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Tiffany A. DeJaynes
CUNY Lehman College

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“Where I’m From” and belonging: A multimodal, cosmopolitan perspective on arts and inquiry

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ldm.sagepub.com**Tiffany DeJaynes**

Park University, Missouri, USA

Abstract

The paper draws upon a year-long practitioner inquiry with adolescents who conducted auto-ethnographies as part of a research course in their urban public high school. Through ethnographic data collection, youth researched their own lives, cultures, and beliefs with the end goal of producing multimodal films that represented their embodied senses of “Where I’m From”, broadly defined. As youth collected and interpreted culturally and personally meaningful artifacts, stories, memories, and family discourses, the cosmopolitan habits of mind and heart that it is argued are important for nurturing reflective citizens of the world. In the process of video production or self-curation, youth palpably negotiated and represented complex, often transnational, identities through the sophisticated use of a range of representational modes and art forms. The paper illustrates how youth-produced multimodal texts such as films can serve as a kind of social glue in educational communities, an invitation for youth to make visible a range of local and global affiliations, creating a sense of belonging and deeper knowing in increasingly diverse learning contexts.

Keywords

Adolescence, affiliation, belonging, citizenship, cosmopolitanism, curation, digital, ethnography, film, global, identities, literacy, multimodal, youth

Introduction

Youth-produced multimodal texts such as films can serve as a kind of social glue, an invitation for youth to make visible a range of local and global affiliations, creating opportunities for self-reflexivity and belonging in increasingly diverse learning contexts. The moment described in the vignette below took place in a qualitative research course I designed and taught in a small, public, New York City high school. This classroom community and school

Corresponding author:

Tiffany DeJaynes, Park University, Missouri, USA.

Email: tiffany.dejaynes@park.edu

are replete with diverse ways of being and seeing the world—a microcosm of the range of ethnicities, family histories, and socioeconomic realities of the city itself.

Posters line the school's hallways announcing the "Where I'm From" Film Festival, a celebration of three months of youth-led ethnographic research, art-making, and media production. Inside the classroom, youth aged 15 and 16 pass around popcorn and nod knowingly to one another, eyes otherwise fixed to the front of the room as they take in the films they have crafted to tell important stories of their own lives. Teachers from across the school, guidance counselors, and principals crowd into the room to celebrate the youth filmmakers with raucous applause, hearty laughter, and sometimes a few tears. The soundtrack for the collection of films moves from Nas's "I Know I Can" to an original rap and then an impassioned piano rendition of "Castle on a Cloud" performed by a young woman in the class. Across the screen float images of beloved artifacts, photographs marking childhood or family history, images of important moments and celebrations, as well as meaningful places, often the homes of family members in cities and towns across the globe. I sit in awe of the openness and honesty of the young people I teach—and the welcoming spirit of their peers.

The ethnography-based course within which the "Where I'm From"¹ project is housed invited youth to explore their own lives and communities. Youth read their lives as texts and created art and media pieces to represent their findings to their peers and school community. In examining the films youth made as the culmination of their auto-ethnographic research, I explore the ways in which young people came to know themselves and their histories more deeply, as well as how they made themselves known to one another, as artful cultural producers carefully curating artifacts and crafting stories they wished to share with their peers. Multimodal video production (particularly the self-curated films described here) affords unique opportunities for youth to both deepen their own senses of self as well as learn from and welcome diverse others, fostering human solidarity and a sense of belonging.

Appalachian poet George Ella Lyon's original "Where I'm From" poem (Lyon, n.d.) has been fashioned as a curricular springboard by social justice-minded educators to invite youth to interrogate their identities and affiliations and share those with their peers, with the intention of fostering self-reflection and a deeper sense of community (Jones, 2006). Modeled on Lyon's poem, Ana's² poem below resonates with the specificity of ethnographic interrogation in its focus on rich details about ordinary places, people, moments, and experiences.

Where I'm From
 I am from maracas and passion,
 From stories of bathing in the river water of Puerto Rico,
 To stories of "Anita" snatching a cheese doodle and running back to momma,
 From jewelry boxes full of treasures,
 I am from Walesca and Vidalina,
 The three bickering generations
 I'm from walking in late to the verses,
 Wearing flower puff dresses, sitting on the pews,
 I am from the hand-me-down decorations
 Surrounding me as I turned six,
 I am from "under the sea,"
 From writing awards,
 And elaborate winter performances

I am from “Dela! Damé café!”
I am from the empanada carts on Graham Avenue,
From candy canes on Christmas and pink candy roses on birthdays,
From the surprises of the “Jolly Christmas Postman”
I am from Walesca and her excitement for her new teddy bear,
From depressing brick apartment houses and hopeful six story homes,
I am from a broken family that comes together for every major holiday tradition

In her film, Ana’s powerful voice narrates over family photos, found images, and the low rhythms of three popular songs woven together to represent different pieces of her identity. One of just over a hundred films created by youth in my classes to share pieces of their multifaceted identities with their peers, her film braided linguistic, musical, visual, and embodied modes to represent a hybridized yet whole sense of self. The story Ana tells by artfully arranging multiple representational modes in her film is one of being from “two cultures, equally unique,” a nod that resonated with many immigrant youth in her class who embody hybridization of cultures and have already developed, along with their families, many cosmopolitan habits of mind (Campano and Ghiso, 2011).

