Dear Claude: An Ongoing Duoethnography of Identity and Displacement

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Abstract: From the angle of parenting and comparative studies, this duoethnographic study shed light on the identification of a marginalized young being displaced in a supposedly multicultural society. From topics including linguistic melancholia, fractures of feminism, and foodways, the two authors express concerns as well as appreciation in answering cultural related questions. While the topic of identity and displacement seems to have been exhausted in academic writing, the authors of this duoethnography chanced upon conversations on parenting and transnational experiences. Such methodology allows both authors to be researchers and the researched at the same time, while engaging in differences of personal narratives and understandings. Anchoring on personal narratives and reflections, this study focused on how identification and displacement might be embodied in individuals'–in this case, baby Claude's– life paths. From anecdotal topics including linguistic melancholia and foodways, the two authors express concerns as well as appreciation in wrestling with multiculturalism and identification.

Résumé: Du point de vue du rôle parental et des études comparatives, cette étude duoéthnographique a mis en lumière l'identification d'un jeune marginalisé dans une société prétendument multiculturelle. À partir de sujets tels que la mélancolie linguistique, les fractures du féminisme et les modes d'alimentation, les deux auteurs expriment leurs préoccupations ainsi que leur appréciation par rapport aux questions culturelles posées. Alors que le thème de l'identité et du déplacement semble avoir été épuisé par l'écriture académique, les auteurs de cette duoéthnographie ont, au hasard, discuté du rôle parental et expériences transnationales. Une telle méthodologie permet aux deux auteurs d'être des chercheurs ainsi que de s'engager dans des

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récits personnels. Ancrer dans des récits et des réflexions personnelles, cette étude s'est concentrée sur la façon dont l'identification et le déplacement pourraient être incarnés dans les parcours de vie des individus – dans ce cas, celui du bébé Claude. À partir d'anecdotes, dont la mélancolie linguistique et les modes d'alimentation, les deux auteurs expriment leurs préoccupations ainsi que leur appréciation vis-à-vis le multiculturalisme et l'identification.

Introduction

Despite being a relatively new qualitative research method, duoethnography has provided new ways of channeling thoughts and meaning making in the research process (Denzin, 2010; Norris & Sawyer, 2012; Sinha & Back, 2014). According to Norris and Saywes (2012),

> Duoethnography... is a collaborative research methodology in which two or more researchers of difference juxtapose their life histories to provide multiple understandings of the world. Rather than uncovering the meanings that people give to their lived experiences, duoethnography embraces the belief that meanings can be and often are transformed through the research act. (p. 9)

In other words, duoethnography spotlights on meaning making from the different understandings rather than reconciling differences between authors. The stories told in a duoethnography, instead of being metanarratives, are often anecdotal stories that become a site for dialogue and vulnerability (Norris and Sawyer, 2012). Similar to its disruption of metanarratives, duoethnography also challenges the solitary authorship in the research and the divided line between the researchers and the researched. That is to say, duoethnography stipulates that authors have to become vulnerable in conversations and the site of their own research. This shift of what to be researched and how to position oneself as a researcher, to a great extent, changes the priority of what is expected to be found in duoethnographic research. As Sawyer and Ligget (2012) remarked, duoethnography prioritizes "complex and

inclusive social constructions and re-conceptualizations of experience" rather than uncovering "findings" (p. 630-631).

To echo the spirit of constant meaning-making embedded in duoethnography, this piece here derives from some quotidian, yet resounding kitchen and living room conversations, in which we, Mila and Ying, as academic sisters, share our individual experiences and exchange our understandings from our shared outsiders' perspectives with references to curriculum theories. Like Huckaby and Weinburg (2012), we attempt to retell individual experiences and re-interpret them, and even read ourselves against ourselves with full awareness that the duet is authentic yet never finished. Put differently, duoethnography enables our conversations to build upon literature while encouraging us to explore beyond what we have already known. Sometimes, one of us sheerly presents a "thick description" of our experiences (Geertz, 1973, p. 4), and the other would respond with her illuminations. Other times, we each share our own experiences, and try to tease out hidden meanings via juxtaposing both of our stories. There are also times when we dive straight into exploring meanings with extant texts we find relevant to our concerns.

As we write down the word authenticity, we are also reminded of Lather's (2017) words:

> What opens up if the problem of authenticity is seen as about relationality, ambivalence, and the politics of representation as a way to fight its tendencies to degenerate into essentialism? This entails a sense of both what can be done in the name of identity that is worth hanging on to and what is made possible by practices that thrive on troubling identity. (p. 168)

In response to Lather's illumination of authenticity and significance in troubling individual identities, we contend that by deconstructing stereotypical understandings of knowledge and revisiting our experiences that are ambivalent, yet haunting our everyday selves, we are constantly re-constructing or adding to that very identity. Thus, as a result, we are always in the process of becoming as opposed to being (Braidotti, 2011; Lorraine, 2011).

