

“Disturbing the Waters”: Using Relational Knowledge To Explore Methodology

By Cynthia C. Reyes

We store in memory only images of value. The value may be lost over the passage of time...but that's the implacable judgment of feeling: This, we say somewhere within us, is something I'm hanging to...Instinctively, we go to our store of private associations for our authority to speak of these weighty issues. We find, in our details and broken, obscured images, the language of symbol. Here memory impulsively reaches out and embraces imagination. That is the resort to invention. It isn't a lie, but an act of necessity, as the innate urge to locate truth always is. (Hampl, 1999)

The Importance of Memory

Reconstructing memory has a tangible relationship to doing ethnography. Telling stories, sifting through details, examining interpretations are relevant to the researcher's job of reporting, to the best of her ability, the representation of a life. In reconstructing other people's stories, it seems inevitable that the researcher's own life—belief system, ideals, practices—once thought of as unapproachable, is now called into question when autho-

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“Disturbing the Waters”

rizing self to piece together others' stories. It is this realization that the researcher, in order to do ethical justice to using ethnography, must know the grounding of one's own assumptions and beliefs. And what happens when those assumptions are grounded in otherness to begin with? Racial discourse traditionally has focused on the dynamics of black and white people. What of the dynamics between researchers of color doing research on participants of color? How does race/ethnicity or religion influence interpretation of research for scholars of color?

In the following article, I examine my racial identity and its impact on my interpretation of the schooling experiences of a 10th grade Latina in an ethnographic case study. Prior to this study, I had been working in a university-based family literacy program where I met Zulmy's mother, Manuela. Due to my experience as a middle grades English/Spanish bilingual teacher, and due to the observations I made about the difficult transition for many of my former bilingual students who entered high school, I was primarily interested in following the school and literacy experiences of Mexican immigrant students in the high school. I had originally met three young Latinas who were in their freshman year; all of them, including Zulmy, were daughters of the Mexican mothers with whom I worked in the literacy program. As a Filipino American whose second language is Spanish, the young women were curious and intrigued about my interest in them, and about my knowledge of Spanish, which I learned in high school and later in college. They were also impressed that I taught and worked in the university, and they often told me of their dreams to go to college. As I came to know the young women, I learned about the individual ways in which they negotiated their schooling and language experiences in a high school bilingual program. Apart from the other young women I observed, I noted the importance of the Catholic religion in Zulmy's family, which Manuela fostered at home. Though her mother was not a participant in the study, I was able to interview her to better understand the support that religion gave to their day to day life. To orient myself with the school setting, I also interviewed Zulmy's teachers and friends about the academic and social life in Zulmy's high school. For the purpose of understanding how class, religion, and immigration influenced my interpretation of Zulmy's life, this article mostly addresses the relationship I had with her.

I followed Zulmy for 10 months in her classes at an urban high school in the Midwest. The school, Salazar High, had roughly 2,500 students of whom 85% were Latino. For the purpose of this article, I evoke my own experiences as a child of immigrant parents to better understand the intersection of race, class, gender, religion, and ethnicity that described Zulmy's identity. In referring to Rosaldo's (1989) notion of relational knowledge, I seek to make my racial persona more culturally visible in an attempt to make the study of differences more the “play of similarities and differences relative to socially explicit identities” (p. 206) between Zulmy and me. This, according to Rosaldo, brings into view the invisible researcher *self* or *detached observer*. In examining racial and religious identity, I explore the complexity in using relational knowledge to construct a continuum in which to analyze the positioning between me and my participant in a research

relationship. Furthermore, such a reflexive process points to how one's frame of reference inevitably influences interpretation, thereby muddying even further the author's, as well as the participant's, voice on identity, language, and schooling. In the following paper, I describe my relationship with Zulmy, first through my initial description of her as a *church girl*. Then I follow this piece with a personal reflection on language, identity, and ethnicity. Throughout the article, I examine our research relationship vis-à-vis my personal reflections on language and identity, and analyze the implications that such a relationship has on understanding data and writing about one's participant.

Zulmy the church girl

In an early classroom observation, one of Zulmy's classmates publicly referred to her as *church girl*, teasing her after the teacher complimented Zulmy's formal dress. In that particular school, students who *dressed well*, in black skirts or pants with white shirts, were often referred to by their peers as *church boy* or *church girl*. This connoted the idea of a church-going, bible-reading, and spiritual-evoking individual. The reference of *church girl* to Zulmy became an initial stepping stone for exploring the multiple identities that Zulmy assumed in the school. After this first impression, I sought to understand what she felt her role was in the school, family, and church. Her dual frame of reference evolved around Mexican values, *la educación* (Valdés, 1996) that she learned from her parents and community, and values from her school peers. From an early age on, Manuela socialized Zulmy into the Catholic doctrine, which is why Zulmy placed value in prayer and believed in the influence of spirituality and faith. In an interview one afternoon, Zulmy reflected on divine providence, a similar reference that her mother made during one of our interviews to reason why things occurred in life. Zulmy said, "I believe that God tries to always help us, and above all you have to do your part." [Yo creo que Dios siempre trata de ayudarnos, y sobretodo tiene que poner su parte.]

I asked Zulmy, "What is the part that *you* have to do?"