In schools, cosmopolitan ideals can be explicitly harnessed for the purposes of identity negotiation, valuing students’ lived experiences and cultures, and fostering deep knowing of self and others in the classroom community. Educational philosopher David Hansen (2010) envisions a cosmopolitan-minded education as one that “can assist people in cultivating thoughtful receptivity to the new and reflective loyalty to the known” (p. 1), habits of mind and heart that are important for nurturing reflective citizens of the world. As youth collected, interpreted, and (re)presented culturally and personally meaningful artifacts, stories, memories, and family discourses as part of our course together, they gained a deeper understanding of their own stories and considered where their unique experiences fit within the complex histories of the world. When youth saw images from one another’s lives, sang along to one another’s music selections, and took in visual representations of their classmates’ identities, they developed, however momentarily, compassion and connection with one another in ways that led to solidarity and a greater sense of collective responsibility. In the analysis, I explore how “Where I’m From” became a trope for cultivating greater openness to others, while also maintaining allegiances to one’s roots across localities.

Identities and multimodal cosmopolitanism

Given the increasing ubiquity of digital tools for authoring, the practice of digitally curating one’s self—at a moment in time—has emerged as literacy practice in its own right, a powerful form of art-making and representational work (Merchant, 2006; Potter, 2012). In the conceptual framework below, I build a lens for understanding the identities youth chose to make visible in crafting their “Where I’m From” films—a process that involved poetry, storytelling, artifact collection, and multimodal remixing of various items at hand. I also work toward a conceptualization of multimodal cosmopolitanism to unpack the habits of mind developed within our school community as youth engaged in an iterative process of curating their life stories and sharing those stories with one another.

Foremost, I envision artistic endeavors as spaces for youth to be seen as “art-full meaning makers,” to cultivate the self, even re-write and re-claim the narratives of their lives, especially when deficit-filled narratives about who they are have been written by others (Vasudevan and DeJaynes, 2013). A tool for authoring selves, the arts open spaces for

young people to re-position themselves as well critique inequities and imagine new possibilities for living together (Greene, 1995). As youth interrogated into and crafted artful digital films to represent pieces of their identities, their stories, affiliations, personal and collective histories became textured sites of inquiry in our vibrant classroom community.

I take up a view of identities that is socially constructed and attends to the ways in which identities can be “enabling, enlightening, and joyful structures of attachment and feeling” in addition to marking pain and collective struggle (Moya, 2002: 8). Holland and colleagues (1998) argued that we perform our identities at various moments and for various audiences, continually shifting and molding our autobiographies in different social and political contexts. Researchers of digital spaces (Merchant, 2006) and adolescent literacies (Blackburn, 2002) have productively drawn upon Holland’s notion of performance to explore how authors and producers agentively position and re-position themselves along a continuum of affiliations for a range of representational purposes. Further, practitioner researchers have explicitly designed learning spaces that invite young people to both claim and negotiate their evolving identities (Potter, 2012).

Potter (2012) offered the useful metaphor of “curatorship of the self” to signal the collection, distribution, assemblage and disassemblage of media artifacts and content across a range of spaces. This phenomenon—of mixing and remixing various digital artifacts to represent the self—can be taken as a new cultural and literacy practice in new media; that is, we might conceive of digital authoring spaces (e.g. social networking, blogging, digital video-making) as spaces to engage in new ways of writing and performing the self (Merchant, 2006). In Potter’s (2012) study of children’s autobiographical filmmaking, he explored how children carefully and artfully curated their lives through film, representing important memories, people, and places through a range of representational choices. In doing so, he worked to understand the ways in which the children represented their social identities through their multimodal choices, particularly attending to the role of memory, personal attachment, and cultural affiliations as children presented a version of themselves in their films. Similarly, Rowsell and Pahl (2007) offer that we might view “text making as a process involving the sedimentation of identities into the text,” thus, every text “can be seen as an artifact that reflects, through its materiality, the previous identities of the meaning maker” (p.388). Thusly, I read the “Where I’m From” films youth produced in the course as material artifacts of their evolving and performed identities, not as fixed social realities, but rather intentionally curated texts bound up in the complex social, cultural, and political realities that they chose to engage with and evoke in their stories.