We title this duo as "Dear Claude" for several reasons: first, Claude, Mila's then 22 month-old son, has connected us more closely than otherwise. Secondly, he has made us wildly aware that we live in research and inquiry as opposed to the misconception that we

were external to the problems we were probing into. Thirdly, his existence has kept alive our conversations and debates upon languages, food, contextualized feminist experiences, identities and as such, all of which spun off from nurturing a baby. Identity, trickily here, both serves as a parallel of language, culture, feminist experiences, and their superordinate. Uma Narayan (2013) admonishes us,

> When it (identity) is not so rooted, it may generate ambivalence, uncertainty, despair, and even madness, rather than more positive critical emotions and attitudes. However such a person determines her locus, there may be a sense of being an outsider in both contexts and a sense of clumsiness or lack of fluency in both sets of practices. (p. 377-378)

Despite such danger of ambivalence at best and madness at worst, scrutiny of identity can be a site of great importance, as it requires our theoretical reflection on "moments of failures" so that we can know "more about who we are" (Rowe, 2005, p. 15). Decoding failures, predicaments, or unknowing, if you would prefer. It is more so when thinking of the future and the next generation and feeling obliged to rack our brains to continue conversations that are messy. It may go nowhere in terms of theorizing, but it does not invalidate the meaningfulness of the conversations per se. Agreeing what Rajan (2002) has advocated as "unfolding into a future that must always be folded back into its past" (p. 32), we hope to offer some alternative possibility of navigating the world for others through retelling vignettes with "excessive moments" (Pinar, 2007, p. 37).

On Language Melancholia

> There was a singular quality to the sounds of the Sholom Home that disturbed me: they (sounds of Yiddish) were familiar, although I couldn't understand a word (1993, p. 12).
>
> Alice Kaplan, French Lessons

Ying: The other day, when I was babysitting Claude, we played the game to recognize animals on cards. For the first round, I would

tell him names of the objects and animals on cards. During the second round, I would ask him, "What's this, baby Claude?", knowing that he had some displays of body language when recognizing some objects and animals. Suddenly, I heard him blabbing English words, car and pig, as I showed him cards with corresponding images. Those were my bitter-sweet moments, sweet for him speaking, yet bitter for him speaking English instead of Shanghainese (or Mandarin Chinese). Indeed, I am bothered by the likelihood that one day he would not be as close as he is now to us if he loses clues and cues of our language, the language in which, we laugh we shop, we chit-chat we think, and we connect. Meanwhile, I also wonder as he grows, if he would develop the odd familiarity and comfort hearing us murmuring in Chinese as Kaplan (1993) felt when Yiddish was the conventional language in her family conversations.

Mila: As you were talking about how melancholic it would be if Claude grows up to be someone who has no clue of our language, I assumed you meant the semantic cues behind our words. And that is a tricky task for Claude given our different living conditions. I grew up watching The Monkey King, Calabash Brothers, and Slam Dunk; while he watches the Mother Goose Club, Blue's Clues, and Sponge Bob, Square Pants.

I guess the best we can do is to consider his multilinguistic acquisition as something more than just about the languages. Mandarin Chinese is a highly advanced, unique, and musical isolating language - as opposed to English, a language that involves inflections in indicating grammatical relationships - that I'm sure he'll find tons of interests learning it. And the purpose of picking up multiple languages is that he may thus have boundless access to authentic perennial works. He will be able to know anecdotes of Mulan through reading the original Ode to Hua Mulan instead of through watching Mulan, the Disney cartoon version; and enjoys the ultimate beauty of Chinese Poems from Tang and Song dynasties, or Japanese poems known as Haiku or Tanka, instead of being lost in translated versions that all the original essence are missing. Also, let's consider cultivating Claude as a project on-the-go. Compared to the very first words that came out of our cute little Claude, I'm more concerned about where and how he roots, reshapes, and reframes his identity as a global traveler.

Ying: I see the utopian world you envision for him to live in the future as opposed to my over-anxiety about his acquisition of

languages. People say children learn their first languages, but only acquire a second language. While learning happens naturally, acquisition takes more time and effort to ruminate words, phrases and idioms loaded with cultural and historical connotations.

