and who is not. Specifically, discourses surrounding immigrants and the assumption of direct paths to assimilation create static and constricting approaches to how people are both expected to behave and how they even can imagine their set of choices for behaviors—largely, either one Americanizes through assimilation or one is somehow willfully failing to meet the expectations of the discourse of assimilation and thus some sort of failure (Author, 2012). Roots of these discourses come from the “scientific” analysis of immigration in the U.S., hailing back to the earliest work of Thomas and Znaniecki (1920) and Park and Miller (1921) and its inclusion in formal U.S. public schooling purposes, including explicit training in “Americanization” (Spring, 2011). When the discourse inherently suggests, as assimilation does, that the immigrant must move in a linear direction toward “Americanness,” the immigrant is obviously confined to courses of action which lead to sloughing off other cultural backgrounds and trying on the new. This flies in the face of

the reality of what it is like for anyone who has located to a new country or who is born into a family whose native culture is not “American.” Such movements across borders and families include a host of hybrid practices, a shift better described as transnationalism.

Did the mainstream media report on the complicated transnational identities of the Tsaernaev brothers, or did they follow the assimilationist discourses I just highlighted? Based on the flood of articles and news reports I read, listened to, and watched, the answer is that the media relied on the discourses of assimilation. At best, the Chechen brothers’ identities were constructed as binary in terms of having lived in the U.S. and as having hailed from Chechen backgrounds. For instance, Ioffe (2013) explains that she herself is “fully assimilated” to the U.S. and problematizes the Chechen youths’ identities, drawing the elder brother into focus in the following: “For Tamerlan, national identity was thrown into the heady mix, and he seems to have stuck with the one he knew his whole life, Muslim Chechen,” as if the identities couldn’t somehow meld or co-construct a new form of identity. Tamerlan reportedly was a prize boxing fighter who trained in the U.S. with U.S.-based coaches; he also reportedly engaged in an active social life with people from many ethnicities; surely these count as something “American”? Analyses regarding the “why” of the young men’s bombings have tended to suggest religious radicalization of the brothers. A profile in *The Wall Street Journal* noted, “The two, in recent years, had shared a powerful transformation to a more intense brand of Islam,” and also included a discussion of breakdown of the nuclear family (Cullison, Sonne, Troianovski, & George-Cash, 2013). I borrow from several articles which attempted to make sense of the young men’s backgrounds to illustrate these points. Other

articles and stories geared more toward describing the events and security surrounding the bombings and Boston seldom delved into any depth or complexity about the boys' identities.

Time after time, the Chechen brothers and their parents were referred to as immigrants, particularly in the lengthier news analyses of why they committed these acts (Drash, Basu, & Watkins, 2013; Fisher, 2013; Murphy, Tanfant, & Loiko, 2013; Sontag, Herszenhorn, & Kovaleski, 2013). These stories even tended to link their immigration as part of the narrative of the "American dream." While inevitably those who move from other countries to the U.S. pursue just such a dream, the reality is that it is untenable for most. A *New Republic* analysis of the brothers appeals directly to the rhetoric of assimilation and argues that their "assimilation was not... complete" (Ioffe, 2013). This claim is supported by "evidence" that Tamerlan visited Russia and that Dhokhar continued to eat traditional, non-American, food, as depicted in a widely-circulated photo where he was eating with a friend. Such activities could also be framed as the young people's incorporation of transnational practices which crossed borders, rather than a kicking-in-of-heels toward Chechen identity.

One might wonder, what is the problem with using the language of the American dream and suggesting that immigrants assimilate? The problem, I argue, is illustrated in the range of choices the Tsarnaev brothers appeared to believe they had, based on the discourses available to them. This anemic set of discourses points to a problem that may lead to additional forms of anti-U.S. sentiment and additional acts of violence against people from the U.S. More importantly, it's limiting to the potential of those who move here and those native to the U.S. in how they relate to these individuals.

We know both Tsarnaev brothers attended U.S. public schools. We can only guess that their teachers likely followed the same discourses surrounding immigrants toward one-way paths of assimilation, generally, the only discourses available to them. It seems the brothers conformed to these limiting discourses about who they could be in the U.S., *either American or Chechen* (which would include identifying as Muslim in their version, it seems). They shifted toward a discourse which portrayed an extreme form of religious identity that stood in deepest contrast to a discourse of being “American,” though at times they reportedly equivocated toward more “American” tendencies of partying, drinking, and smoking. They reportedly “self-radicalized” (Page, 2013) toward an identity that embraced religious extremism and a reaction to Americanism, especially what is reported to have been their anger at wars in Afghanistan and Iraq.

The question millions have been left asking is, “How could this have been avoided?” In the assimilationist discourse mentioned above about immigration, politicians have resorted to simplistic thinking about immigration identification and restrictions. Short of an abundantly intrusive surveillance state, this reaction seems untenable. The reality is the Tsarnaev brothers were fully regularized in their immigration status to the U.S. Halting all immigration is both impractical and, of things which could qualify as such, fully un-American for a nation whose binding narrative is that this country was founded by immigrants.