Many scholars of multimodality attend critically to the “grammar” of the text, highlighting its design and technical properties (Jewitt, 2008; Kress, 2003). While I attend to design choices in the analysis, I am more interested the social and emotional explanations of their designs; that is, I focus less on reading their designs for their own technical merit and more on “affective and aesthetic attachment” in multimodal text-making (Leander and Frank, 2006). By homing in on the stories the film producers envisioned in choosing representational materials through which to author themselves, I come to see youth as cosmopolitan intellectuals co-constructing the learning space.

Calling upon the hopefulness of storytelling, our qualitative research course was framed by a compelling talk by Nigerian novelist Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie’s (2009), where she reflected, “I’ve always felt that it is impossible to engage properly with a place or a person without engaging with all of the stories of that place and that person.” A multiplicity of stories about people is, she argued, essential to seeing our similarities and developing a felt

sense of shared humanity within the diverse range of people in our own communities and communities afar. “Single stories,” a term she uses to describe stereotypes and assumptions based on limited knowledge of others, highlight difference and rob people of dignity. It is only through engaging with multiple stories of people and places (in their own words) that “we regain a kind of paradise,” a shared understanding of one another that resonates with the ideals cosmopolitanism that I take up below.

While migration and hybridization of cultures are certainly not new, the rapidity of cultural mixing in our increasingly mediated, globalized society has led contemporary scholars in the social sciences to re-look at the classical ideals of cosmopolitanism. At her most fundamental, the cosmopolitan is a “citizen of the world,” who understands that “there are many values worth living by and that you cannot live by all of them” (Appiah, 2006). Cosmopolitanism frameworks highlight our global interconnectedness and deep responsibilities to unique and diverse others.

Educational researchers are only beginning to explore what curriculum and pedagogies that foster cosmopolitan habits of mind might look like in schools and classrooms (Hansen, 2014; Hull et al., 2010). Far beyond notions of toleration or pluralism, critical cosmopolitanism marks moral and political shifts in understanding relationships between Self, Other, and World (Wahlstrom, 2014). In reading curriculum, Wahlstrom (2014) has applied four cosmopolitan capacities set forth by Delanty (2009): self-reflexivity, hospitality, intercultural dialogue, and the transactions of perspectives. The lived curriculum described here fosters many of these cosmopolitan capacities, attending especially to the concepts of self-reflexivity and belonging.

My application of multimodal cosmopolitanism resonates with the work of Hull et al. (2010), who investigate how young people take up multimodal compositions to aesthetically engage with others both to explore and address differences. Their work attends to the multimodal authoring young people in their study engaged in as a means to know, understand, and communicate as thoughtful and receptive interlocutors within and across localities and amidst global flows and connectivities. In reading the films youth made in my study, I attend to the ways youth engaged in artistic and creative endeavors to both interrogate and cultivate the self, to build understanding with others, and to experience belonging. And in doing so, I draw attention to the aesthetic and communicational work of braiding together the various modes of sound, still and moving image, gesture, language (oral and written) into films that accounted for their overlapping identities as youth, New Yorkers, media producers (and consumers), and more. I also highlight language as a mode, as youth took up the invitation to express themselves through the multiple linguistic resources available to them (e.g. Spanish, Creole, Farsi, Hindi).

Multimodal cosmopolitan pedagogical approaches offer much potential for intercultural dialogue and exchange. In their study, Hull and colleagues (2010) investigate “intercultural triggers” in the space of a facilitated transnational social networking site. Their work highlights the ways in which moments of discord and disconnection were transformed into what Papastergiadis (2007) calls “glimpses” of cosmopolitan hospitality, as youth worked to understand and welcome one another in and through difference. The unique space of my New York City classroom, like classrooms in many places, is impacted upon and often enriched by the local realities of globalization and mass migration. And although my students speak the same language at school and share many cultural understandings by virtue of shared geography and experiences, the daily impact of cultural hybridity can be confusing or, worse, overlooked. These “intercultural triggers,” which come forth in classrooms where

children bring with them a range of cultural affiliations and expectations, offer rich opportunities for developing cosmopolitan understandings, extending to youth the possibility to see “the other in themselves” (Hull et al., 2010: 361). These moments support young people in making imaginative leaps to see and know one another more deeply—and, importantly, to develop habits of mind that will enable them to be hospitable communicators in our global community.

Stories, Vasudevan (2014) posited, “are held in our bodies, our memories, and resemiotized retellings in which a lived experience gains expression in a variety of modes” (p. 61). Re-seeing her 5-year ethnography of an alternative to incarceration program through a multimodal cosmopolitan lens, she comes to read embodied modes of laughter and singing as moments of belonging. Her reading prioritizes affective and embodied moments of interaction that enable us to understand the cosmopolitan potential of small moments. Our pedagogy, she suggested, ought to be “in service of tapping into our human and critical capacities for finding ways to know about ourselves and one another in service of crafting new sites and ways of belonging” (p. 65).

