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## IMMIGRANT STUDENT IDENTITIES: HOW BAKHTIN AND HERMANS' THEORIES CONCEPTUALIZE THEIR FLUIDITY

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*This essay discusses how Bakhtin's conception of double-voicedness and cultural identities, along with Hermans's theories of I-positionality and subjectivities, helps frame researchers' characterization of immigrant students' complex and fluid identities. This age of globalization has increased the number and dimensions of positions anyone can assume. Immigrant identities, particularly students, can especially be conceptualized as dynamic and in flux, fluctuating between at least two cultural positions. Sometimes their transnational identities can be conceived as hybridized and dialogic between these cultural norms.*

**Keywords:** Bakhtin, Hermans, double-voicedness, I-positions, cultural identity, globalization, cultural hybridity, transnationalism.

### Introduction

The hum of the airplane lulls my thoughts to a familiar trance. My plane to China has just left the golden hills of California bound for what seems like, outside my tiny frost-etched window, an endless expanse of sea sprawling to the edges of the world. I look around the cabin and see mostly Chinese faces, perhaps returning home from a stint in the USA. There are also a few excited non-Asians, no doubt embarking on a journey of a lifetime. Yet, there is a third group who belong to neither of these (Bhabha in Rutherford 1990). Having been born in China and come of age in the USA, for me, going to China is simultaneously a home-coming and a foreign venture.

Technological and transportation innovations have bridged these once distant worlds (Pensky 2001; Mitev 2004), as mobility between distinct cultural settings has facilitated cross-cultural interaction drastically. After each trip, I realize that not only have I quietly and subtly grown and changed with respect to my cultural context, but my *cultural context* has also changed, in many ways not so subtly. Each time I visit China, I see new effects of its rapid modernization and capitalism. When I return to the United States, new political and cultural landscapes abound. It is as if I acquired a new set of ears and eyes from each stage of my life, a new language with which to tell my story and a new tint to color my world.

I can sense Chinese people gaining in cynicism and constructing more barriers around their more affluent, individualized lives, even as others around them still live with next to nothing. In the USA, there has been a push for globalization and diversity in education and society (Hermans and Hermans-Konopka 2010; Obama 2014), where there is a more systemic outlook. Perhaps, one consequence of this mutual cultural shift today (Appadurai 1990) is the reality that I hear more non-English languages in the

USA and more English than ever in China. I am, culturally speaking, a composite of the distinct voices and hues of my life (Hermans 2001). To help me understand my own complex cultural identity, as well as that of other immigrants, I will explore research viewed from the lens of Mikhail Mikhailovich Bakhtin (1981, 1984a, 1984b, 1986), and Hubert Hermans and colleagues (Hermans 1996; Hermans, Kempen, and van Loon 1992).

### Global World

In this globalized age of postmodernism, postcolonialism, and poststructuralism, many venerable concepts have been troubled (Bhabha 1991), so much that even one's cultural identity has become less monoglossic (Bakhtin 1981) and increasingly hybridized. Hermans and colleagues (Hermans 1996, 2001; Hermans, Kempen, and van Loon 1992; Hermans and Hermans-Konopka 2010) along with Bakhtin (1984a, 1984b, 1986) serve as meaningful guides to contemplate this phenomenon. Their theories of identity positioning together with the dialogic process of cultural interaction frame my thinking on this issue. Indeed, I see the term *identity* itself as a synthesis of two words, *id* and *entity*. As such, I hypothesize that our identity develops from the bare basis of who we are, originating from the most genuine, most primal aspects of our being.

These days, common mobility practices, including 'immigration, international exchanges, tourism, traveling, media-communication, border-crossings, and diaspora increase not only the number but also the difference and heterogeneity of positions in the self' (Hermans and Hermans-Konopka 2010: 136). People in our globalized world populate diverse frames of mind, perhaps bolstering our capability to empathize with what seems like an ever-growing multitude of others, resulting in a superdiverse context (Blommaert 2013; Vertovec 2007). This plethora of positionalities aggrandizes and complicates one's multiple cultural perspectives.

For example, I can remember in the winter of 1994, I traveled to Pretoria, South Africa. There I met a mixed-race boy who was obsessed with Michael Jackson, an Eighties American cultural icon, and moonwalked passionately along the sidewalk, dancing wildly while singing *Thriller*. Many years later, when I taught in China in 2009, many of my Chinese students were entranced by the NBA, and supported their favorite American basketball players, donning team jerseys etched with player names and imagining they were those superstars as they played basketball after class. Throughout the years, I have seen non-Westerners' attire shift to more Western looking styles and their behavioral norms edge more toward individualized dynamics.