She answered:

I have to help my family, I have to pray, and later I have to study. I always remember that God is also with me, because if I say that God has to help me but I don't study, or I don't try, I will not do well, I will not get the 'A'. [Tengo que ayudar la familia, tengo que rezar, y después me pongo a estudiar. Y siempre me acuerdo que Dios tiene que ayudarme pero no estudio, o no hago el esfuerzo, no voy a tener éxito, no voy a sacarme una "A."]

Zulmy also found value in songs written by young Christian groups. Favoring salsa over the ranchera that Manuela listened to, Zulmy said she liked salsa, cumbia, or Christian rap. She described a favorite song about someone who professes to believe but is capricious and whose faith is inconstant.

My favorite song is one that my friend who is Pentecostal lent me that said, "that you accepted God but you never talk to him, that you don't talk to him unless you

“Disturbing the Waters”

need him, you never talk to him but when you have problems you talk to him.” You always forgot about him, you just call him when you need him. But it’s not like that. [Mi canción favorite es una que me presto una amiga, un pentecostés, y [la canción] decía, “que tú aceptaste Diós pero nunca la hablas.” Siempre lo olvidas, solo lo llamas cuando lo necesitas. Pero no es así.]

Zulmy described religion as being more strongly grounded in her parent’s time and generation. She referred to *los tiempos de antes* or a time before when things were better, something she had learned from her mother’s childhood stories about life in Mexico. Now reflecting on her own generation, Zulmy perceived young people throughout the world, not just the Mexican immigrant youth who acculturated quickly to the English-speaking mainstream, as suffering a lack of values that had not been learned from an earlier generation.

I think that today the youth no longer want to study or do anything. There are a lot of drugs, the computer is used for (doing) bad. Many are using the (computer) to look at bad things or make bombs or to harm young children. And I believe things long ago were not as bad. There is more drug use, more gangs. [Yo pienso que hoy en día la juventud ya no quiere estudiar ni nada. Hay mucha droga, la computadora la usan para mal. Muchos la están usando par ver cosas malas, para hacer bombas o hacer daño a los niños chiquitos. Y creo que antes, antes no había la maldad. Ahora hay mucha droga, muchas gangas.]

I asked her if she might have thought the technology was also responsible for making things available to young people, and Zulmy agreed, but she also said that it was also due to lack of will or faith in oneself.

I feel sad because many young people instead of success they are using drugs and are gangbangers and I think that we are all important, they are intelligent. There is nobody “dumb” not even the handicapped. And the handicapped people, I admire them a lot because I think that they although they don’t have (the use of) hands or feet many times they do more than we do. [Me siento triste porque muchos jovenes en lugar de triunfar ellos están usando drogas y son “gangeros” [pandilleros] y pienso que nosotros valemos mucho. Todos son bien inteligentes. No hay ningún burro ni siquiera los incapacitados. Y la gente incapacitada yo la admiro mucho porque pienso que ellos muchas veces aunque no tengan las manos ni los pies ellos hacen más que nosotros.]

These quotations clearly reflect Zulmy’s belief about the transformative influence that religion could have on adolescents. Her concern about today’s youth also reflects the thinking of her parent’s generation; the youths’ perceived lack of faith and confidence in themselves, and their dependence on drugs. Zulmy believes that everyone has a choice and that these choices may result from divine intervention. She believes prayer and faith would lead one to a solution.

As a researcher, I am compelled to listen to Zulmy’s beliefs, and as someone who had also been raised with a religious background I could bring that knowledge to bear on my interpretations of Zulmy’s religious perspective. At the same time, I ponder Zulmy’s quick assumptions about her peers who she perceived as losing

their identity in the American mainstream. I was a youth of immigrant parents who had also acculturated to American life, as my parents raised us to embrace a life they felt afforded many freedoms we would not have been entitled to in the Philippines. Suddenly, I become aware of my own assumptions, and the way in which Zulmy's response situates me, aware of the dialectic between researcher and participant perspectives and how those influence the interpretative process.

In recounting my life's experiences on paper, of my own acculturation as a U.S.-born citizen, I am reminded of how my own views on language, identity, and religion differ from Zulmy's. In taking into account the lens through which I view our relationship, it seems negligent not to examine more closely the relationship dynamic of the researcher and participant, and the power inequities inherent in such a relationship. What, for example, is the responsibility of the researcher to present the participant's story as she presents it in the context of her life, yet with the researcher's gaze that one is taught to do in one's respective graduate program? Throughout my relationship with Zulmy, I learned about the importance of religion in her life, home, and community. In the following example, I observe how she strongly communicated her beliefs during a conversation with friends in art class one day. Zulmy began to reminisce about one of her best friends, Maria Luisa, whose family decided to suddenly move back to Mexico midyear. Zulmy's other friends were teasing her about her friend moving away.

"Hope you don't cry, Zulmy." Lorena teased Zulmy. They all knew that Maria Luisa was returning to Mexico permanently because Zulmy had come to art class several times sighing about how her best friend was going back, and how she would miss her.

Zulmy threw her a mischievous look. "I'm not going to cry. And for what? It makes me happy that she is going!" She laughed.

"Oh, Zulmy." Cecilia sighed. Cecilia was one year younger than Zulmy and Lorena. Sometimes Zulmy referred to her as the *bébe*, the baby, in the group. Cecilia had met Zulmy and Lorena for the first time in art class. She didn't know Zulmy well enough yet to know when her friend was being serious or not.

"She's one of my best friends," Zulmy replied enthusiastically, adding, "but there is one thing that I don't like, and that is her religion."