Context of the study

The “Where I’m From” auto-ethnography project was part of a required year-long course in qualitative inquiry in a small public high school in New York City. During three months of auto-ethnographic curriculum, youth interrogated (through field research) their lived experiences, cultures, and beliefs; crafted blog posts and presentations to share their data; and published their findings by producing multimodal films that represented their embodied identities.

Our classroom bore many markers of our increasingly globalized world. The 110 students enrolled across four sections of the course in 2012–13 were diverse in terms of socioeconomic, racial and ethnic identity, and ability. Youth had roots in countries across the globe—from Haiti to Puerto Rico to Colombia to Russia to South Korea, to name a few. Because texts reflecting on students’ identities, narratives, and cultures became the curriculum, the project invited youth to learn more about one another’s neighborhoods, histories, and cultures, a practice that Appiah (2006) argues helps people of many different backgrounds, traditions, and belief systems “get used to one another.” Despite attending the same small school, participants often knew very little about the nuances of one another’s social and cultural affiliations.

It is also worth noting that I enjoyed more curricular freedom than is customary in a time of rigid curricular mandates and high stakes assessments. Thus, I was more readily able to lean into my pedagogical proclivities and build a multimodal, arts-based curriculum that fostered community building and identity negotiation. Finally, our class had access to a range of art supplies and digital tools for composing, which facilitated the depth of our multimodal engagement.

Methods and data analysis

Practitioner inquiry asks who has the right to construct knowledge with and about particular communities (Campano, 2007; Cochran-Smith and Lytle, 2009). Teachers—by their location and social situatedness—commit to research with constructive consequences for the community studied, harnessing the power of their emic perspectives, their own social commitments and pedagogical aims, and the capacity to immediately put findings into practice.

Data collection consisted of writing a teacher inquiry journal and course blog, collecting student-generated artifacts (i.e. blogs, written and visual reflections, and films), and conducting a series of informal interviews and group conversations. While the insights in this piece draw upon my reflections of teaching all four sections the course, I was most deeply informed by ongoing conversations with a dozen focal participants. Further, many curricular improvisations and pedagogical shifts stemmed from reflecting with a thoughtful and creative co-teacher for two sections of the course.

I employed situated practitioner inquiry methods I had developed in a previous practitioner inquiry (DeJaynes, 2010). I explicitly involved focal participants in understanding what the “Where I’m From” project had meant to them, that is, whether it deepened or challenged existing ideologies or social commitments. I often asked if I could jot notes during informal (and intentional) after-school conversations deconstructing our course and their auto-ethnographies, a move welcomed by a handful of young people who were eager to converse about curriculum, especially if they knew their insights would fuel curriculum revisions and lessons—and be shared with education community. Early in the year, students began to remark that the class felt “different,” “meaningful,” and “deep.” I regularly asked for elaboration of these vague but hopeful sentiments as I strove to understand their research moves, representational choices, and shared classroom moments. A dozen focal students worked with me on these ideas for academic presentations for university classes and at educational research conferences. We had many planning sessions for these presentations where we focused on themes from our course that we wanted to share— “community,” “knowing,” “identities,” “belonging,” “similarities/differences,” “media-making,” the “ethos of inquiry,” and the “purpose of schools/classrooms.”

Conversations with participants about their “Where I’m From” projects for the purposes of the practitioner inquiry were infused with our collective sense of the value of ethnographic research for knowledge creation. That is to say, conducting research with 15 and 16-year-olds who had been trained to be critical ethnographers and action researchers led to deep insights rooted in the reflective work they’d already done about the value and purpose of qualitative research for communities. To illustrate, in a visual reflection on the year, one participant, Andrea, crafted a red pinwheel with the block letters “Your Own” to describe qualitative research as “observations, words, stories, opinions, thoughts, feelings, work that matters.” Andrea and her peers had internalized a sense of research as process of reflection and action within local communities, a move that shaped how we discussed and understood the “meta” task of unpacking what it meant for youth to conduct their research projects.

Findings

As focal participants and I analyzed their films, reflective blogs, and other curated artifacts from the year, it became clear that the “Where I’m From” project had bred cosmopolitan reflection rooted in the local city and classroom community yet illustrative of global echoes. Many stages of the “Where I’m From” project invited youth to refine a “reflective loyalty to the known and a receptive openness to the new” (Hansen, 2010) as they collected and analyzed data from their lives, curated a representation of themselves in their films, and shared their films (a new kind of artifact) with others. These cosmopolitan habits of mind (e.g. reflection and receptivity) became visible through: (1) various stages of curating multi-modal selves, (2) the communal ethos created in the classroom, and (3) the deep listening/seeing youth offered one another within the classroom community. Below I analyze how the

youth in my classes made themselves known to their peers and welcomed one another, fostered new possibilities for identifying previously unidentified connections, and appreciated one another's shared and varied perspectives and experiences. I also analyze pedagogical moves that explicitly invited youth to engage in the work of deep knowing and acknowledgement of one another, moves that were intended to foster cosmopolitan receptivity, reflection, and belonging.