Simultaneously, the US culture has also been affected and changed, as we now have increased access to outside cultures (Appadurai 1990; Otmazgin 2014), and foreign cultural products inundate our markets at a pace and magnitude unmatched in history. Perhaps as a result, many Americans are now beginning to appreciate the benefits of community and collective thinking (Parker, Haytko, and Hermans 2009), a traditionally Eastern quality, even as Chinese society becomes ever more individualistic and capitalistic (Tan 2012). There may take place a mutual, systemic shift in cultural tendencies in the world today.

In fact, the concept of distinct and homogenous cultures set against one another may altogether be antiquated (Hermans and Hermans-Konopka 2010), and instead need to be replaced by cultural intersections and interfaces. These frontiers of culture that manifest particularly in the identities of immigrants may be hybrid (Bhabha 1991; Gon-

zales 2005), a blend of different culturally-oriented positionalities, or transnational (Basch, Schiller, and Blanc 2000; Portes, Guarnizo, and Landolt 1999; Vertovec 2001), vacillating allegiances of geopolitical reference. These spaces may be viewed as those of dialogic interaction (Bakhtin 1981, 1986), where multifaceted hybrid realities encounter, and struggle with, each other.

### Hybrid Global Identities

As individuals have been liberated through the confines of bordered cultural space, their own identities are partitioning to adapt to that morphing, diversifying context (Hermans and Hermans-Konopka 2010). In this age of extensive globalization and connectivity, 'the number and nature of voices in the self have been expanded dramatically, and we are increasingly involved in mediated forms of dialogue' (p. 64). In a sense, cultural *I*-positions (Hermans 2001; Hermans, Kempen, and van Loons 1992), or the frames of reference tied to distinct cultural tendencies, along with those traditional discrete notions of cultures themselves, have become dynamic, dialogic, and difficult to neatly partition and categorize (Bhabha 1991). Bakhtin characterizes this identity as a 'complex dialogized hybrid' (Bakhtin 1981: 77).

As an example, García-Sánchez (2010) studied the heteroglossic (Bakhtin 1981) mutual construction of adolescent Moroccan immigrant girls' hybrid cultural (Bakhtin 1986) and gendered identities in Spain. In the rich dialogic, sociocultural context of peer play groups, these girls engaged in culturally and religiously subversive, linguistically incongruous activities. They constructed alternative worlds, where they enacted secular Spanish ideals of femininity that are undesirable in their Muslim cultures. They manifested a hybridized, unsanctioned, vulgar (Bakhtin 1984a) identity that is also displayed in the dialogic heteroglossia of both polite and vulgar discourse, codeswitching between both Arabic and Spanish vernaculars, while exhibiting cultural and religious moral tensions as they play. The researcher studied these 'hybrid language practices of adolescent peer groups... and the importance of these practices for articulating ties to immigrant origins and adolescent subcultures' (García-Sánchez 2010: 525). Thus, construction of identities is not merely cultural on the macro regional, global, or national scale, but also perhaps dialogically negotiated on the microscale in everyday interactions and hybrid language use (Canagarajah 2011; Hermans 2001).

In this sense, current patterns of immigration are one of the most conspicuous manifestations of this great exchange of peoples and consciousness worldwide (Bhabha 1991; Ong 1996, 1999). An immigrant's cultural activities and frames of mind are etched by negotiating the various, often ambivalent, voices that dialogue with the larger political state, and establish an individual's complex definition of belonging, politically, culturally, and geographically. In El-Haj's view, one may feel disparate disharmonious allegiances, because for immigrants or minorities, 'belonging frequently entails developing one's sense of identity in relations to multiple nation-states' (El-Haj 2009: 277).

Hermans, Kempen, and van Loon (1992) wrote about this complex synthesis of frames of minds. They claim that '(t)he dialogical self, in contrast with the individualistic self, is based on the assumption that there are many *I*-positions that can be occupied by the same person' (Hermans, Kempen, and van Loon 1992: 29). In their understanding, this heterogeneous self can be partitioned into distinct frames of minds that represent 'different anchor points that may organize the other *I*-positions at a given point in time' (*Ibid.*). One cultural position, thus, may influence or affect another within the

same individual. Mexican-American youths' responsibilities as translators for their families may impact their status as adolescents in the American school context (Orellana 2009), while their identities as Americanized adolescents also, perhaps, influence their role in their families and heritage communities.

Bicultural immigrants may contend with worldviews that are shaped by two cultures (Bordieu 1985; Hong, Morris, Chiu, and Benet-Martínez 2000), finding that they are not entirely conforming to either. This synthesis of diverse cultural elements is complex. With reference to transnational immigrants (Smith and Guarnizo 1998) with split allegiances (El-Haj 2009), these cultural frames of reference may present as more of a discordant, conflictual debate. Furthermore, the self is liable to vacillate, and be split, between two cultural norms, two mores, and two languages, as there may be a palpable 'discontinuity of the self' (Hermans 2001: 246), where the 'I fluctuates among different and even opposed positions' (Hermans *et al.* 1992: 28).