Zulmy considered Maria Luisa a great friend, and according to Maria Luisa's message they shared a mutual respect. But Zulmy perceived their friendship as sometimes challenged by their differences in belief. Zulmy's skepticism was based on her disagreement with Maria Luisa's beliefs over how the earth would end. Zulmy related to us what Maria Luisa described to her about life after death in heaven. Her friend explained how Jehovah's Witnesses believed in an apocalypse that predicted in the end that earth would turn into paradise, and only the believers would be saved. "To us they would say...What do you wait for? To die? Because, she (Maria Luisa) says, paradise is right here (on earth). There is a quote that they use about how John had a vision that only *those* people (Jehovah's Witnesses) would be saved."

Though Zulmy prides herself in having friends of different religions, it is dif-

“Disturbing the Waters”

difficult for her to understand that another religious group could view itself as more favored in God’s eye than her own. She acts slighted at the idea that any other group would see themselves as the *chosen* ones.

“Each one has their own beliefs but why does Maria Luisa talk to me so much if she knows that I believe in something different...if I ever took another religion, *that* (Jehovah’s Witness) would be the last one,” said Zulmy. She launched into a story with her friends of one experience that she had with one of the members of Jehovah’s Witness who canvassed her neighborhood one weekend. According to Zulmy, Jehovah’s Witnesses always told the person at the door how they wanted to save their souls. She listened respectfully, received the woman’s pamphlet, and later disposed of it in the garbage can. As if to make up for what she perceived might be a harsh comment on her friend’s religion, Zulmy offered a compliment that both validated her friend and reflected Zulmy’s inability at the time to develop a more critical understanding of difference between her beliefs and that of her friend’s as she noted that, at least, Jehovah’s Witnesses dressed well and spoke respectfully. In this instance, Zulmy’s quick concession also reflected her mother’s practice of finding common ground with others with whom they perceived differences.

Although others might perceive her comments or description of her friend’s religion as misguided, she would never think of herself in this way. She often supported what she said with her wish to be charitable to others, regardless of their religion, as her Catholic religion taught her. In situating this analysis within the researcher participant relationship, I am compelled to *tell* her truth as she sees it, but from a researcher’s *objective* gaze, I must also analyze the data critically. As someone who has tried to act as Zulmy’s advocate, how responsible should I be for helping Zulmy become more aware of her own biases? As a teacher in an instructional setting, had one of my students spoken thus, I would not have let this teaching moment pass. But since my relationship with Zulmy began as a research study informed by restrictions and ethical rules, as well as a relationship whose tone is dictated and set by an orientation to methods and methodology, I did not feel comfortable assuming the teaching role, especially since I had my own particular views about religion. Like many other educational ethnographers who might work with students, how can we be both compassionate advocate and critical researcher for our participants? As a researcher of color, I am even more perplexed about how to reconcile the issue of power inequity between me and my participant who is also of color. As anthropologist Ruth Behar noted, “Here is the paradox of doing ethnographic work—it is a process by which each of us confronts our respective inability to comprehend the experience of others even as we recognize the absolute necessity of continuing the effort to do so,” (1993, p. 271). In the following two sections, I explore more deeply the power inequities in our relationship, and what is meant by relational knowledge in this context.

Drawing upon Personal Knowledge as an Ideological Tool To Understand Power Inequity

Doing ethnography¹ did not merely suggest the practice of methods or techniques of that research tradition, but also required a reflexive exercise of the cultural and social borders that I perceived between me and Zulmy. Using the ethnographic method to construct Zulmy's experiences, I also became more aware of the researcher's self. As Denzin (1989) observes, bias inevitably influences the scholar's interpretations. Subjectivity is another term that is used to describe how in a research study, one is never free from the influence of one's class, status, value, which collectively engages with the analysis of the phenomenon at hand (Peshkin, 1982). Rosaldo (1989), whose anthropological work with the Illongot tribal group in the Philippines, sees one responsibility of ethnography as the remaking of social analysis that focuses on redefining the researcher from a blank slate or position of *detached observer* to one of a *positioned subject*. In reflecting on the anthropological stance that he used in his research with the Illongot, he likened the relationship to that between a child and an adult, where his role, which was similar to an infant's, was to learn and to grow from his participants, the Illongot adults. Rosaldo felt his own "enlightenment" of their culture would naturally follow if he engaged the role of a child who was learning or gaining more experience. He described *social borders* as potential sites for creative cultural production that required investigation. Social borders "were salient around such lines as sexual orientation, gender, class, race, ethnicity, nationality, age, politics, dress, food, or taste" (1989, p. 208). Rosaldo (1989) also proposed a central role for participants in the research study, whose perceptions the anthropologist should also consider. Giving the participant an opportunity to comment on the anthropologist's conduct would also make visible the researcher's upper middle-class professional persona. The study of differences, formerly defined in opposition to an invisible "self," now becomes the play of similarities and differences relative to socially explicit identities. The questions become, How do "they" see "us"? Who are "we" looking at "them?" (1989, p. 206)

In *Translated Woman* (1993), Behar goes to great lengths to unpeel the layer of social class between her and her participant, Esperanza, a Mexquitic woman. She first discovers this difference in the way that others may perceive from observing them together in public, which signifies something altogether different from their usual setting where she is researcher and Esperanza is participant. This is noted in the following quote.