Curating multimodal selves: "reflective loyalty to the known"

As students interrogated into the different people, moments, and affiliations that shaped them, they critiqued their positionalities, questioning how their own thinking might be shaped by their various lived experiences. I examine this identity work by considering how youth curated their evolving identities through their auto-ethnographic fieldwork and multimodal films.

Auto-ethnographic fieldwork as identity work. Youth were invited to search for physical and embodied traces of their identities as they learned to be fieldworkers. Through the collection of personal artifacts, close observations of significant places in their lives, and interviews with important people in their lives, youth engaged in a guided process of reflection and self-reflexivity. They worked to "make the familiar strange" as they sought to deepen their answers to their research questions: "Who am I? Where am I from?" Through the iterative practices of data collection and analysis, youth began to see themselves anew and develop hospitable postures with which to welcome their peers. The act of curating became much more than training ground for youth fieldworkers, but moreover an opportunity for youth to interrogate into sometimes unexplored layers of their identities—particularly pieces connected to family histories and unquestioned affiliations.

The students' data collection was a multimodal process involving photography, audio- and video-recording, writing and digital archiving. For many the task of observing and documenting familiar spaces invited an onslaught of memories. For example, Jeanette photographed a dusty corner with cookbooks designed for cooking with children and realized how much her family life had shifted as she and her sister had become adolescents. Mario used the video camera on his phone to record the route he and his grandfather had taken to and from his elementary school, reflecting on the tenderness and care in this everyday act that he hadn't considered before. Observing and documenting spaces in their homes with photographs enabled youth to notice things they hadn't noticed before about their relationships, values, interests, and strengths. Their multimodal documentation practices set the stage for self-reflexivity and opened up possibilities for sharing powerful visual stories with peers.

To practice the interviewing strategies of qualitative researchers, youth spoke with parents, grandparents, guardians, and other adults invested in their lives. Many conversations provoked forays into cultural memory, revealing hidden, often unexpected, stories. For example, Andrea knew that her father had immigrated to the United States in early adulthood, but she didn't realize that his mother, her grandmother, had come north when he was 12, sending him remittances in the care of an unsympathetic aunt who did little to support him. This act set into motion a sequence of temporary homes and injustices that mark her father's teenage years. Upon hearing her father's stories, Andrea grew to understand and "respect" him just a little more and later wrote a tribute to him in her film.

In their talk, her father also painted a picture of a colorful and mountainous Guatemala, one that she took pride in, a place where her resilient father developed a sustaining and affirming relationship with an informally adoptive family. Andrea was one of countless young people exasperated at the details of their interviewee's lives they had never thought to ask or never previously been told, and in doing research into family memory, (re)claimed parts of their identities.

No clearer was the negotiation of identities than in the artifact collection phase of the young people's auto-ethnographic data collection, where youth were asked to carefully curate five artifacts representing personal, social, and cultural affiliations on their blogs. Literacies researchers (Pahl and Rowsell, 2010) and anthropologists (Miller, 2008) have been keen to explore how artifacts provoke memories and tell powerful stories. Miller (2008) explained, "people sediment possessions, lay them down as foundations, material walls mortared with memory." Keying into the theme of her family's strength, Andrea, who was astonished by her family's immigration story above, selected an elephant from her grandmother's collection, a piece that represented the determination and steadfastness of her family. She later reflected, "artifacts can mean so much more than just decorations or for display. [...] they can mean love and caring and symbolize a lot more than you would expect." Another participant, Naomi, shared a Yiddish folk song called *Tum Balalaika*, an artifact carried in her grandmother's heart as she fled Romania during the Holocaust with little more than the clothes she wore. Naomi later reflected, "When collecting artifacts during this study, I thought about how I had acquired them and why I kept them. Doing this helped me learn more about myself, the things I value, and why."

As educators—and a classroom community—we were so moved by the thoughtful identity work of the young people as they collected and published on their online blogs, we shifted the curriculum to make room for them to share the artifacts they had selected in short, informal class presentations. We could not have predicted the boisterous singing that would erupt when youth shared photos of well-known American children's television figures or that Clara would burst into tears of connection when a classmate shared an image of the popular Ukrainian children's show *Cheburashka*, a cartoon with an adventurous, kind-hearted koala as its protagonist.