Smith and Guarnizo (1998) termed this divided multinational affiliation as 'transnationalism' (Smith and Guarnizo 1998: 3), characterized by the 'deterritorialized nation-state' (p. 8) as the result of the 'cultural hybridity, multi-positional identities, border-crossing by marginal "others", and transnational business practices by migrant entrepreneurs' (p. 5). In a sense, they may form communal identities with other nationalities based on other cultural ties, like religion or language. This diversity of positions heralds an abundance of perspectives and heteroglossic voices as well (Bakhtin 1981). Today, the global citizen is a hybridized bricolage of distinct cultural perspectives and vernaculars, coexisting in a tense, innervated, multitudinous space (Hermans and Hermans-Konopka 2010).

In fact, Vertovec (2001) asserts that '(t)ransnationalism and identity are concepts that inherently call for juxtaposition' (p. 573). For instance, a Muslim Indian immigrant in a Western nation is apt to assume multiple, at times seemingly incompatible identities. At school or work, this person may take on more liberal Western identities; at home or at the mosque, he or she may identify with more conservative Muslim tendencies. Furthermore, these distinct personas engage in what could be conceived as dialogic interactions inside the individual in order to coexist (Bakhtin 1986; Hermans 2001). Yet, even while some immigrants exist within these cultural borders, others may not recognize these boundaries at all either due to a more globalized outlook (Hermans and Hermans-Konopka 2010), or a failure, willful or not, to recognize these inconsistencies.

### **Linguistic and Cultural Flexibility**

In line with these vague cultural and linguistic boundaries, Bakhtin (1981) characterized the resultant hybridity as 'a mixture of two social languages within the limits of a single utterance, an encounter, within the arena of an utterance, between two different linguistic consciousnesses, separated from one another by an epoch, by social differentiation' (Bakhtin 1981: 358). That is, two distinct languages and cultures reflecting different definitions of power and identity enter into a dialogic relationship (Blommaert 2010; Lee 2004). Cultural (Bhabha in Rutherford 1990) and linguistic (Egi 2010) hybridity entail a framework cast from blending discrete cultural and linguistic reference points.

This cultural hybridity has been described by Bhabha as the 'the negotiation of contradictory and antagonistic instances that opens up hybrid sites and objectives of struggle' (Bhabha 1991: 37), where distinct cultural tendencies exist synchronously. In this 'Third Space' (*Ibid.*: 54), dialogic, hybridized, porous identities, where *I*-positions are

in flux (Hermans 2001), are often engaged in ambivalent struggle. This leads to 'a plurality of world views' (Bourdieu 1985: 728), constructing a 'multidimensionality of positions' (*Ibid.*: 724).

Immigrant students often actively wield this hybridity of disparate selves (Bhabha 1991; Gonzales 2005; Smith and Guarnizo 1998), generating perhaps an intrapersonal cultural dialogue (Bakhtin 1986; Hermans and Hermans-Konopka 2010), and may have origins and heritage roots in one culture, study in a different one, socially interact in yet another, and reside in still another. Even in one of these locales, such as school, the individual is apt to showcase and engage one's multiple cultural and linguistic positions.

In their study, Blommaert and Rampton (2011) explored the idea of linguistic and cultural superdiversity (Vertovec 2007) in the globalized world today. For instance, there are a slew of minority linguistic artifacts found in crevices and corners of majority cultural settings, with 'mobility, mixing, political dynamics and historical embedding' defining world languages today (Blommert and Rampton 2011: 4). Dialogic mixing of languages and cultures yielding heteroglossia (Bakhtin 1981) has troubled the concept of a singular contained 'speech community' (Blommert and Rampton 2011: 6), and has instead pluralized the notion to hybridized language repertoires. Not only are there greater increases of different peoples, but also distinctions within those different populations, yielding complexities within complexities, dialects within dialects. With centrifugal forces pulling away from a static unitary standard language, flexibility and dynamism characterize the state of languages in these speech communities.

In describing this mixture of languages, Canagarajah (2011) studied the ways a Saudi Arabian undergraduate student, Buthaniah, composed her writing as a dynamic, hybridized mixture of two vernaculars. He termed the dialogue between them 'codeswitching' (p. 401) or 'codemeshing' (p. 404) of English and Arabic, as Buthaniah employed different linguistic codes in her writing. The language she utilized corresponded to distinct national and cultural identities, her writing as visible manifestation of that dynamic cultural interplay and hybridity, 'translanguaging to assume more linguistic flexibility' (Hornberger and Link 2012: 262).

Finally, according to Vertovec, these days, 'an increasing number of people are able to live dual lives, [for these transnational individuals] are bilingual, moving easily between two cultures, frequently maintain[ing] homes in two countries, and pursue economic, political and cultural interests that require their presence in both' (Vertovec 2001: 574). Their sense of belonging may thus be situated within two geographical, linguistic, and cultural spaces. A simultaneous cultural presence in both locations may herald a dynamic instability of the self (Hermans 2001; Hermans and Hermans-Konopka 2010). The self-concepts and positionalities of immigrants may thus be both heterogeneous and dynamic.

