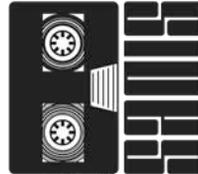


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Learning Between Borders

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Abstract:

Dwelling in a "Borderland" between academic and narrative writing, and drawing from the work of Gloria Anzaldú, bell hooks, and Michel Foucault, this essay critically confronts and transgresses the disciplinary structure of information production, both inside the Academy and out. Scholars of Hip-Hop will be especially interested in the author's analysis of Hip-Hop as a scholarly discourse, and her argument that different genres of scholarly discourse, such as Hip-Hop and MLA-style English, can and indeed *should* be blended within the Academy to stimulate new ways of thinking.

Keywords:

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...as we collectively imagine ways to move beyond boundaries, to transgress. This is education as the practice of freedom. (bell hooks, 207)

The Academy splits me in two. It splits my body from my mind in the late dark hours when my eyelids are like lead, yet my mind is full and lively. It splits the lover from the scholar when my partner needs affection, yet my studies jealously demand everything I've got, and more. It splits the intuitive artist from the rational empiricist, the playful girl from the stoic adult, the humanist from the scientist, and demands that I make my loyalties known by declaring, this way or that, which one I will be. But,

The number 2 is a very dangerous number: that is why the dialectic is a dangerous process. Attempts to divide anything into two ought to be regarded with much suspicion. (C.P. Snow, 9-10)

My life has been entwined with the Academy for nineteen of the past twenty-two years, and by now its ways are internalized—a beloved, inseparable part of me. Yet at the same time, even while I adore the Academy, I also understand it as a repressive institution that thrives on power and control. It is difficult to reconcile these two views.

Academic learning is a form of what Edward Said has called “Orientalism”: a colonial fantasy of knowing, circumscribing, or reifying the unknowable other in order to master it and thus wield power over it. As its reward, the Academy confers privilege and prestige upon those who acquiesce to its power. Clark Kerr and Peter Burke have both written about the several origins of this tradition, including the European Enlightenment and German Idealism: it is a tradition that cherishes taxonomy, classification, systematic thinking, and binding people and ideas by imagining that they are discrete, knowable objects that can be conquered and controlled. But within this system not everyone is empowered to seek and to know; it reinforces a raced, classed, gendered power structure that privileges the values of white bourgeois men above all others.

The Academy seeks to perpetuate its authority and police its borders via segmented disciplines, in which subject experts determine explicitly what constitutes legitimate versus illegitimate knowledge. This is performed via a complex system of assessment and observation, including testing, citing, grading, degree-granting and tenuring. Michel Foucault described this observational disciplinary system powerfully when he wrote about quarantines in plague-infested medieval France:

This enclosed, segmented space, observed at every point, in which the individuals are inserted in a fixed place, in which the slightest movements are supervised, in which all events are recorded, in which an uninterrupted work of writing links the centre and periphery, in which power is exercised without division, according to a continuous hierarchical figure, in which each individual is constantly located, examined and distributed among the living beings, the sick and the dead—all this constitutes a compact model of the disciplinary mechanism. The plague is met by order; its function is to sort out every possible confusion: that of the disease, which is transmitted when bodies are

mixed together; that of the evil, which is increased when fear and death overcome prohibitions. (197-198)

Thus the ideal disciplinary academy disrupts love and family life by demanding the full obedience and energy of its scholars. It depends on old-school systems of production and oppression in which the lord of the manor cognizes quietly in his study while his wife, servants and slaves look after his material needs; the scholar has no responsibilities beyond those to his institution and to his rigidly disciplined mind.

But many students somehow emerge from this disciplinary system intact, able yet to form intimate relationships and nurture their families and communities. In this way, universities in reality can be understood in the way Paolo Freire envisioned them, as spaces where reflective citizens can explore ways to meaningfully act upon their communities in order to live in and transform them. Academic disciplines can be much more fluid than we imagine, with porous borders through which students, faculty, community members and public figures frequently pass. When students emerge from the Academy, they are not necessarily as “disciplined” as one might expect; rather, many have cobbled together fragments from across the curriculum to help them construct understandings of themselves as whole humans—lovers, children, parents, spouses, friends—rather than discrete, segmented scientists, social scientists or humanists.