A shift in the discourse: Toward understanding immigrants as transnationals in thought and educational practice

I have argued elsewhere that it is time to shift the discourse about immigrants toward understanding these individuals as transnational (Author, 2012, 2013). By

transnational, I refer to the cultural practices of meaningfully engaging communities across national borders on many levels, including, but not limited to, physical visits across borders as well as through social media and the consumption of media over borders. Transnationalism implies that people can maintain multiple senses of identity at once because their social and personal fields overlap, often at once, referred to as “simultaneity” (Levitt & Glick Schiller, 2004). Transnationalism can also include the latent ability for those who engage their transnationalism later in life (Author & Co-author, 2013), such as choosing a life partner from, for instance, their parents’ country of origin (Smith, 2006). In my research with Mexican-origin transnationals, they navigated daily U.S. encounters through school, work, honors classes as well as through consumption of news through Spanish-speaking news outlets, chats both virtually and via phone with family and community in Mexico, and through religious practices oriented toward more Mexican approaches to Catholicism, such as veneration of the Lady of Guadalupe through thoughts and prayers directed toward her. This stands in contrast to the either/or discourse of assimilation toward Americanization. These results are similar to the ways transnational youth manage a host of ways of knowing and cultural practices (Sánchez, 2007; Sánchez & Machado Casas, 2009; Smith, 2006; Urrieta & Martínez, 2011; Wolf, 2002). In fact, the simultaneous overlapping of students’ lives through time and space (Harvey, 1992) is a practice transnationals engage with dexterity when more monocultural individuals struggle to grasp how to adjust and adapt in an increasingly globalized world. It seems that more monocultural people can stand to learn from transnationals in the face of globalization, rather than forcing a limiting discourse of assimilation on them.

**Naming transnationalism: Opening choices for students to situate their identities
and life choices**

In order for transnational students (heretofore I will refer to “immigrants” as transnationals) to understand they have more choices for locating and performing their identities, accessing the language of transnationalism can be an important first step. While educators have used the language of biculturalism and bilingualism in this effort, the “bi” still connotes a sense of duality and perhaps even an either/or binary. Students also may have more than one identity in addition to their sense of “Americanness.” This likely was the case for the Chechen brothers, who had lived in different regions in Russia, whose parents were of different ethnic groups as well. This was also true for the students I taught in first decade of the 2000s. We spoke about biculturalism at the time, but it didn’t fully fit students who had a tribal identity, a national identity, and whose parents may also have been multiracial and who spoke languages both shared and not shared between them. The term transnationalism foregrounds the “trans,” something which spans, crosses, and bridges. It allows for the performance of and expansion of hybridity of identity, which in turn creates new spaces, or Third Spaces of learning (Gutierrez, Baquedano-López, Alvarez, Y Chiu, 1999). Hybridity of identity for transnationals can include the mixing of the ways of knowing with which they approach life situations, the ways they perceive problems, and the ways they engage the world. Hybridity is not necessarily comfortable, particularly as it is not well-understood by those who don’t recognize their own or anyone else’s experience of it. Specifically, a transnational can simultaneously be multiracial, multilingual, and emotionally and psychically situated in several nations with which (s)he identifies at once. Drawing from Anzaldúa’s (1999)

understandings of Nepantla, students can inhabit the often painful ground of being in-between with skills that include the ability to make sense out of these in-between spaces, of being neither here-nor-there.

I propose that educators overtly invoke and unpack the term of *transnationalism*, starting as early with this term as students are familiar with the term *immigrant*. They can use it to introduce concepts of study in their formal and informal curriculum. This will allow those who may identify as transnational to begin to appropriate the term and a discourse which runs alternative to the limitations of the discourse of immigration. It can allow those who aren't likely to be transnational to develop a better understanding of the tens of millions of people in the U.S. whose families do fit this notion of transnationalism. Transnationalism can also provide a sense of a global citizenship to which we all might aspire in this increasingly globalized world.

There are many ways to include transnationalism in instruction across many curricular areas. In music and art, for instance, teachers can have students find transnational connections of influence in both fields, looking for the fusions and hybridity of artistic creations spanning and criss-crossing national boundaries. In language arts, students can learn from literature which depicts transnational protagonists, both fictional and non-fictional. They can analyze what traits are depicted of transnationalism and see if they recognize their own abilities as transnationals, including cultural, literacy, and linguistic skills. When are characters, and students themselves, practicing literacy in multiple national contexts, the literacy of news consumption, music, social media, and written texts? When are the characters and students shifting readily among various languages and even registers within those languages? Some works which could be used