## **Dialogue of Identities**

### **Hermans' I-Positions**

In Hermans' (2001) view, these dimensions within an individual do not always coexist harmoniously. In fact, these positions of selves are often conflictual, as the *I* in one position can engage in active, at times adversarial, dialogic interactions with another perspective, agreeing, disagreeing, understanding, and misunderstanding. For bicultural persons, their multiple, at times contentious positions, enter 'a dialogically agitated and tension-filled environment of alien words, value judgments and accents, weaves in

and out of complex interrelationships, merges with some, recoils from others, [and] intersects with yet a third' (Bakhtin 1981: 276). This recoil may be incited by the shame immigrants feel for their native culture (Salazar 2007), common in the identity development of immigrant children, compelling them to distance from their heritage world.

This multiple, perhaps discontinuous idea of belonging is apt to be conflictual and contested especially when the cultures are adversely positioned (Levitt and Schiller 2004). Such is especially the case with a vilified group like, according to El-Haj (2009), currently that of the Arab culture in the West. This population may be universally cast as an antagonistic cultural faction, regardless of places of origin. Arab immigrants in a Western nation, like the United States, may don dissimilar, conflicting cultural positions in society (Hermans and Hermans-Konopka 2010), their subjectivities sometimes parsed along cultural lines within the limits of a given social context. The educational experiences for such students 'often reinforced the idea that being Arab and being American were incompatible identities, thus exacerbating the challenges of belonging and participation for these young people' (El-Haj 2009: 279), leading to contested *I*-positions (Hermans 2001).

Through this process, countless other perspectives can enter our awareness and dialogue with our own. For example, Lowinger and colleagues (2014) researched Chinese students studying in the USA displaying varying degrees of academic success, influenced by language difficulties and homesickness. These students struggled 'to adjust their social and psychological behavior to fit in with or integrate into the mainstream culture of the society' (*Ibid.*: 142) due to incompatible cultural *I*-positions. In time, however, this once 'foreign' American position may be personalized enough to become just another equally valid perspective in their repertoire of multitudinous positions (Hermans *et al.* 1992; Lowinger *et al.* 2014), perhaps resulting in dialogic synthesis.

This conception of consciousness allows for departure from unitary perspectives of identity (Bakhtin 1981), wherein the self is defined by 'continuity, distinctness, and volition' (Hermans 1996: 31). The postmodern, globalized individual is finally recognized as fractious and eclectic, fraught with inconsistencies conjoining as a 'multivoiced' (*Ibid.*) identity. This type of cultural synthesis and multidimensionality is not only possible, but inevitable in our globalized world (Hermans and Hermans-Konopka 2010). In a sense, this transnational identity is a natural response to globalization and immigration (Vertovec 2001).

Bicultural, bilingual, and binational immigrant students may possess 'a "dualistic" form of awareness where the *I* is strongly detached from specific positions' (Hermans and Hermans-Konopka 2010: 10), liable to shift and attenuate with the context. In essence, the self is decentered from a mold of intensely rigid nationalism to more permeable sets of allegiances. As a consequence, the self is invariably deterritorialized as well (Appadurai 1990; Smith and Guarnizo 1998). These distinct positionalities perhaps may portend a gloomy forecast of discord and unmanageability; and, a dialogic relationship that manages these disparate positions (Hermans 2001; Hermans *et al.* 1992) may be needed for coexistence in a globalized world. In every thought, multiple cultural perspectives may be considered, yielding new dimensions.

### **Bakhtin's Double Voicedness**

Bakhtin (1981) characterized this expansion of positions within such individuals as a double-voicedness. Cultural minority students in Western classrooms often enter a tri-

partite space, where they must learn to manage the standardized official school language, the community-based vernacular of their daily lives, and their individualized ways of molding language. The language of school is also perceived as double-voiced (Lee 2004) for it implies a social stratification and hierarchy these students must obey while they brandish their own heritage tongue, which is similarly socially stratified. At this intersection of languages, these individuals must manage and author meaning for themselves, a dialogic double-voiced process.

For instance, Bigelow (2010) conducted an ethnographic narrative research of a Somali community in Minnesota, and their development of multiple literacies. Being Black Muslim Somali women, we see the 'intersections among race, religion, nationality, and gender [creating] a dynamic hybrid space' (p. 112). Their experiences of literacy were impacted by this fluid sense of identity, and the racialized experiences they encountered from a racist and Islamophobic majority culture. Experiences of the 'racialization of students' identities ignores the fluid nature of identity' (p. 115), their complexities reduced to one symbol. Yet, they become skilled in both standard American and African American vernaculars, often representing the urban hip hop culture in their literate activities, attempting to gain membership to a fragment of American culture. On filling in demographic data, however, 'if given the option of writing something under "Other", Somali youth will write "Somali"' (Bigelow 2010: 29). Even as they engage in 'American' cultural activities, they still elect to retain their heritage selves. In essence, there is double-voicedness in the construction of their identities, which are 'simultaneously constructed by them and by [the] other... through the interaction with others' (p. 115).