By inviting youth to share their collections of artifacts with one another, youth became their peers' teachers, utilizing material artifacts to make visible transnational affiliations and understandings. Local and global realities co-existed and transacted in their textual choices. Campano and Ghiso (2011) argued:

For students from immigrant experiences . . . cosmopolitanism is not just an imagined possibility, but often a perceptual and lived reality as well. By virtue of their diverse vantage points and transnational negotiations, they are uniquely positioned to educate their peers and teachers about the world. (p. 166)

In their artifact blog posts, youth represented their diverse, often transnational vantage points by arranging family recipe cards, flags of many colors and stripes, and photographs—of relatives and friends near and far—alongside images of game consoles and technological gadgets. In her presentation of her artifacts, Deni shared that taking photographs with a 1970s SLR camera her father gave her made her feel like the truest version of herself, a representation that lived alongside her description of her affectionate relationship with vintage wear, marked by a simple pink tank top picked up at a local shop, and her appreciation of the fabrics of the saris and salwar kameez that she wears on

special occasions. Similarly, Bessie chose to make herself known as an artist by sharing her sketchbook, an inconspicuous volume filled with drawing of birds and other animals alongside elaborate photos of her family celebrating Chinese New Year in New York City. In collecting auto-ethnographic data for their projects, youth intentionally collected stories and artifacts that marked personal experiences, family memories, and local and global affiliations.

Curating through film production. Film production was the deepest layer in the multimodal curating process, as youth were to select and artfully arrange the pieces from their auto-ethnographic data collection (i.e. interviewing, observation, and artifact collection) to form a sort of whole, a picture necessarily incomplete, yet polished, that would represent their key identities, affiliations, and values to an audience of their peers and interested others. Bits of data from fieldwork seeped into films in covert and explicit lines and also made their way into youth conversations across the school building and after school. The curatorial process was an invitation to story the self both through film and through continued dialogue in the classroom, lunch room, and after school as youth continued to ask one another about the multi-layered identities they were unveiling to their classmates, often for the first time. Further, curating one's life through film involved a great deal of choice and decision-making. A nod to the difficult representational choices involved in curating lived experiences, Sam's film opens with the image of an iPod, his fingers scrolling through a few different tracks until he gets to just the right one. We see and hear his selection process—a few seconds on each tune until we reach the one that's set the right mood and tone for what he wants to communicate. Youth often helped one another brainstorm just the right songs and relied on one another's home archives of music to locate the perfect soundtrack for their visual, textual and embodied representations.

As youth crafted their films, they began to consider their representational and aesthetic choices in terms of uncovering “the real me,” to perform a sense of individuality as well as a sense of connection with their pasts, their ancestors, and those moments before they were born that shape how they approach the world. In Preeti's film she says, “I'm just a little tiny leaf on a big family tree,” echoing close ties to her community as well as marking her individuality. Poet John Berger (2008), in his writings on Palestine, gives voice to the communal and individual aspects of identity:

True identity is something known in one heart and recognised within another. It always contains a secret that no interrogation can reveal. Its secret is its human-beingness. And it involves both the personal and the collective. It offers a sense of belonging and a sense of distinction. [...] A true identity implies continuity; it evokes ancestors and heirs, the dead and the as yet unborn. And, at the same time, it frames a here and now which is a ME at every transient moment.

Curating their films involved the performance of a version of the self at a particular “transient moment.” Many youth, though not certainly not all, were keen to tell me that they highlighted happier and prouder moments, alluding to hardship and pain through a veil, a hidden reference in the form of an obscure image, line, or song lyric that held more meaning for them personally than an audience of their peers would understand. Thus, it's worth emphasizing the nature of choice in the young people's representation of their identities.

In Ana's film (her poem opens this essay), music is one way in which she chooses to articulate “belonging and a sense of distinction” as she represents her identities. Her opening

photo, where she describes herself as “hanging on to her mother for dear life,” is set to “a Marc Anthony classic” that she loved to listen and dance to as a child. Later, as she offers more contemporary photos of her family and her achievements, she cuts in two songs that she “just recently started to get a taste for.” She reflects, “‘Two Worlds Collide’ by Demi Lovato shows the side of me that is insecure and unsure of certain things, while Christina Perri’s ‘A Thousand Years’ portrays my immortal love for my family and their love for me.” For Ana and many other youth filmmakers, the music became “the thread of the story,” pulling together memories, emotions, and identities, sometimes in surprising ways. Sound, Rowsell (2013), argues, is a “somatic subjective experience” capable of conveying precise cultural references and embodied meanings. It is also “synesthetic, evoking particular other sounds, colours, emotions, histories, affordances, and meaning.” As I talked with youth about their films, I regularly heard stories of hours spent selecting music to evoke a particular sentiment and then carefully arranging songs alongside visuals and their voices for just the desired accent or affect.