This paper transgresses colonial ways of knowing by relating my own personal narrative about my education within academic “Borderlands.” As I tell my story, I’ll engage many of the voices and disciplines that have collided along the way. Through this narrative I hope to articulate the ways in which I have transgressed bounded disciplinary systems, in order to resist being reified and circumscribed as a scholarly object. Here, in the liminal spaces between disciplinary boundaries, I have found reprieve from the coercive hierarchies that try to divide me into pieces. In Borderlands I can be multiple, and thus whole.

My idea of Borderlands is inspired by Gloria Anzaldúa’s 1987 masterpiece, *Borderlands / La Frontera*, in which she poetically describes her struggles coming to terms with her identity as a Chicana woman living in the *tejas*-Mexican border:

A borderland is a vague and undetermined place created by the emotional residue of an unnatural boundary. It is in a constant state of transition. The prohibited and forbidden are its inhabitants. *Los atravesados* live here: the squint-eyed, the perverse, the queer, the troublesome, the mongrel, the mulatto, the half-breed, the half-dead; in short, those who cross over, pass over, or go through the confines of the “normal.” (25)

I cannot speak for everyone, and nor do I want to. But I suspect that many other scholars—both students and professors alike—find themselves inhabiting similar spaces, neither one thing exactly, nor another. Perhaps one is a hybrid between biologist, anthropologist and musician; perhaps another between English scholar, librarian, and philosopher; perhaps another is even a hybrid between man, woman, and Mestiza, as is the case with my brilliant friend, Cat, who recently earned her degree in game theory from Goddard College in Plainfield, Vermont, by intellectualizing her social and biological transition from male to female.

This paper dwells in a Borderland, too, between academic and narrative writing. I use theoretical frameworks and citations cautiously, as these devices often serve only to reinforce what has already been said—previously “legitimized” and “authorized” ways of knowing. In short, this paper is both a labor of love and an act of transgression and resistance in itself.

Beginnings

I grew up in a strict fundamentalist Mormon family in Cedar Rapids, Iowa. In my family, we believed that women belong in the home, and that their divine purpose is to “multiply and replenish the earth”: to incubate and to raise children. My three brothers learned how to be entrepreneurs, invest money, and survive in the wilderness, while my sister and I were taught how to fold laundry, dress modestly, and watch our weight. When I asked my dad to teach me about investing as an eleven-year-old, he told me that, as a girl, I didn’t need to worry about that kind of thing. I’m pretty sure this is why I behave more like a bitter second-wave feminist than my more cheerful third-wave peers! My upbringing in a family with repressive views towards women has left me angry, giving me more in common with the women who grew up within the repressive social conditions of the United States during the 1950s and earlier.

But my education liberated me: “Books saved my sanity, knowledge opened the locked places in me and taught me first how to survive and then how to soar” (Gloria Anzaldúa, preface). Because I tested well in school, I was placed in my elementary school’s Talented and Gifted program where we were taught early to reflect, question and act. In my regular classes, I was educated in the different “subjects”: math, science, social studies, and language arts. But in the Talented and Gifted program, a small group of us were able to integrate our studies by going to “Future Problem Solvers” competitions, staging archeological digs, and writing dramatic plays about the legal issues surrounding the disputed paternity of Rumpelstiltskin. When we returned to our regular classrooms, the homeroom teachers often punished us or tried to make us feel embarrassed because we were being treated as “special”—these teachers were suspicious of what we were learning when we left their direct supervision. Yet my encounters with new and different ways of thinking via the Bowman Woods Elementary Talented and Gifted program undoubtedly had a direct influence on my dissatisfaction with my parent’s answers when I asked them why I wasn’t allowed to learn the same things as my brothers. These critical, interdisciplinary experiences were my first taste of what bell hooks and Paulo Freire have called “education as the practice of freedom.”

My father, who naturally was head of the household, forbade us to watch television, and so our mother would take us to the public library to check out books. Here my siblings and I learned to lose ourselves in other people’s stories. By the time I entered high school, I was deeply immersed in the great American “coming of age” cannon—*All Quiet on the Western Front*, *Catch 22*, *Catcher in the Rye*, *A Farewell to Arms*, *The Great Gatsby*, *Hamlet*, *Johnny Got His Gun*, *The Metamorphosis*, *The Odyssey*, *Oedipus Rex*, *Siddhartha*, *Slaughterhouse Five*, *The Stranger*, etc. I was reading all of these narratives (by white American and European men, but that would be

a problem for another time...) and trying to assimilate them into what I knew of life as a young Mormon girl growing up in Cedar Rapids, Iowa. All of the things I was reading about in these books—war, violence, blasphemy, iconoclasm, sexuality, infidelity, murder, death—were so different from anything I had ever known or experienced. It was so exciting! I sensed great possibility in these stories, and discovered even within this extremely narrow niche of literature how varied, how diverse can be the human mind and spirit.