This idea of double-voicedness may be especially pertinent to immigrant second language learners (Vitanova 2013). The acquisition of English, for example, is not a uniform process as immigrant discourse merges with some voices while distancing from others, participating in dialogue with the foreign language (Bakhtin 1986). Double-voicing is 'prefigured in language itself (in authentic metaphors, as well as in myth), in language as a social phenomenon that is becoming in history, socially stratified and weathered in this process of becoming' (Bakhtin 1981: 326). So, this idea is really about the experience of one self existing with another self, as the other self is forming. The developing self matures with the cultural inputs he or she experiences in the immigrant context, influencing and being influenced by the other pre-existing self cohabiting the same space (Hermans 2001; Hermans *et al.* 1992; Hermans and Hermans-Konopka 2010), while the pre-existing self simultaneously is also changed. Such dual cultivation breeds multiplicity in understanding the world.

With some immigrants, this contested double-voicedness can also incite tension expressed in tense 'social heteroglossia' (Bakhtin 1981: 326). For example, El-Haj (2009) studied Arab American youths' perspectives and experiences in the post-9/11 nation as enemy-outsiders, and offers new ways of thinking about national identity. In fact, she found that their two identities were conflictual, that 'being Arab and being American were incompatible identities, thus exacerbating the challenges of belonging and participation for these young people' (p. 279). Immigrants can 'simultaneously accept and reject their differences from the majority, being engaged in a "double-voiced" discourse between their individual voices and the majority's dominant voice' (Hermans and Hermans-Konopka 2010: 34). Possessing two distinct voices synchronously meets the multifarious cultural contexts in which these transnational persons live (Appadurai 1990). Yet, this disjuncture may also be met with a conflictual process of entanglement.

### Constructed Cultural Identities

Appadurai (1990) postulated how two cultures are apt to engage in this type of mutual interaction. He discussed how refugeism and immigration have skewed cultural landscapes, and how globalization has changed economic realities in different settings. The frenetic pace of global cultural flow produces imagined realities for people, where a person situated in one location often imagines life in other geographies and cultures. This overcomes any unitary, singular definitions of cultural existence, with the foreign culture contributing by being unsheathed to unveil a new profundity and dimension of complexity, perhaps resulting in a 'varied mutual contest of sameness and difference' (Appadurai 1990: 308). Such is the case with my own Mexican-American participant, functioning as a 'foreigner' who engages her heritage culture with that of the rural Southern United States. By encountering Mexican cuisine and the Mexican Spanish language, simultaneously, this U.S. culture both affects, and is affected by, these Mexican cultural fragments, their sameness and differences interacting with each other.

In her research, Bigelow (2010) utilized an exploratory case-study design to understand how Black Muslim 'Somali immigrant youth construct and negotiate identities in a U.S. cultural setting where there is much racial and religious bias' (p. 97). In essence she asked about the way high school students' cultural positioning dialogue (Hermans and Hermans-Konopka 2010) with a monoglossic (Bakhtin 1981), discriminatory, prejudicial, and unwelcoming White Judeo-Christian Midwestern context. In this location, even though 'racial identities are infinitely complex, racial identifications are shockingly simple' (Bigelow 2010: 28), manifesting as societal inertia in dominant population's cultural perceptions.

Utilizing six focus groups, along with interview and case-study data, Bigelow (2010) explored how participants created knowledge about identity and how they either affirmed or contested others' comments, and how their positionalities interacted with others (Hermans 2001). Through her work, she developed three categories of racial and ethnic identities: *imposed*, *assumed*, and *negotiable* (Bigelow 2010: 99).

First, the *imposed* identity is not negotiated (Bigelow 2010), but rather undialogic and unitary (Bakhtin 1981). Dialogue does not exist at all in the manifestation of this identity, for it is 'imposed' by another, without the consent of, or input from, the individual. For example, a U.S.-born child of Somali immigrants may be inaccurately assumed to be a refugee by teachers without her or his awareness, and not be allowed to 'negotiate this imposed identity' (Bigelow 2010: 99).

Bigelow's (2010) second identity is labeled the *assumed*, which is also imposed by another, yet there is a willing acceptance of that marker. There is some dialogue (Bakhtin 1981, 1986) that exists in the negotiation of this identity (Hermans 2001; Hermans *et al.* 1992), for at least there is volitional affirmation on the part of the individual. For example, Somali adolescents in the USA are often assumed to be part of the African American culture, so many embody such an image by listening 'to [hip hop] music, wear[ing] loose pants, sometimes even' braiding their hair (Bigelow 2010: 29).