Being seen—for the first time—as others see us is a moment of revelation for me, as though we've suddenly entered a hall of mirrors...It is one thing, I realize, to have Esperanza come secretly to my kitchen in Mexquitic and fill my waiting ears and voracious tape recorder with her stories. It is quite another to be in the street together as real people with real bodies, with real racial and class meanings attached to us...There we are, two comadres walking side by side, transgressing a silent border simply by being together. (1993, p. 240)

“Disturbing the Waters”

Behar reflects on her privilege when she observes the various class advantages to which she is entitled when considering the social settings in which she is already situated: she has access to a place to stay in the village in which she does her ethnographic work, she can afford to bring her family as she completes her work, she can buy and locate services freely because of her status as a university researcher. Although Behar contemplates on the different meanings that were ascribed to her social class in contrast to Esperanza's, she also describes an ironic contrast with her position in higher education, where as a Latina and a woman, she felt the burden of being a minority faculty who sold out. In the following quote she described the dilemma of being a faculty of color:

I was planning to turn the tales of a Mexican street peddler into a book that would be read within the very same academy that had toyed with my most intimate sense of identity and then, with even less compunction, bought me out. Fresh from the horror of being a translated woman, I would now turn around and translate another woman for consumption on this side of the border. (1993, p. 335)

The power differential between me and Zulmy is obvious. I am a Filipino American who had access to good education her whole life. I was a child of immigrants who grew up in a middle class home because of my parent's education and social class. As a university researcher, I am entitled to the intellectual property that I gain from my research studies. In collecting Zulmy's stories I am compelled to interpret her life, but I am also challenged to interpret her story in light of my own cultural experiences. Though I cannot speak for her or give her voice in my narrative, I strive to write her story as she has communicated it to me. While I have accountability to Zulmy, still implicit in that accountability is the very power that entitles me to tell her story.

Using Story To Understand a Participant's Experience

In the following reflection piece, I recall my struggle with identity and language not to suggest commonality between my life and Zulmy's, but to put forth my reason for writing about Zulmy's teen experiences. There is a vital need to voice the experiences of teen life, especially of young women of color. The works of various educators (Davidson, 1996; Fine, M., Weis, L., & Powell, L., 1997; Weiler, 2000) informs my understanding of the making of youth identity in the school relative to, among other factors, peer and adult relationships, and academic schooling. My awareness of what I experienced as a child of immigrant parents, my inability to maintain two languages and of having acculturated so quickly into the American culture prompts me to record Zulmy's experiences as being distinct from my own. Attempting to understand her experiences helped me to become more aware of living in a bicultural and bilingual world. That prompted a kind of *relational knowledge* that Rosaldo (1989) referred to when describing how social analysis thus became a relational form of understanding in which both parties actively engaged in the interpretation of cultures. Rather than being perspectival, impressed

from within a single point of view, such forms of human understanding involved the irreducible perceptions of both analysts and their subjects. Yet, I argue these forms of understanding, as Rosaldo described them, are not juxtaposed equally. In exploring further what is meant by relational knowledge, there is an inequity that is already inherent in the relationship. While Rosaldo likened his relationship to that of child to adult, I could not analyze from a similar anthropological stance. The differences between me and Zulmy are at once ethnic, religious, and generational. Though I strive to write about her experiences as she sees it, my own lenses of a woman old enough to be her mother, of a teacher, of a university researcher collectively create layers of authoritative privilege that risk misinterpreting the story of a young adult woman of color. In the writing of Esperanza, Behar (1993) comes close to suggesting a familial affinity with Esperanza through their relationship of *comadres*. The attention that Behar brings to her own story as a young scholar of color who struggles for recognition in a university becomes potentially self-indulgent and highlights the limitations of exploring researcher subjectivity in light of one's participant. Behar goes on to explore more fully such limitations, as well as revisits the role of the anthropologist's vulnerability in her later work (1996). Though we are both women of color, similar to Behar and Esperanza's relationship, our lives are situated differently as the public would perceive us differently. In my attempts to locate the power deferential in my relationship with Zulmy, I argue that even with its limitations the concept of relational knowledge is important to identifying power deferential in a research relationship. Having chosen to explore the intersection of race, ethnicity, gender and social class in her relationship with Esperanza, I argue Behar comes close to exploring a reflexive process that elaborates on Rosaldo's concept of relational knowledge. As a result, the following section is my attempt to interpret Zulmy's life based on a narrative of my own experiences with identity and language.

Memory of Identity and Language

My little nephew Jordan Michael, whose name—his parents intended—when reversed would be the same as the famous, former professional Chicago basketball player, Michael Jordan, grabbed the back of a chair doing his own athletic feat. Legs bouncing, his chubby fingers curled tightly around one rung as he swung one leg closer to where his mother Owens sat, tempting him with a morsel from her fork, “C’mon Jordan,” she coaxed, “halika ditto” (come here).

I watched as he advanced, his lips brimming with drool, his bright eyes searching his mother's face. “He loves manok (chicken), and even sinigang (sour soup).” Owens proclaimed, “He's a true Pilipino.”