Gradually, I stopped being able to believe that Mormonism, so prescriptive and positivistic in the way it was taught to me, could be correct, kind, or even moral, in its excluding from salvation all those who sought truth and found it outside of Mormon doctrine. The stories I was reading were, if nothing else, stories about (non-Mormon) people in search of truth. During this time I was also going through a painful period of questioning the more secret aspects of my Mormon faith: the discouragement of interracial marriages, the belief that the dark skin of Cain's descendants is a curse from God, the exclusion of Black men from the Mormon priesthood until 1978, and the exclusion of all women from leadership roles. As it does for many teenagers, I suppose, my paradigm was shifting away from what my parents and religious leaders had worked so faithfully to teach me.

There was great freedom, but also a great sense of loss, in choosing to no longer practice Mormonism when I was about sixteen years old. I couldn't consider myself Mormon anymore, yet I still felt an overpowering, emotional, visceral connection to it whenever I overheard it being discussed or critiqued ("...those weird Mormons!"). People I deeply loved were still Mormon, and it was a very real part of what had formed me. But perhaps more than any aspect of my formal education, this private rejection helped shape my attitude toward disciplinary boundaries. My experiences within the framework of Mormonism forced me to acknowledge that my own view of myself as a woman diverged sharply from the way many others viewed me. Mormons viewed women as wives, mothers and homemakers, yet I saw myself as a thinker, leader, and transgressor. And so I had to accept that I would not always enact the version of myself that others desired. I chose to transgress my identity as a Mormon woman, and instead to explore other ways to make sense of my female identity.

Transgression is a terrifying, sinful word to many Mormons, who believe that the fall of man was caused by Adam's original transgression when his wife, Eve, tempted him to taste the forbidden fruit of the tree of knowledge. But through my education, the word "transgress" has come to exemplify my ideals of knowledge and learning, thanks in great part to thinkers like bell hooks and Michel Foucault. Transgression, to me, is the practice of actively challenging established paradigms and power structures in order to renew and evolve. Now I understand transgression as a process of liberation, and it is one of the most important ideas to me when I think about my choice to dwell in Borderlands, beyond disciplines.

My senior year of high school, just on the heels of my religious doubt, I voluntarily left the school district I had been attending since I was five years old—including all the teachers and students in it—and enrolled in a high school on the other side of town where the population was much more economically, racially and intellectually diverse, and where I would have the opportunity to take electives like photography, economics,

philosophy, statistics and jazz choir. My old teachers discouraged the transition—for selfish reasons, I can now see—but I was hungry for new experiences, new ways of learning. At the new school I read *Paradise Lost*, fell in love with the photos of Josef Sudek, graphed probability distributions of the game “Pass the Pigs”, and learned about supply, demand, and Nihilism. And although my new cohort of students welcomed me, I was naturally not quite one of them, either. They had known each other for years, while I was a newcomer, and an anomaly even at that—it’s not like my dad had uprooted me by transferring jobs from out of state, or some other familiar reason like that. Again, I found myself in Borderlands, neither a student of the old school or the new, but craving new disciplines and ways of knowing.

Middles

My new guidance counselor at George Washington High School encouraged me to apply to colleges I had never even heard of before. This was one distinct advantage of changing schools my senior year. The old school surely would have funneled me into one of the three state universities—all reasonable choices, certainly, but I was grateful for the encouragement to consider other options, too. I also chose not to apply to the premiere Mormon college, Brigham Young University, where both my parents and my three oldest siblings had gone. My sister Christy, older and much wiser, warned me not to even give myself the option of going to BYU. Instead, I applied to Macalester College, a small private liberal arts school in St. Paul, Minnesota. I barely knew what Macalester was, but I knew that it was different—and it had a great brochure!