The last type of identity is *negotiable*, which are those that are actively challenged and contested (Bigelow 2010). Here, we see an active resistance to being identified by another, wishing to engage in a participatory dialogic construction of cultural identity (Hermans and Hermans-Konopka 2010). For example, a Somali girl may actively contest the stereotype of oppressed Muslim women by both wearing traditional Muslim at-



tire while presenting an erudite and politically progressive persona. There is a mutual, hybridized showcase of her two cultural positions. We see Somali parents and community leaders worrying over youths forgetting their culture, language, and religion, pulling youths to their common heritage identity, in a centripetal direction (Bakhtin 1981), while simultaneously, the adolescents are constructing hybridized, novel, individualistic identities, counteracting in centrifugal diffusion. Additionally, these identities are constructed in a fearful and distrusting dominant context that may sabotage any identity constructed due to such extreme prejudice.

As another example, Kanno (2003) conducted four case studies of bilingual, bicultural Japanese adolescents on the cusp of adulthood. Kanno's participants spent most of their adolescent years in Canada before returning to Japan, competent in both English and Japanese. Such youths, 'with high proficiency in both languages [,] can often enjoy membership in two ethnic groups' (p. 88); they can have split notions of belonging (El-Haj 2009; Levitt and Schiller 2004), which may also manifest in their literacy activities. For her, such students' identities are 'diverse, contradictory, and dynamic; multiple rather than unitary, decentered rather than centered' (Kanno 2003: 3), engaged in centrifugal expansion (Bakhtin 1981). In studying them, the researcher used both Japanese and English in the interviews, as well as both Japanese and Canadian cultural positioning in the analysis, to better understand her participants' unique languages and cultures.

These participants seem to straddle multiple boundaries (Kanno 2003): developmental, cultural, and linguistic, forming dialogized hybrids of different vernaculars. Kanno depicted how these multiple simultaneities of her participants represent 'a typical double-accented, double-styled *hybrid construction*' (Bakhtin 1981: 304), each accent pertaining to another cultural *I*-position (Hermans and Hermans-Konopka 2010), where youths 'live in such a world of relativity' (Kanno 2003: 105). These Japanese adolescents are prone to feel different levels of comfort and even exhibit different demeanors as they engage with others in Japanese and in English (Blommaert and Ramp-ton 2011).

Kanno (2003) conceives of identity as fractured into many splinters, as multiple 'aspects of our "selves" contribute to our understanding of who we are' (p. 3), consistent with Bakhtin's (1981) notions of heteroglossia and hybridity, as well as Hermans' (2001) different *I*-positions. Bilingual, bicultural people are between two languages and two cultures – that tension incorporated to their sense of self. She theorized about how different cultural selves within these students manifested in the different settings of their lives. For Kanno, like Bakhtin and Hermans, one's identity is multiple and changing, in constant dialogic interactions with its context.

### Synthesis of Voices

This hybrid dynamic consists of 'collective voices' (Hermans 2001: 262), which organizes and manages the constructs of meaning spawning from this dialogic relationship. Distinct voices participate in dialogue with each other, so that our behaviors are not manifestations of unitary understandings, but of an amalgamation of perspectives. A person's distinct selves 'fluctuate among different and even opposed positions [, as t] he *I* has the capacity to imaginatively bestow each position with a voice so that the dialogical relations between positions can be established' (Hermans *et al.* 1992: 28). This synergy is not always tranquil and serene, as dialogue in this sense is not only about attaining a peaceful compromised resolution. Often, these native, heritage voices and

those developmentally acquired ones, engage antithetically with each other and among themselves caught amidst conflictual tensions within a person (El-Haj 2009; Hermans and Hermans-Konopka 2010).

Cultural and linguistic repertoires of bilingual, bicultural immigrants are manifestations of who they are, and how they construct and engage with their context (Blommaert and Rampton 2011). Such may especially be the case, according to El-Haj (2009), when the cultures of immigrant and mainstream dominant cultural students clash and combat with each other. There may exist a 'plurality of independent and unmerged voices and consciousnesses... with equal rights and each with his own world, [that] combine but are not merged in the unity of the event[s he depicts]' (Bakhtin 1984b: 6). Perhaps this dynamic necessitates the existence of a superconscious observer that oversees these positions, teasing out the disjunctive elements. Such is the function of the transnational consciousness (Vertovec 2001) or the bilingual translator (Hornberger and Link 2012), who can attend to and comprehend both perspectives. The immigrant child may need to develop just such an identity in order to survive in her complex, multivoiced world (Hermans 1996; Orellana 2009).