In addition, Mila, how should we make up for unequal social constructions of linguistic landscapes? For instance, only at the Starbucks on our campus, I have come across folks who have Chinese characters tattooed on their skins, and T-shirts with Chinese characters printed on them. It seems familiarizing themselves with Chinese characters, while attempting to be cool because Chinese characters were foreign to their figured worlds (Holland, Lachicotte, Skinner, & Cain, 1988). For people who really speak Chinese as the primary (first) language, they do not really have the privilege of being cool to speak Chinese on many public occasions. For instance, Guofang Li (2006) wrote the book, Culturally Contested Pedagogy: Battles of Literacy and Schooling between Mainstream Teachers and Asian Immigrant Parents, partly as a consequence of the bizarre phenomenon that as the majority of Vancouver population, Chinese immigrant families have different takes on educating their children while the mainstream pedagogy at school are dominantly "white", let alone the bleak fact that Chinese language was prohibited in schooling.

It is, therefore, more of my concern that he does not read enough to critically examine what to give and take before taking away the book, Three Character Classic, from your hand. Probably, my melancholia also forces me to think about how to remind him of the trap in preferring English as one keyword of his identity, while he is not granted the full entry to that very cultural citizenry, and perhaps also of the utmost joy of speaking Chinese and the culture within the language. For this, I think, I will always speak to him in Mandarin Chinese, even when I know this is to little avail.

Mila: It is neither fair to compare Claude's potential learning progression to those lovely students with cool tattoos that you encountered; nor to Li's study in Vancouver. Chinese language learning, or in your belief, acquisition, is profoundly encouraged in most institutions in the States, so if an ABC (abbr. for "American-born Chinese") is clueless about either the learning purpose to begin with, or the fun in the process, it is not the environment to blame.

Chinese characters are pictophonetic, combined with phonetic signs that shows the pronunciation of words and pictographs that indicates the origin. For example, I didn't mention this when we

were discussing "under erasure" the other day. In explaining the idea, Derrida explained that language is arbitrary in a way that the signified word indicates the signifier, i.e., a-p-p-l-e together means the signifier [apple]; and on the other hand, nothing about a [shadow] logically leads to the word shadow. The problem with such explanation is that though it applies in English, it doesn't apply in Chinese. With inflections, both "global" and "globalization" makes sense in an arbitrary way; however, "ization" doesn't make sense at all. But in Chinese, "**蘋果**" (ping guo; apple), combined by the phonetic 频 (pin) and the picto **木**(tree), allows you to get a sense of where this particular fruit grows on, and how it should be pronounced.

On Culture: Foodways

> Why do people want to adopt another culture? Because there's something in their own they don't like that doesn't name them (1993, p. 209).
>
> Alice Kaplan, French Lessons

> It is hard for anyone who has not experienced isolation from his familiar world to conceive the vital importance of maintaining symbolic ties with that world and the sense of deprivation that results from their absence (1970, p. 228-229).
>
> Jean Briggs, Never in Anger: Portrait of an Eskimo Family

Ying: During my last trip home, I found something called **谷兰诺拉** (pronounced as gu lan nuo la in Mandarin Chinese) in the supermarket. Walking closer, it turned out to be granola in English, **谷兰诺拉** being the transliteration of its English counterpart. For me, there's meaning assigned to granola, but not **谷兰诺拉**. Granola is just one of myriads things unnamed in our culture; even after being imported and translated, it is to another culture I find the recourse to meanings. As a result, I have to adopt another culture to some extent. Well, you might argue I have been very post-structural in having this debate about Granola with myself.

But deep in my mind, I still reserve some standpoint understanding of my being and knowing. I remember in the cultural studies seminar I took a while ago, where we discussed Carol Adams' (2010) book, Sexual Politics of Meat: A Feminist-Vegetarian Critical Theory, and I could not buy Adams' notion of "the absent present" about meat consumption (p. 13). A little more on "the absent referent" (Adams, 2010, p. 13). I was convinced of her illustration on similar treatment of women and animals in the patriarchal society. But, I was absolutely not when she argued that with the use of vocabulary like beef, pork, and mutton, people were made oblivious of the lives of the animals that make meat possible and their sacrifice (Adams, 2010), not at least after witnessing animals being killed for delicious dishes within my parents' backyard and in the farmers' market. The animals and the killing were always there when I savored the meat. Therefore, my previous knowledge persists before I could agree with Adams' western perspective.

Mila: I grew up in metropolitan cities such as Shanghai and Tokyo where the part of killing is no longer to be seen, so I probably will not be able to respond to that part in particular. However, let me share with you something that I know.

The first thing I learnt while I was in Tokyo is to bow my head in front of food. The entryways to all restaurants in Japan are exceptionally low, so customers are forced to bow down before getting in. Such design is for the purpose of reminding eaters the sacrifices made by not only all animals, but also people in husbandry and farming. So, I guess my problem with the food culture here is not just about the absent presentation or disguised replacement of concept in their vocabulary, but the lack of awe and respect towards food in general - not just poultry, red meat, fish, but wheat, vegetables, and so on. Humans are a link in ecological equilibrium. I eat not because I enjoy killing, but because I need to survive. I guess the hypocrisy hidden behind the vocabulary such as "beef, pork, and mutton" indeed bothers me a little bit, and I have encountered more than one student here claiming themselves to be vegetarians while minutes later I spot them eating fish and brisket in the cafeteria – as if fish and chicken grow on trees. However, what bothers me more is the wasteful attitude here. A couple of weeks ago, Claude and I went to a birthday party where food is more often on the floor, in the trash can, and on people's faces than in their

stomach. I wonder how these people would react once they are deprived of these resources.