This was the first time I had met my nephew, and the second time I had seen Owens, my cousin Mario's wife. It was during this family reunion on my mother's side when I met my cousin, his wife, and child. Similar to other immigrants who followed their families to the U.S., Mario had arrived from the Philippines three years ago to join his father, my mother's only sibling, Uncle Danilo who had settled near Portland, Maine. Everyone conversed in Tagalog, occasionally switching to

“Disturbing the Waters”

English to address me, the only one in the room, besides little Jordan, who could not share in their stories or jokes. As a young girl, I was able to create distractions so as not to call attention to my poor rendition of Tagalog. When relatives came to our home, I never spoke to them. They sat in the living room exchanging what I perceived as a song-like rhythm of their language. My mother would nudge me to perform some recent accomplishment: a piano piece, a dance, or what I desired doing most, the hula hoop. While I could not impress them with my speaking ability in Tagalog, I could always charm them with my talent for swinging a green, neon hoop one hundred or more rotations around my waist. I had lost the ability to speak Tagalog since we returned to the U.S. when I was six years old. My mother remembered how I came home from school one day and how I resisted her efforts to speak to me in her language, telling her that the sisters would not like it if I spoke in a different language. From then on, my mother stopped speaking to me in Tagalog, suddenly aware that her efforts to maintain our native language would only get in the way of me speaking good English. The sound of the beads raced round and round inside the hula hoop shaking loudly each time I gyrated my hips in response to the applause. Instead, I cued my laughter, drawing it out after everyone had stopped so they would see that their linguistically challenged U.S. relative could understand their jokes even if she could not share any of her own.

In every Filipino conversation I’ve ever heard between generations, the elder usually asked the younger members the inevitable question.

“Are you teaching him Tagalog?” my mother asked Owens.

“Ah huh, ate Lori, como no?” she answered.

My mother nodded in approval. Handing a bowl of rice to uncle Danilo, my mother said in Tagalog, “Here, have the rest, I’ll get more.”

“I’ll get it, mom,” I said, half wishing my Uncle Danilo would speak to me, but knowing that I couldn’t answer him.

“Cynthia doesn’t speak Tagalog anymore, ate?” uncle Danilo asked in Tagalog.

I yelled “no” over my shoulder as I walked into the kitchen. He didn’t notice.

In the kitchen I heard my mother say, “She used to speak more when we lived in the Philippines, remember? She really knew the language then.”

Yes, I thought. I remembered. Mother told me exactly when I learned how to speak Tagalog; it was after my first visit to my lola’s (grandmother’s) house. I was three-and-a-half. We had returned to the Philippines from Chicago so my father could finish studying medicine in the U.S. My father worked hard and spent his days and most evenings in the hospital, while my mother cared for two young children at home. I often wondered if the harsh Chicago winters produced loneliness so intense that to be without family or friends might have been more than what any individual could bear. So, my mother returned to the Philippines with my brother and me in tow, and for the next three years we lived across the street from my grandparents in a district of central Manila.

During my first visit to their home, I was suddenly struck with the uncomfortable feeling of wanting to go to the bathroom. My lola had no inkling of the

nonsensical words that came pouring out of her American granddaughter's mouth. She chuckled curiously as I bent my legs at the knee and clutched the front of my skirt. She watched in disbelief as I relieved myself. Over time, my mother retold this story as a moral for the importance of learning a second language.

But, I did learn. I know because the experience of speaking a second language was like moving into a new house. One day you would cover an empty space on the wall, another day you would fill all the bookshelves, and in the following weeks you would move with familiarity toward a cabinet or closet. Soon, Filipino words spilled forth from my mouth, dramatizing my moods, articulating my urgencies. I used English words as theater props when I confused some word or meaning. Now, in my mother's dining room I could no longer utter a single word in Tagalog.

The inner struggle I have had with understanding the significance of language loss in the early part of my life is ongoing, as I continue to search for a comfortable place that means being American and being Filipino.

Being "Other" Does Not Make One an "Insider"

Well after I had finished my research, I shared a smaller, autobiographical piece with a good friend who was, at the same time, also writing her dissertation. Sharing a common bond of having a family while pursuing doctoral work, we also shared, among other interests, a commitment to immigrant issues. The piece I had written was about my first day as a bilingual teacher of an eighth-grade class of Mexican immigrant and Mexican American children in a large, urban public school. When I began it I didn't have a clear idea of what place this personal piece had in my dissertation, but the recollection of it had a resonance for my interest in working with and doing research on Mexican immigrant students. I wrote about doubts I felt as a new teacher, pondered on my teacher training and the influence it might have on creating a positive bilingual classroom.

After reading this piece, my friend offered her candid interpretation. She turned to the last paragraph where she showed me a phrase she had circled. I had written that even though I spoke Spanish I still felt an outsider in a particular school that emphasized Mexican culture. My friend was reacting to the implication of the line, "I *still* was an outsider." "When," she asked me, "did I think I was ever an insider?" She was questioning my assumption that I could ever consider myself an *insider* in the Mexican community where I worked, for the implication was that I would always be the *other*. Her statement resonated with Kondo's (1990) reflection on her insider/outsider perspective with the Japanese culture, where she immerses herself in her participants' culture for a prolonged duration of time, works alongside them, experiences as close as possible their day to day practices and rituals, and then suddenly risks crossing the boundary to become like her participants.

Her question, at first, stunned me. I recalled memories of having worked with the Mexican community almost all of my adult life. I had taught English as a second language, basic Education classes, bilingual education, and even trained Mexican women to be day care providers in their homes. Perhaps, I was reacting to the notion

“Disturbing the Waters”

that as a woman of color I indeed felt I could cross that boundary. Furthermore, I felt my friend, who was also a woman of color, would immediately understand my meaning: that someone with my own ethnic history should be able to identify a cross cultural intersection of experiences that I could share with, and relate to, my students' experiences. So it was with surprise that I perceived her as drawing a boundary line between me and the Latino community in which she herself was a member.