### **Cultural Carnival and the Dialogic Transformation of Cultures**

Regarding this split notion of cultures, Bakhtin (1984a) wrote about the seldom recognized Carnavalesque tradition, a contradictory, vulgar, corporeal, grotesque undercurrent of the Middle Ages that promulgated satire, laughter, and humanism in a monoglossic (Bakhtin 1981) era dominated by strict views of religion. If not for the liberatory, humanistic element of Carnival festivities, European thought may have forever been bogged by religious dogma and singular truths. During Carnival, solemn 'social ceremonies took on a comic aspect as clowns and fools, constant participants in these festivals, mimicked serious rituals' (Bakhtin 1984a: 5). Thus in reality, for him, culture is not unitary, but always a dialogic interaction of disparate, independently legitimate forces, where the unsanctioned culture always has a voice, even if it is undocumented, participating as an 'actively dialogized backdrop' (Bakhtin 1981: 76).

The vulgar, according to Bakhtin, can be thought of as the raw, native, heritage, or unsanctioned perspective that always participates and influences the multifaceted dialogue inside the individual (Velez-Ibanez and Greenberg 1992), enacting a linguistic and cultural hybridity (Bhabha 1991; Brandt and Clinton 2002; Egi 2010). The *lingua franca* defining this space, according to Egi (2010), can be viewed as 'an interlanguage' (p. 2), a transitory language between the two vernaculars.

By hypothesizing this 'peculiar culture of the marketplace and of folk laughter' (Bakhtin 1984a: 4) as one of the harbingers to the artistic, cultural, humanistic explosion of the Renaissance, Bakhtin validates and even prioritizes these voices within the dominant discourse. Perhaps cultural hybridity even existed in the 'singularity' of the Middle Ages, only it was not officially validated, but where perhaps 'inevitably arises an inner contradiction and tension' (p. 291). Like the immigrant's unsanctioned voice in our society today (Canagarajah 2011), the undercurrent of a minority culture forever dialogues, influences, and perhaps even elevates the path of civilization.

This notion is relevant to current studies of immigration. For example, El-Haj (2009) researched the split, contradictory cultural allegiances young Arab-Americans may feel, as they 'maintain psychological, cultural, and economic ties to multiple nation-states' (p. 275). In case-studies of 1.5 and second generation Arab youths living in

the U.S. after 9/11, their cultural positionalities were found to be complex and caught in the interface of the local and the global contexts. Such multiple cultural references are especially difficult to maintain if one of them is regarded as 'enemy-outsiders' (p. 275) or 'enemy-aliens' (p. 278), inciting cultural tension similar to Bakhtin's Carnavalesque culture. Here, we see the Western White-American culture as the reified one and the indigenous Arab culture as the 'grotesque' undercurrent. The language used to label them may also psychologically predispose them to villainization and 'Othering' (Bhabha 1991).

Alternatively, Kanno's (2003) research of Japanese students who returned to Japan from studying in the West found the cultural positioning of these youths also to be two-fold, but for them however, their Western cultural experiences and capital formed the 'unsanctioned' undercurrent. This acquired perspective coexisted in a dialogic, hybridized space within the sanctioned, monoglossic homogenous subset of Japanese culture in which they lived. Their distinct cultural elements preserve their integrity, even as they often overlap. Many appeared to be 'walking contradiction(s) who looked Japanese but did not behave Japanese' (p. 18). Even with strong attachments to Japan, their extensive time away from their home country may instill considerable insecurities, perhaps as a tentative *I*-position that fails to assert itself within the person (Hermans 2001). While in the West, however, their Japanese language and culture formed their undercurrent, native voice, interjecting unsanctioned aspects into their lives.

Bakhtin (1986) conceived of such a cultural meeting as a 'dialogic encounter of two cultures [that] does not result in merging or mixing [, as] each retains its own unity and *open* totality, but they are mutually enriched' (p. 7). Consistent with Hermans' (2001) view of contested selves, he also sees coexisting cultures as at times incompatible, yet mutually dialogically influential, each enriched by their meeting. Culture to Bakhtin is a malleable, unstable, transformative dimension. When two cultures encounter each other, a symbiotic process of change and growth occurs with respect to each.

This phenomenon in a research context is termed by Bigelow (2010) as a 'co-construction' (p. 93). The Somali youths she was studying had complex cultural positions, for in trying to adopt the African American culture, they clashed with their African home cultures. The American social culture, their Muslim Somali home culture, and their own racial and cultural positioning all contribute to their identity construction.