Andrea’s film opened with the blue and white lines of the Guatemalan flag, a moving image of a meadow of flowers, and was set to the popular early 1990s love song by Bryan Adams, “(Everything I Do) I Do It for You.” The music was not what I expected from purple-haired Andrea in artfully ripped black clothing and an arm full of colorful friendship bracelets. She reflected that she indeed intended to choose an indie artist who shared her fashion aesthetic:

When I was choosing the music to put behind my movie, it took me around an hour. I was going through all different genres to find the perfect song. At first, I wanted to choose an Adam Lambert (<3) song because he is my favorite artist and he is one of my role models for fashion and what not. But listening to his songs I couldn’t find one that fit my movie just right. Then it hit me, what about my parents wedding song?

Andrea, who had reflected a great deal on her relationship with her parents through the film-making process, wanted more homage to her nuclear family. Text-making is always a multimodal process (Jewitt, 2008), and in filmmaking, the combining of expressive modes is an overt creative act of mixing and remixing various modes for the desired effect. As youth designed their films, many said the themes were already playing in their heads; others worked with emerging ideas in the film editing software, trying out different sound and image combinations, finding surprising connections. Putting all the pieces together to create a coherent whole was aesthetic play and trial and error, imbued in authorial intent and self-representation.

The films became artifacts, carefully curated collections with traces of many different affiliations—as well as many different real and imagined audiences. As youth edited and expanded their original collection of artifacts, re-examined observations, collected additional images, re-read interview transcripts, and re-examined photo albums (often with loved ones), they worked to make their films meaningful texts for their families as well as art pieces welcomed by their peers. The multimodal texts the youth produced offered profound opportunities for them to consider how they wanted to represent themselves for multiple audiences.

Our people: “thoughtful receptivity to the new”

The final film festival supported youth in cultivating what Hansen (2010) calls a “thoughtful receptivity to the new” —to welcome one another as hospitable interlocutors. There’s a richness and vibrancy in a classroom full of youth bopping along to hip hop, classical or

Russian tunes their peers have selected; cooing at one another's baby photos and holiday celebrations; breathing in stunning images of the Black Sea or feeling the warmth of a grandmother's kitchen, and cheering at each representational attempt.

However, I was awe-struck by the young people's responses to one another's finished films. After four days of classroom film festivals and much spilled popcorn, I penned the following in my teacher journal:

Even though everyone felt like they were revealing a part of themselves, I think there was a kind of relief to it. In high school, you put on so much, you have to show yourself to be a particular way. But when you talk about where you come from, the field levels out a bit more. [...] I know it was dangerous, but it felt good to share. [...] In a way, the project was a bit of a relief. People felt like they'd put themselves out there and their peers honored and congratulated them and it was okay. (December, 2012)

Most had a sense that the films showcased a part of themselves they don't usually show in school. Even for an outsider, it was clear whose film was being played on the classroom big screen—the hunched shoulders and looking down awaiting and anticipating possible responses revealed the risk involved. Responses were uniformly positive, but they didn't always meet expectations. Michael, for example, took a risk in his film to mock-sing a line and was hurt when his peers did not laugh on queue. Sharing and vulnerability hold inherent emotional risks; however, I would argue that it is just such risks that are necessary to provoke deep dialogue about difference and create spaces for belonging.

Many small steps and sharing along the way created a space where this level of vulnerability felt safe. My co-teacher, Emily³ and I modeled vulnerability and the possibility of keeping stories to yourself that you didn't want to share, whatever the reason. Representational choices were just that—choices. Some films offered great detail, while still others relied on metaphor and abstraction. Youth were encouraged to share only what felt right; the stories were theirs—to hold, share, or, even re-imagine. In short, a range of ways to represent one's self in film production was welcomed. Naomi's film offers art pieces and metaphors to illustrate a sense of herself. She reflects:

I realized that I could represent my present and future in my film instead of turning to my past and that kind of changed my life when I made my film. I very intentionally did not include any pictures of myself as a child nor did I make any references to my childhood because that's not what I wanted people to see as where I come from. [...] Nobody was like, "oh, but you didn't have pictures of yourself as a child like everybody else" because we each got to show what we wanted to and it was appreciated individually.

Naomi is perhaps more open about her measured representation choices than her peers, but the more I talked with youth, the more I learned just how intentional and deliberate they were in their self-representations, reflecting deeply on the version of themselves they wanted to perform at this moment and for this audience.

However, Naomi also keyed into another important finding in her description. Not only did youth make deliberate choices about representation (albeit constrained as they were by the tools at hand), but, as she says, their contributions were "appreciated individually." In the film festival, youth exhibited a deep curiosity about one another, clear through their silence, applause, thoughtful questions and the many sentences that began with "I didn't realize..." and ended in a newly discovered connection or relationship. The youth came to know one another more deeply and, at the same time came to understand the partial nature

of representation through their own work. Their tears, hugs, singing, and dancing were cosmopolitan encounters, moments of connection and belonging that fostered a communal energy of acceptance, even if only momentary.