Banks (1998) and others (Behar, 1993; Meyerhoff, 1977; Villenas, 1996) wrote about the complexity of doing research from an indigenous perspective, and experiencing the tension of doing research on one's own community from the vantage point of a university researcher. Banks also developed a typology of learners who engaged in cross cultural research in order to describe the varying level of roles that defined each learner. The degree to which I develop my approach to research is ideological and based on my interpretations of the cultural experiences that I undergo in the different arenas of my life and the various identities that I own; as university teacher and researcher, as daughter of immigrant parents, mother of bicultural children, and as an Asian American woman. The literature of indigenous researchers who do work in their own communities is useful in guiding my research, such as the writing of one researcher (Bressler, in press) who pondered the conundrum of doing research in her native country although she had not lived there for more than 20 years. As the last example shows, there are complex layers to how we identify ourselves ethnically, racially, nationally, and internationally. There is still more to learn, however, about the role of a researcher of color who is a member of a minority group and engages in research on a participant, also of a minority community, but who is not of the same ethnicity as the researcher. What cross cultural lens or insider/outsider perspective could such a role lend to the research relationship?

It was during that moment that I thought of the complexity of identifying what makes one an insider or outsider, and how that influences interpretation and knowledge production. If I didn't quite feel like I belonged to the ethnic community in which I worked, I didn't feel a cultural bond either to the mostly White neighborhood in which I grew up or worked in. It ignited the tension of who could claim the right to do research in certain communities. It brought up uncomfortable questions, such as the following: When *did* I cross the work line to ever feel that I was a member of the ethnic group with whom I worked? How could I claim ownership to similar experiences by virtue of having been a child of immigrant parents?

In order to explore my own subjectivity and goals for doing my research and to work with a participant whose ethnicity and race is different from my own, I had to engage in the exercise of what Rosaldo (1989) described as the study of differences, the analysis of similarities and differences relative to socially explicit identities. How do *they* see *us*? Who are *we* to look at *them*? These questions had serious implication for my writing, because if my friend could point to a part in my writing that conveyed a research stance I was unaware of making, then how was I constructing Zulmy's life on paper? In the following sections I look at the *insider* and *outsider* perspectives that describe my research relationship with Zulmy, and

the manner in which I interpret cultural experiences based on the status variables of socioeconomic class, religion, and immigration. Although I discuss the status factors separately, I acknowledge that they often overlap and they often function as an intersection of experiences that changes and is often in a state of change, as one organizes and makes sense of one's experiences.

Insider/Outsider Perspective

Socioeconomic Status

Born into a middle class family, whose parents earned undergraduate degrees and pursued professional degrees, I learned early on the meaning and privilege of having an education. Even though my father came to the U.S. as an immigrant, he owned land in the Philippines and was able to use the monetary resources accrued from this land to finance his education in the U.S. This outsider lens does not help me to truly understand the nature of work that Zulmy's parents engage in; her father's factory job, the long hours and the low benefits and wages. Her mother's job at the school is one that she earned through years of volunteering and being active in her daughter's classroom. She was able to find a part-time job assisting in the vice principal's office as a parent liaison and working with other parents within the school community. Having such a job enabled her to understand the school culture better, which resulted in better communication with her daughter's teachers and principal.

There was also the obvious difference in the position I held as university researcher and teacher and the manner in which Zulmy's parents respected the role that I had as teacher. They respected the authority of teachers and believed in the importance of listening to teachers. The difference in our socioeconomic status was also reflected in the changes that affected both of our neighborhoods, which were located in different parts of the city. The phenomenon of gentrification, which was active in our neighborhoods, affected our lives differently and held different meanings for us. As the property value increased in Zulmy's neighborhood, some of their friends moved out to find more affordable housing, while Zulmy's family struggled to pay the increasing rent. As I spent the entire year visiting her community, I experienced both irony and humility to return home each day to my own neighborhood that was also undergoing gentrification and where most of my neighbors welcomed the new status that came with that change. As more of the rental units were purchased to make way for the renovation of more expensive single family homes, I observed more of my working class neighbors struggle with the change; some had inherited their homes from their parents and who now faced the pressure to put on new siding or to renovate the older façade to compete with the newer buildings next door, while other neighbors sold their homes to one of the many developers who canvassed our neighborhood. Though my home was secure and I even benefited from the changes in my own neighborhood, I was affected by the hard work that Zulmy's parents engaged in to just lead a better life for her.