As cultural insiders 'raise new questions for a foreign culture, ones that it did not raise itself[,] we seek answers to our own questions in it; and the foreign culture responds to us by revealing to us its new aspects and new semantic depths' (Bakhtin 1986: 7). Being cultural outsiders may grant immigrants a depth of insight, unhindered by cultural biases. There is a mutual dynamism in this relationship. In this exchange, that foreign culture is simultaneously emboldened and modified, concurrently affecting and being affected. As we learn more about the foreign culture of the immigrant, participating in an active dialogic understanding (Hermans and Hermans-Konopka 2010), we change it by injecting our perspective into the fold, giving that culture new found self-awareness. At the same time, our understandings of our own culture are embellished, as new dimensions of its complexities are revealed in contrast with 'a completely different, nonofficial, extraecclesiastical extrapolitical aspect of the world' (Bakhtin 1984a: 6).

Even as immigrants return home to their countries of origin, they may experience a different type of transition. Like my own 'homecoming' to China, these migrants bring with them different understandings of the world, so upon their return, they may feel like

‘strangers entering a homogeneous culture with highly codified norms of behavior and values’ (Kanno 2003: 115). Returning to one’s country of origin is thus often not simply a return to those distant, precious primordial memories, but also a new undertaking, a dawning of a new cultural paradigm laced with interstices of the old as a dialogic synthesis.

In this sense, the immigrant may actually understand more about the host culture, unfettered by culturally ensconced biases and preconceptions regarding it, and hold more of a metaperspective regarding these cultures’ interplay in the world. Bakhtin (1986) views the immigrant cultural perspective as an essential aspect of our world. So, with respects to culture, ‘outsideness’ is not necessarily a condition to steer away from and ‘insiderness’ is not essential to strive for to gain full cultural perception and understanding (Cattani, Ferriani, and Allison 2014). Immigrants’ conception of the host culture may actually be more accurate and objective, and their views need to be heeded by cultural insiders for a more unbiased understanding (El-Haj 2009), as these two perspectives engage in dialogue with each other.

Perhaps even more important than cultural understanding, according to Simandiraki (2006), is cultural empathy, a deeper innervation of cultures, as international education can promote national cultures as allies or enemies (El-Haj 2009). When we learn to internalize another culture, we see the world differently. This ability to feel another’s pain is perhaps transference of individual and cultural *I*-positions to another individual from another culture, freeing our sense of self from its isolated space.

In the third space between cultures (Bhabha 1991), the immigrant self is consumed in a position characterized by its place nestled in the ‘marginality vs assimilation continuum’ (Teerling 2011: 1080), as identity is split between two definitions of belonging, two senses of reality. Immigrants simultaneously feel included and ostracized by the dominant cultural context (El-Haj 2009), a dialogic sense of belonging. This space is not only double-voiced (Bakhtin 1981; Lee 2004) and hybridized (Brandt and Clinton 2002), but also, like the ocean between China and the US for me, a special sacred place, territory claimed by the transnational immigrant identity (Vertovec 2001).

In this complex space, cultural intersubjectivity resonates, ‘where one seek[s] mutual understanding through choosing worlds and creating “temporarily shared worlds” that transcend the private world of each interlocutor’ (Strickland 2012: 79). In Strickland’s qualitative study of immigrant students using a multivocal approach, intersubjectivity as semiotic negotiation is found to be an important indicator of cultural transference in school, as ‘meaning making is negotiated in the classroom through an interactive process between teachers and students’ (*Ibid.*). The landscape of the immigrants’ minds can assume these transcendent oscillations between their dual private worlds. I can in one moment feel more American, and in a different context the next feel more Chinese. In others, I can feel both simultaneously.

## Conclusion

As Bakhtin and Hermans believe, subjectivities transcend the bounds of simple, unitary classifications. Especially in this global era, intersubjectivities become the norm, so much so that the idea of singular cultural reference points becomes troubled. Perhaps only in dialogue can we best acknowledge the benefits of each culture, examining each closely, empathizing with each, to peer at the world through different eyes, much like

the way I feel after spending a length of time in China, when I learn to see my world differently, and in turn, my own self in another way.

Perhaps, in this world, we are all engaged, in one way or another, in the dynamic cultural transgressions of immigrants (Ong 1996, 1999), even if we never leave the soothing familiarity of our home space. We cannot help but be confronted with diverse experiences (Blommaert 2013), with an international frame of reference. Our hearts ache when we hear of the genocide in Rwanda or of the tsunami in Southeast Asia, when we see the escalating violence in the Middle East or the shootings in Paris, and when we read about self-immolations of Tibetan monks in China protesting religious suppression, or about the helpless hurricane victims in New Orleans. Our empathy with a common humanity untethers our being from its static geographic location.

As global citizens, we are simultaneously cultural immigrants and natives. Especially with the torrent pace of technological and digital advancements, many of us may struggle to keep pace with the dynamic cultural definitions and understandings, identifying as 'digital immigrants' (Pensky 2001: 2). Thus, the idea of 'immigrants' itself (Ong 1996, 1999) perhaps needs re-examination. Being an immigrant needs not be an inferior status. If cultural dialogue can lead to better understanding and deeper synthesis of ideas, then why not all strive to be double-voiced like immigrants.

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