Ying: Wow, I am impressed by how you interpreted the meaning hidden behind how people enter restaurants in Japan. I have been a fan of Midnight Diner, the Japanese cooking show on air two years ago, but I never gave a second thought on why people lowered their heads while going into a dining space. Yet, I was taught to appreciate food in other ways. I was beaten hard because of wasting food, as food was regarded as more than commodity: it is also the time, efforts, and perspiration of fathers and mothers all combined. Like Dumas (2003) commented, mothers and grandmothers in my hometown have raised animals, planted various vegetables, and prepared dishes on our family tables from scratch like what upscale restaurants in the U. S. always claim to entice customers. I am wondering both your poignant comments to people's lack of respect for food here and my disbelief in "the absent present" would be possible if we were raised otherwise. Here I am reminded of the Deleuzian notion of becoming, which is said to take place, "…in the world as we know it...Bodies in flight do not leave the world behind...they take the world with them - into the future" (Massumi, 1992, p. 105).

On the Threshold of Conclusion (Yet to Conclude)

> Stereotypes engender a static and hence repressed notion of identity as something already out there, a stability that can be assumed. Here, identity is expressed as a final destination rather than a place of departure (2003, p. 29).
>
> Deborah Britzman, Practice Makes practice

Mila: You know how there are people who choose not to be informed about their babies' gender? So… at week 16, my OB checked with me first by asking, "Do you wish to know what you're having?" It's either because of the language, or my pregnancy mind, I replied, "I'm pretty sure I'm having a human being." As a matter of fact, I have been struggling with the word "sojourner" since you adopted it for the first time. I am not sure if I am comfortable being called, or treated like, a forever guest, or even worse, forever foreigner.

One of my philosophy professors once specifically told me not to juxtapose Socrates and Confucius. "It's going to be a disaster", said she, "and it's going to be problematic however you conduct comparative studies." Unfortunately, I went behind her back and analogize those two in my class as I thought it might help students' understanding.

It was up until recently that I realized I should have listened to my professor. Analogizing cultural foundations are like stereotyping fixed identities. The moment we start to believe that we have found the shortcut for understanding, we have lost the opportunity to see the broader picture and think cross-culturally. We will then be trapped in our pre-constructed, onto-epistemological coordinate and perceive ideas that we are less familiar with based on such system. In analogizing new cultures, we also recklessly cram ideas into such system, not only because it is the easiest way, but also because this makes us feel, to some extent, superior.

Claude did not choose to be an ABC; it was on me. I could have done the best thing one could ever do for their babies by presenting transcultural views; I could also have done the worst thing one could ever do to their babies by taking him away from the society where how he looks conforms with the social mainstream, and casting him into where he will continue to struggle in searching for his being and belongings. I have so much more work to do. I am not sure I am capable doing all these on behalf of our societies as a mother, a teacher, and a curriculum theorist, Ying.

Ying: Yes, we do. In her book Be Longing: Toward a Feminist Politics of Relation, Rowe (2005) reminisced about every home she had dwelled in and belonged to. She wrote, "And I long for each (home) in its absence, and neither is complete without the other...I am not 'the same' here and there. In each I long for the other" (2005, p. 15). Her (2005) insistence of including multiple locations into her notion of home reminds me of us traveling within/across boundaries and constantly identifying ourselves with places, people, communities, cultures, etc. I wonder, whether, as literature on sojourning experiences and transnational journeys are imbued with losses, displacement, and deprivation, if we can also wield the tool called individual agency to even discursively, re-imagine our identities and envision possibilities. Jackson and Mazzei (2012) posit that individual traces contribute to, "our being and doing in a tug-of-war with the competing meanings that we both resist and accept - both acknowledged and unacknowledged" (p. 21). Trace

(2012) also requires us to valorize how standpoints shape and differentiate us from others, including those others said to belong to the same "imagined community" as ours. In this sense, we can always do more than being passively categorized into the extant taxonomy. I am not fully sure where this ongoing duoethnography will take us, and possibilities are that if Claude read our conversations someday, he would also charge us with essentializing language, feminism, food, and identities here the same way as we refuse to be merely categorized into socially constructed identities. I think I would feel consoled rather than offended if that happens, as that troubling and reconstructing is always the key of our renditions of our being, becoming, and knowing.

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