Religion

My parents regarded certain values as cultural strongholds. They were profoundly Catholic. My father converted from Methodist to Catholicism in order to marry my mother. Their faith, as far as my memory could take me, resembled ritual and processions. When I lived in the Philippines, I remembered long ceremonial lines to the church to celebrate a wedding or to the cemetery for a funeral, sometimes accompanied by a band, men dressed in the traditional *barong*, a silk, white shirt, and altar boys carrying the cross or the statue of Mary. Their faith, mystical and steeped in ritual, ranged from a joyous festival to solemn mourning. Growing up, I unquestioningly embraced the mystery and mysticism. Yet, as a young adult I became more aware of what I perceived as hypocrisies in the Catholic church and which I continue to struggle with today. Having met or worked with Catholic nuns in the States and in Central America, I observed the strength that they brought to their communities but the lack of power that they were entitled to within the larger church structure. I was becoming more aware of the dominance of the central church authority represented in the rules and edicts that the pope endorsed. I also struggled with the notion of one religion holding itself above and beyond the reproach of other world religions, which slowly led me to the idea of a more pluralistic approach toward all religions that I was beginning to favor. In spite of, and because of, the remorse and guilt that I felt, I eventually strayed away from the church. As I worked with Zulmy, the loss of religion and language from my background became the lens through which I interpreted my relationship with Zulmy and her family, a devout Catholic family who frequently evoked God’s name in their daily discourse and used prayer and parable in their conversations with me. While I had convinced myself that I had buried deeply my feelings about religion, the guilt from no longer practicing my religion surfaced frequently as Zulmy and her mother strongly urged me to understand, as well as engage in their religious community. They often invited me to attend their church gatherings and to share religious stories which I listened to and mediated through the loss of my own faith.

The paradox was that I was a skeptical believer, but a believer nonetheless because of my early socialization in the Catholic dogma. The Pilipino characteristic that Western culture often referred to in Filipinos was their “extreme politeness and respectfulness” (Francia, 1993). This politeness, also perceived as deference, went hand in hand with the Catholic doctrine. In our household, my mother taught us to be polite and to never question the priests and sisters who were occasional guests at the dining table. Asking questions that put people in an uncomfortable place, in other words, challenging people from a position of power was disrespectful, especially if a child addressed an adult in this manner. And so it follows, if I used this lens of deference to observe Zulmy’s religious practice and discourse, with, perhaps, even an insider understanding of religion, I may have also been less critical of her practices, as exemplified by my earlier questioning of Zulmy’s bias toward her friend’s religion. I acquired a view of acquiescence when it came to exploring

Cynthia C. Reyes

Zulmy's religion—quietly observing their participation in church, listening to the religious stories that impacted their lives, and observing passively their spiritual evocations. Due to my own conflicted feelings of church and religion, I felt less inclined to question or to examine critically the religious and spiritual aspect of their lives. In other words, there was little to question and, therefore, sadly little to gain about how this important aspect of Zulmy's life impacted her school one.

Immigration

I felt that my own experiences as a daughter of immigrants would help me gain an insider perspective on Zulmy's world, especially as they related to parent expectations for their children's success in the United States. Both our parents felt it was important to gain access to the school. Zulmy's mother and my own volunteered in the younger grades to understand the school structure better. They valued the teacher's authority. During the year that I observed Zulmy in the school, Manuela volunteered in the vice principal's office and eventually landed a part-time job as parent liaison. Having an advocate in the school helped to orient Manuela to gain information about college options for her daughter. She became friends with the guidance counselor and with Zulmy's teachers. She also became well known to other students as she helped to manage the hallways and the detention room.

At the same time I had an outsider perspective on her parent's immigrant experiences. My father had first entered the states on a student visa, and immigration policies during the sixties were assuredly different than in the nineties. Zulmy's father came to the U.S. first, and after gaining his citizenship, he sent for his wife and daughter. The working class Latino community into which they moved validated their attempts to foster bilingualism in the family, maintenance of their first language, support of their church, and access to other family members who resided in the same neighborhood. My parents, on the other hand, assimilated quickly in the American culture and the predominantly middle class White neighborhood that we lived in. Any of my parent's attempts to foster their native language in their children was unsuccessful, since, at the time, the bilingual movement was just beginning to catch on. Yet, they succeeded in maintaining close cultural connections with other Filipino families even if they had to travel long distances to visit each other.

In using Rosaldo's concept of the relational process I had hoped to further examine the influence of class, religion, and immigration on the research relationship. I learned from my qualitative research courses the importance of establishing relationship with one's participant, but what ultimately mattered was the importance of trust and honesty. It was imperative to ask Zulmy about her thoughts on the process, her thoughts on my presence in the school, and her thoughts on what made her feel uncomfortable about the process. I was aware of the power imbalance in our relationship, and I felt that in sharing my intent and to keep Zulmy aware of the research study if nothing else would help her understand my position as a university researcher and teacher. I also made her aware that she could withdraw from the project at any time. In hindsight, I can't say that Zulmy understood the *full*

“Disturbing the Waters”

implications—opportunity to publish the data, doctoral program—of my research work and what the process entailed. In the end, however, Zulmy knew that she had an important role in this process and that the *paper* that described her schooling experiences was done in a spirit of respect toward her and her family.

Ethnography that Recognizes Relational Knowledge

The anthropologist is an instrument of cultural translation that is necessarily flawed and biased. We cannot rid ourselves of the cultural self we bring with us into the field any more than we can disown the eyes, ears, and skin through which we take in our intuitive perceptions about the new and strange world we have entered. Nonetheless, like every other master artisan (and I dare say that at our best we are this), we struggle to do the best we can with the limited resources we have at hand—our ability to listen and observe carefully, empathically, and compassionately. (Scheper-Hughes, 1992, p. 28)