Although private liberal arts colleges often get a bad wrap for being catchalls of the wealthy and elite, my family wasn’t rich at all. By then my parents had divorced, and my mother was supporting my younger brother and me on her hourly wage as an office manager for a small local business. Just a few years earlier, she had been making her living as a housekeeper. I worked a part-time retail job in high school, too, and helped pay for many of my own expenses. Yet somehow serendipity, coupled with my naïve assumption that “college is just what you do,” was leading me straight to the front doors of this top-tier school that guaranteed to meet 100% of its students’ financial needs through a need-blind admissions policy. A lot of brilliant international students from less wealthy countries were accepted to Macalester via the same caveat; indeed, Macalester prided itself on its diversity and internationalism. Sadly, Macalester dropped this need-blind policy in 2003, in spite of student protest, fury, and feelings of betrayal. But in 2001, the doors to the next phase of my critical education were flung wide open.

I had no clue what I wanted to study at first. My fantasies ranged from medicine to classics to psychology. Because of my interdisciplinary experiences in elementary, middle, and high school, I felt that no subjects were off-limits. That first semester, I studied physics, human geography, British literature, and Italian language. But for some reason, although Macalester didn’t require me to declare a major until the end of my sophomore year, I felt that I should start to focus immediately. And literature is what I have always truly loved—so at the end of my first year, I chose that. I remember feeling relieved that I had at last figured out how to rationalize my decision to study

literature, by planning to pursue a career in publishing when I graduated. I felt that was the point, after all—to develop a skill that I could eventually transfer to the marketplace as a sustainable livelihood. At the time, the idea that I would be able to support myself instead of relying on a Mormon husband to take care of me seemed a great privilege and a freedom.

I admittedly felt a little smug in my introductory Poetry class, knowing that I, unlike the other students in my class, had officially “declared” English literature as my area of expertise. I suppose this is one of the perils of situating oneself within a discipline—one can become overconfident that she already knows everything there is to know. I was so proud of the first paper I wrote as an English major, about Marianne Moore’s poem, “The Mind is an Enchanting Thing.” I used showy phrases like “double entendre” and “quotidian logic,” and even analyzed the “quixotic axabbx rhyme scheme” to prove my argument... which was essentially that “Marianne Moore thinks the mind is an enchanting thing.” The professor kindly gave me a B+. Infuriated, I showed up at his office hours to demand answers about what had gone wrong. It was there, in Professor Stephen Burt’s office, that I gained a richer understanding of that essential scholarly instrument, the Thesis Statement. During the next three years, I honed my ability to formulate more complex, cogent theses supported by substantial textual evidence, and became fairly adept at writing within the genre known as the undergraduate English paper. Indeed, nearly every English class I took required me to write several short papers and one longer paper that were expected to follow this form, in MLA format. In our analyses we were encouraged to be theoretical and qualitative. And we used these tools in every English class I took, from African American Detective Fiction to Medieval and Renaissance Love Poetry, and even The Films of Alfred Hitchcock. I notice that this is how I still approach knowledge; I am drawn to the theoretical, qualitative, and interpretive, and tend to be annoyed by the empirical, quantitative, and rational. In this way I suppose it can be said that I have become quite “disciplined” in the way I view knowledge.

We read theory. Carl Jung, Claude Levi-Strauss, Edward Said, Ezra Pound, Frantz Fanon, Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari, Henry Louis Gates, Jacques Lacan, Judith Butler, Laura Mulvey, Luce Irigaray, Michel Foucault. The English department harbored sub-kingdoms in which psychoanalysis, structuralism, deconstructionism, and post-colonialism each reigned. These theories were so disparate yet so enticing that I wanted to assimilate them all, and still want to. To me they are each voices, representing different perspectives on shared problems—all persuasive in their own ways, all worth engaging and critiquing on some level. I’m sure some people find it strange or fuzzy, that I can be attracted to all of these ideas at once. But to me, theories represent not absolute truths but rather complementary ideas, and like bell hooks I believe that only by incorporating theories into the practice of one’s day-to-day life can they become liberatory, rather than cold, detached, repressive, objectifying.