this way include: the illustrated books, Transnational Latinas' *Recuerdo mis raíces y vivo mis tradiciones: Remembering my roots and living my traditions* (2003) and Anzaldúa's *Friends from the other side/Amigos del otro lado* (1997), novels such as Sandra Cisneros's *Caramelo* (2003), Junot Diaz's *The Brief, Wondrous Life of Oscar Wao* (2007), and the historical account of Sonia Nazario's *Enrique's Journey* (2006). In math, students could compare and contrast movements of populations through what is called "circular migration" when peoples locate and relocate over borders. They may also interpret numbers of refugee populations and consider push and pull factors involved in those movements. In social studies, textbooks have generally neglected thoughtful and nuanced instruction regarding the events of 9/11 (Hess & Stoddard, 2013). Certainly, among the need to understand the events of 9/11 is also a need to understand the actors in the events, particularly Muslims who were so summarily and quickly vilified after the events, to the point of murder of those who even "looked" like Muslims on U.S. soil. Interrogating the sense of transnationalism can allow students to develop and understand multiple allegiances to multiple identities, allowing for a broader sense of citizenship, one that allows for critique as well as richer participation in society (Bellows, 2012; Giroux, 2009).

The most obvious area where transnationalism can be studied includes a reframing of thematic units on immigration which tend to span disciplinary areas from language arts to science; these units are quite popular in instruction of English Language Learners in particular. Units on immigration should incorporate definitions of transnationalism and analyses of immigration. Educators should use this lens instead of framing those who move to the U.S. singularly as immigrants on a one-way path toward

assimilation. This allows for an expansion of imagination about all people's life chances in an increasingly globalized world, not just those traditionally considered immigrants.

More specifically, there are several areas which might be reframed in the teaching of transnationalism units, as opposed to immigration units. First, rather than simple examine stories of one-way migration, circular migration can be included. When in the past, teachers asked students to understand the adaptation of immigrants to the U.S., they can now ask students to understand the always-present complexity of hybrid identities of transnationals. Students can identify contemporary news issues and analyze them through multiple lenses, including more traditionally "American" ones, lenses of sending countries from which they may hail, and lenses where these perspectives overlap.

This would allow for all students to develop a more nuanced understanding of global economic and political issues which send people back-and-forth over borders, rather than from a singular nationalistic perspective which may push students toward nativist discourses of defensive rhetoric such as, "*They* are taking *our* jobs," or "They broke the law and are illegal." An understanding of global economic forces, corporations, and their connections to political structures would allow students to direct their concerns toward the sources of many global movements of peoples, rather than the casualties. Finally, educators can point students toward understandings of the U.S.'s history of a tradition of social movements spanning racial, religious, and cultural boundaries. They could include information about rich international networks of solidarity and encourage student participation in these networks as they identify the need to do so.

This more nuanced form of teaching about transnationalism (as a reframing of immigration) would have a profound impact on students. I remember the looks of astonishment on my students' faces when they told me they had almost never been congratulated in formal education settings for their bilingualism, let alone their biculturalism. This recognition would go much deeper for transnationalism and provide for increasing forms of hybrid identities and understandings of the ever-changing world around them, identities which allow for the understanding that youth whose lives span many borders are in fact *Nepantleras* with great skills. Students would understand there are multiple discourses to which they might turn in understanding their identities and life choices, not either/or binaries, particularly the assimilationist one of *either American or not*. Youth who might otherwise want to voice their frustration through violence or religious extremism, as appears to be the case of the Chechen brothers, would feel less forced in their choices and could be far more thoughtful about who they can become.

In the field of teacher education, future teachers can reframe their thinking about "immigrants" as transnationals as well. Courses related to English Language Learners need to include the discourse of transnationalism as one pre-service teachers can engage and transmit to their students. The term English language learner (ELL) itself focuses merely on the language deficit of the student. The term transnational English learner (TEL) shifts an understanding toward the multifaceted abilities and identities of these students (Author, 2013). Concretely, pre-service teachers can study the transnational practices of youth with whom they work in their field placements. Similar to the fruitful project of inquiring about the funds of knowledge youth and their families have

(González, Moll, & Amanti, 2005), they can also inquire about the transnationalism of the students and their families in their field placements and in their student teaching units.

Concluding thoughts

The idea of reframing immigrants as transnationals is relatively new, with the term only emerging in the field of anthropology in the 1990s and generally having been applied to those who physically cross borders (Basch, Glick Schiller, & Szanton Blanc, 1994). As I have argued, if we hope to shift the scope of possibilities for how “immigrants,” or transnationals perceive themselves and make life choices which impact us in the U.S. and globally, a shift in the discourse toward transnationalism is necessary. Consequently, this should help create a more inclusive society in the U.S. and outside its borders as the language and discourse of transnationalism continues to be picked up. It should help all youth learn to think more expansively about people who are newer to the U.S.; this, in turn, will allow those most in danger of constructing their identities in the negative (e.g. *not* terrorists) to be free to experience multiple identities at once. In the U.S., we are moving away from a mainstream discourse suggesting people can be in control of their destinies (however inaccurate this may have been) toward an increasingly globalized world filled with greater uncertainty. Transnationalism and its cultivation of characteristics such as hybridity and *nepantla*, or inhabiting the in-between, can lead toward greater understanding of these globalizing factors at play, and, more importantly, how to engage these factors through creative, rather than destructive, responses.

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