We lived, as a classroom community, Miller's (2008) assertion that:

the primary grounds for the practice of anthropology is empathy, the ability to see the world from perspectives other than one's own, and empathy is not a million miles from sentimentality – it is the generic as opposed to the personal expression of feeling.

That is, by starting with our own stories and being vulnerable with others, we refined our empathy for one another. Not only did youth find shared references, but they were also moved by seeing parts of their peers' lives that are usually invisible in the space of school. Youth began to see their classmates as in their roles as sisters, daughters, granddaughters, and aunts. They also found unknown common ground—battles with cancer and other illnesses, beloved stories and programs, and shared hobbies and sports interests. Neighborhoods, cities, and countries they'd never stepped foot in were enlivened and made rich through the stories told about them. Many were comforted by the shared a sense of cultural hybridization, a sense of belonging (and not) both here and there, wherever those places might be. They made visible their efforts to form "integrated lives" in the face of disparate, sometimes competing value systems. New York City itself became a character in a majority of the films, a metaphor for the transaction of identities, social realities, and intercultural connections visible in the cosmopolitan city youth proudly called home.

Representing our stories to one another has a particular power. Ana reflected, "In order to thrive in a community and develop close relationships and understanding, you need to understand where people come from, how they think, why they think the way they do." In order to truly develop truly cosmopolitan frames of mind, one must develop a clear sense how local and global realities co-exist and mutually constitute our experiences and our understandings of them.

Jackie's film ends with the following line, one that is the heart of this work. She says, "I'm from life. I'm from my friends, my family, from my school, my teachers, my religion, kinda, I mean, I'm from all of you guys, and I hope some of you are from me too." Her inclusivity and her desire to have somehow influenced her peers has cosmopolitan echoes. It is a claiming of one's community, a community of diverse peoples and interests with whom one learns. Her words resonate with Hames-Garcia's (2011) provocation:

Who are our people? One's own people are those people with whom one has made common cause. [...] Solidarity or common cause must take into account deeply embodied connections and relations among people. [...] Expansive social identities can form one resource for discovering these connections and relations that enable a rich and robust solidarity across differences.

In interrogating their social identities with their peers, youth came to see the ways in which their worlds overlapped and diverged, developing a greater sense of citizenship and belonging.

Harkening back to Adichie (2009), youth began with their own stories, pushing back against stereotypes or incomplete visions others held about them—and those they held about others. Many youth reflected on their surprise at the difference between how their peers typically author themselves at school and how they authored themselves their films. Naomi reflected on finding patience for a peer she had previously only seen as insensitive as she watched the peer's film and reflected on its undertones. My co-teacher Emily and I both

noted a handful of students with whom our connections were deepened, alongside a few students who we began to “see” for the first time. She highlighted students who were humanized, with whom she had found bits of connection and understanding that she later drew upon as their teacher. Ethnographic work offers a richness and specificity that debunks or, at a minimum, complicates incomplete perceptions. In the context of the global, ethnography enlivens a shared sense of humanity, empathy, and pride in self/home mixed with curiosity and openness—a receptivity to the new. The “Where I’m From” project invited young people into a space that was at once risky for the vulnerability it sought, but also ripe with the possibility of belonging and connecting more deeply with known others.

Toward a pedagogy of multimodal cosmopolitanism

In the laughter, dancing, and tears, we begin to understand the ways in which multimodal texts might uniquely communicate powerful, sensual and embodied meanings and social identities that resonate with and connect us to others. As Naomi noted, the project asked her to understand herself and how she was bound up in the stories of the world. She said, the project “allowed me to think of myself as a story, and it allowed me to think of myself as the writer of that story, all in the context of something concrete.” The concreteness, the curating of personally and culturally relevant musical, visual, linguistic, and embodied resources to invoke a sense of “Where I’m From” supported youth in honoring the ordinary lived experiences that make up their diverse social and cultural identities.

Modern classrooms are increasingly imbued with diverse and divergent viewpoints and experiences. Reflexive pedagogies that ask youth to author themselves might do much to foster ideals of citizenship, belonging, and affiliation as young people negotiate hybrid and evolving identities. Culturally situated pedagogies that respond to who young people are and invite them to craft their stories through memory, affiliation, and re-presentation enable youth to re-present themselves in a continually evolving global landscape yearning for a self-reflexive and hospitable citizenry equipped to welcome one another across a range of representational mediums.

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Notes

1. Lyon’s “Where I’m From” poem was first crafted into curriculum by Linda Christensen of *Rethinking Schools*. Additionally, the curriculum here builds on the “Where I’m From” films. Lalitha Vasudevan invites graduate students to make as part of her Culture, Media, and Education course at Teachers College, Columbia University.
2. Participant names are pseudonyms.
3. This curriculum also owes a great debt to my co-teacher and thought partner Emily Mottahedeh whose generosity and creativity helped shape our learning community.

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