

# Manóles, L. (2005), The Transformative Power of Literary Third Space

## CHAPTER I

### INTRODUCTION

#### An Impressionist Vignette of Third Space in Literary Discussion

The children's novel, *Esperanza Rising* (Muñoz Ryan, 2000), begins with the father readying to go into the field to harvest the grapes on his ranch. The father sharpens the scythe and Esperanza, in her silk dress, makes the ceremonial first cut usually reserved for the oldest son. With the drop of the first cluster of grapes, the harvest season begins.

As a literature discussion group in a fourth grade class opens, the teacher stops the children and asks, "Can you show me what that looked like?" Gabriella holds up her left hand as if gently cradling a cluster of grapes, and with her right hand swiftly swoops an imaginary blade across the vine, making her left hand go heavy with the weight. Rey excitedly adds, "Yeah! Swoosh! swoosh!" as he makes a similar motion back and forth. Francisco joins in, "My mom had to pick grapes when we lived in California, and I went with her. She had to use scissors and go really fast." Francisco makes the motion of clipping down a row of vines and placing the grapes into a basket. Then he looks to the text to find the word "cluster" and explains, "She had to put the *cluster* of grapes in her basket (pointing to an imaginary basket)." Maria adds, "If I had to cut grapes, I think I would rather use scissors. My mom doesn't let me use sharp knives even when we're cooking." Rey agrees, "Yeah. And I would get cansada." "Yes, cansada," says the teacher. "Imagine how tired the workers feel. Esperanza only had to cut the first swipe. The workers have to cut all

day long.” Francisco regards his teacher, “That’s because *she*’s the rancher’s daughter.”

#### Demonstrations of the Power of Third Space: Unpacking the Vignette

This brief impressionist vignette (Van Maanen, 1988) of a discussion around an authentic piece of multicultural literature demonstrates the power of “third space.” Within this space, children’s opinions are valued and blend with the teacher’s curricular goals of teaching literature. The children are engaged in reading because they not only see parallels to their lives, but they are given multiple opportunities to voice as well as physicalize their experiences through gesture and the use of imaginary props. Though moments like these should be commonplace in schools today, they are altogether too rare as children are usually asked to sit quietly and listen rather than participate in literary interpretation.

I define third space as a place where the content of the curriculum clearly merges with the out-of-school knowledge of the students, and I believe I’ve found it in literary discussion groups. Indeed, I believe that in the classrooms of exemplary teachers, third space abounds as children engage in literary interpretation. To interpret literature, the reader must fill inferential gaps in the story. These gaps create openings for a hybrid discourse. Exemplary teachers recognize these openings and enter into them by inviting in children’s ideas as well as accentuating curricular goals to enhance communication. Yet, why is third space so common here and so rare elsewhere? There are three main reasons: (a) meaningful content, (b) a context that invites reception of ideas, and (c) the value placed on expanded notions of text including various modes of expression.

Meaningful content is the first component that facilitates the creation of third space. The content represented in this example includes vocabulary exploration, referring back to the text for more information, and digging deep into the larger themes of authentic multicultural literature. For example, in my opening vignette of the fourth grade classroom, Francisco borrows the term “cluster”—a word he had never previously used in English—to share his ideas about how the grapes are cut. By returning to the text to find the word, he also demonstrates his understanding that careful examination of the narrative can help him communicate in new ways.

Still, the reason Francisco is eager to return to the text is because he finds it *meaningful*, which highlights the use of aesthetically crafted and authentic multicultural literature (Harris, 1993). Children need texts that speak to their lives as well as show them worlds quite different from their own. Francisco’s teacher has carefully chosen *Esperanza Rising* (Muñoz Ryan, 2000) because it lends itself both to her curricular goals and to the lives of her students, many of whom have experiences of migrant fieldwork through their parents, just as the author of the novel has, for the story is the tale of her grandmother’s life.

While the content of literary classrooms works toward better communication, the *context* provides an invitation and reception to enter into the conversation. As students are socialized into “doing school,” they must be invited into spaces that are open and receptive to ideas different from the mainstream ways prevalent in classrooms (Heath, 1983), while simultaneously being invited into ways of using mainstream modes (Delpit, 1995). This takes work. Contexts ripe for the creation of new ideas do not just happen; instead, they are continuously shaped by all of the

participants (Fairclough, 1995; Gee, 2001). In the vignette from *Esperanza Rising*, the teacher's work is subtle. First, she is taking on the role of active listener. Though she's quiet, she encourages her students to engage in true dialogue, building on each other's personal experiences.

The teacher also recognizes varied forms of her students' knowledge (Gee, 1996) as well as their "funds of knowledge" (Moll, 1994). When Rey speaks in Spanish ("I would get cansada"), she restates his contribution showing support for his use of Spanish, and she agrees that he must be tired. Finally, the teacher uses that opportunity to scaffold the learning and push the conversation to a more critical level. By including the discrepancy between the workers and Esperanza, she is introducing her students to an important issue that runs throughout the text: the impact of culture and class. Moving the students in this direction is one way in which the teacher manipulates the context to encourage deeper reflection about texts. Francisco's final comment affirms that he understands that as the rancher's daughter, Esperanza's cutting of the grapes is merely symbolic. She will not be doing the real work of the ranch.

The third and final component of a classroom that fosters the third space in literary discussions is a way into the conversation through expanded notions of text and *alternative modes of expression* (Gardner, 1983). In the vignette, the teacher asks the group to *act*, enabling students like Rey, with less accessibility to English, to build physical connections to the text. Encouraging action helps Gabriella to feel the story and facilitates Francisco's memory about his mother. Researchers agree that incorporating art (Enciso, 1996), drama (Wolf, 1998), and writing (Lensmire, 1997)

into students' responses to texts results in richer interactions as students tap into their own experiences. Through these interactions with diverse media, the third space provides a springboard for a "more inclusive" classroom (Gallas & Smagorinsky, 2002).

In my research, I have studied one exemplary teacher and her students as they engage in small group literature discussions. My decision to study an "exemplary" teacher is based on my belief that there can never be too many cases of excellent teaching. As Shulman (1983) argues, we need "images of the possible" and "the well-crafted case instantiates the possible" (p. 495). In the chapters that follow I closely examine her teaching decisions and in-the-moment interactions with her students that enabled them to open up and include their personal knowledge in their classroom conversations. By making this description available, perhaps more teachers will strive for the classroom qualities that are necessary for children to deeply engage in reading.

My focus on third space in literary discussions provides an opportunity to explicitly show the delicate and dynamic balance and blending of school knowledge with out-of-school knowledge. In the chapters that follow I will examine the full range of that balance that this class experienced as I provide examples of the students' interactions within the book clubs (Raphael & McMahon, 1994). I offer descriptions of multiple instances of the blending between school knowledge and out-of-school knowledge within the context of literature discussions. These descriptions provide a clear view of the hybrid spaces that occurred in one classroom over six months time.

Though the impressionist vignette in the opening of this chapter is an imagined instance of third space in an imaginary classroom, the real examples in the following chapters provide a compelling case for what can be accomplished intellectually, creatively, and culturally in classrooms when a teacher is tuned in to her students and not just the goals of the curriculum. Without a clear view of the hybrid spaces that can exist among students and their classroom curricula, we can only wonder. Yet, with a clear view, we can see through to the possibilities of third space.