Scheper-Hughes stated that if she did not believe that ethnography could be used as a tool of critical reflection *and* (author’s emphasis) as a tool for human liberation,” she would not keep returning to “disturb the waters” of the Brazilian shantytown that she studied. What drew her initially to the people who inhabited that shantytown were the spaces of convergence, empathy, and connection they all shared. What initially drew me to Zulmy were also those spaces of convergence I perceived in our shared, lived experiences of young adolescent women, daughters of immigrant parents for whom schooling and learning English were valued. In the study, I originally examined Zulmy’s schooling experiences through language and literacy; however, her adolescent identity evoked memory and, therefore, relational knowledge about my own racial and sectarian identity. In weaving in my narratives of the loss of my parents’ native language and the loss of religion, I sought to examine the influence that such memories might have on interpreting my participant’s life. Such views may have significantly altered my representation of Zulmy’s life, though by focusing on my subjectivity, or self, I argue the use of relational knowledge as a way of exploring ideological reflection of methods and methodology. In hindsight, my orientation to religion inevitably shaped my interpretations of Zulmy’s religious practice and the discourse that reflected this practice. It wasn’t until later did I become more aware of the importance of pursuing and understanding the significance of religion in their lives. As a result, my initial interpretations may have glossed over more critical questions about the relationship between religious literacy or religious practice and Zulmy’s schooling. In retrospect, the questions I would ask now are, Of what consequence were the spiritual discourses that Zulmy evoked in the school, and how did those intersect with her school identity? How do such omissions or lack of clarity in similar ethnographies influence the way we view adolescents or its impact on their schooling? Such critical questions now inform the way I interpret and make sense of the research data.

In addition, I had to acknowledge some of the cross-cultural differences that we

Cynthia C. Reyes

shared. Because of these differences, which I had hoped to illuminate in the personal reflection above on language loss, I try to draw attention to Zulmy's ability to depend on her religion as a frame of reference to help her interpret her world. Though my experience was fraught with more of an identity dilemma, religion, community, and parents supported Zulmy's young adolescent identity. However, due to her situated life, Zulmy had little exposure to the lives of her other peers who were marginalized in the school, who did not have the same access that Zulmy did in her community. After finishing my school observations, I had noted that Zulmy kept very close to her family and home, and in her school program had very little contact with those students who were not academically successful. She perceived them to be unmotivated and, in some cases, lazy in their approach to school work. Zulmy also perceived these students as not having any order in their lives. As her earlier statements indicated, she felt that some of her peers engaged in negative behaviors such as belonging to gangs. In one of our interviews before the end of year school field trip for the biology club that she belonged to, Zulmy expressed concern about the type of boys who were coming on the weekend trip. While her teacher generally felt that it was important to reengage some of these disaffiliated boys, Zulmy felt they could not be trusted and should not be entitled to go on the trip.

In the same high school, I had opportunity to work with a group of young men that the administration felt their last hope before dropping out of school was contained in a small, personalized reading and writing program that two English and theater teachers ran. The sign on the classroom door was predictably titled, "At Risk." I observed that some of these young men, contrary to Zulmy's views, did not want to fail in school and struggled instead with how to develop expectations for themselves, as well as find adults they could trust to help them succeed. There was little opportunity for Zulmy to engage with these young men who existed at the periphery of her school; at the same time, she and others had very strong opinions about them. Upon reflection, by not calling attention to her own misguided perception of such students, some of the very stereotypes, deficit theories, and assumptions I was trying to debunk about Latino students were perpetuated in Zulmy's narrative. Yet, Zulmy's narrative is her own story of how she views the world. Her story is also important to understanding why she is successful in school and how she uses the rich resources of her home and community. This cycles back to the earlier question of the researcher's responsibility to capture the participant's story, and how to do so with a critical researcher's gaze.

My personal evocations of language loss and religion also framed my interpretations of Zulmy's perspective. Since Spanish was my second language, I used my understanding of immigrant experiences from my parent's perspective to initially understand Zulmy's classroom observations. In using Rosaldo's notion of relational knowledge I sought to build meaningful connections among racial identity, schooling, literacy, and language though I argued that within the idea of relational knowledge is an inequity that is already rooted and fostered in the relationship between researcher and participant. As the researcher is entitled to

“Disturbing the Waters”

explore positionality, one’s analysis still risks the distortion of a participant’s life, or of the privileging of the researcher’s story over the participant’s. The caveat to highlighting the researcher’s role, to rendering the researcher self visible, is to examine more closely the researcher’s story in light of her participant’s. In reflecting on Behar’s work, there is also the caveat of indulging in self-absorption. In response to this, I return to Scheper-Hughes’ notion that were it not possible for one to use ethnography to critically reflect on life, then she wouldn’t continue returning to her ethnographic site to *disturb the waters*. In a similar vein, I view the possibility for ethnography as a tool to render different interpretations of life, as well as to illuminate the complexity that coexists between them.

Note

¹ For this study, I view educational ethnography as the combined fields of anthropology and education, owing its history, methods, and methodology to the field of anthropology. Significant work in the field of educational ethnography and ethnicity include the works of George and Louise Spindler, Henry Trueba, Frederick Erickson, Shirley Brice Heath, Courtney Cazden, Caroline Heller, Concha Delgado-Gaitan, Ray McDermott, Harry Wolcott, and others. The ethnographic approach, briefly defined in the “The Use of Anthropological Methods in Educational Research,” (Spindler & Hammond, 2000), I included a number of attributes. Those involved (1) observation (participant observation) for a long duration of time at the research site, (2) the volume of material that ethnographers tend to collect. (3) The process of analysis that evolved from the fieldwork, and (4) the ethnographer attempted to interpret the “emic” or native point of view of the informant.

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Cynthia C. Reyes

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