My English professors employed a pedagogical technique called “locks” and “keys” that had been developed at the University of Michigan. For most texts we read, the students were asked to identify at least two locks and two keys per class session. Keys were symbols or themes embedded in the text that helped illuminate aspects that weren’t evident on the surface (e.g.: “Noses in Gogol are phallic!”), and locks were

moments from the text that seemed incongruous or even simply inexplicable. One day my Literature and Sexuality professor talked to us about the cave in Chinua Achebe's *Things Fall Apart* to help us cope with an unknown detail of the protagonist's life in Radclyffe Hall's *The Well of Loneliness*. In *Things Fall Apart*, the narrative arc climaxes when a little girl named Ezinma, who has mystical powers that are destroying her village, is spirited away by the priestess Chielo in the middle of the night and taken to a cave to confront powerful spirits. In the text, Achebe never reveals what actually happens inside the cave—the reader stays outside while Ezinma enters with Chielo, and we never learn the true nature of Ezinma's gifts. My professor, Michelle Wright, argued that this narrative device resonates with us because, in our quests for knowledge and understanding, we will always encounter questions that we simply cannot answer. This idea opposes the Imperial view of knowledge, which believes that all is knowable and conquerable. Yet despite these unknowable mysteries, we still continue to seek. This quality of the unknown is the nature of a “lock,” and it is what propels me still to ask questions of texts, even when I'm not sure they can, or should, be answered.

It was in this same class that I was introduced to another interesting argument. We were discussing the shape of narrative arcs, and noticing that a “traditional” narrative begins with a titillating problem, climbs towards an eventual delayed climax, and falls off into a petit denouement in the last few pages or scenes. We were amused to realize that this follows the pattern of a male orgasm, and wondered how deeply our cultural narratives are structured by male erotic fantasies of pleasure and desire. It was around this time that I began to really appreciate writers like Colette, Doris Lessing, H.D., and Rosa Chacel—dreamy writers who meander here and there, exploring, pushing, prodding, sensing, but without making a climactic argument, without ever resolving a problem. Could it be, I wondered, that there are also multiple ways to approach *scholarly* questions, beyond the tidy and satisfying “problem, evidence, conclusion” way of doing things? I have wanted to explore this question ever since.

So yes, my education in English literature has certainly disciplined my view of knowledge and my positioning of myself within the world. It has given me words and names to describe the ideas I began to grapple with as a teenager: that everything is in some a way a text, or a narrative, that can be interpreted, interrogated, deconstructed, and eventually reconstructed. But I wasn't only taking English courses at Macalester—I was also taking physics, astronomy, geography, Italian, political science, history, religion, linguistics, women's and gender studies, and art history. In the sciences, I learned about dark matter, quantum theory, Einstein's theory of Special Relativity, and elementary particles, and my favorite physics professor, Sung Kyu Kim, ended the semester on a humanist note by telling us tearfully that we are all made up of the same element—carbon—as the stars.

But my most transformative educational experience to date, including everything that has come since, was my lone class in the linguistics department. Although I am not a linguist by discipline, the lessons I learned from Sociolinguistics now haunt me wherever I go; they have become infused with my way of thinking and being. It was a traumatic experience, in ways—Sociolinguistics shifted my paradigm in a way that has prevented me from being able to communicate with my friends and family with quite the

same level of naïve, open trust. But it was nonetheless an experience that I would never, ever, choose to give up~

It looks like a fairly innocuous book. On the pale blue and grey cover there is an outline of a young schoolgirl in pigtails, wearing knee socks and Mary Janes, with the word “[girl]” written on her. Yet there is nothing innocuous about Peter Trudgill’s book, *Sociolinguistics: An Introduction to Language and Society*. In his book, Trudgill lays bare the social and political biases that make Standard American English the preferred dialect of American schools and institutions, rather than, for instance, African American Vernacular English or Appalachian dialects. As I assimilated his arguments, I began to understand languages, dialects and accents as competing yet equally rigorous and valid semiotic codes that are exploited by those in power to silence marginalized cultures by robbing them of their right to speak. Gloria Anzaldúa has said:

So, if you want to really hurt me, talk badly about my language. Ethnic identity is twin skin to linguistic identity—I am my language. Until I can take pride in my language, I cannot take pride in myself. Until I can accept as legitimate Chicano Texas Spanish, Tex-Mex and all the other languages I speak, I cannot accept the legitimacy of myself.
(81)

Before, I had believed in the myth of the supremacy of my own language. But now I understood that this wasn’t true. Yet in the circle of my friends and family, I was completely alone in this belief—like many other privileged white Americans, my friends and family arrogantly assumed that accents from the Deep South are indicative of low intelligence and bigotry, that Black dialects are indicative of “not trying hard enough.” For several months afterward I attempted to argue whenever these prejudices reared their ugly heads in casual conversation—as they often do—, but I was getting nowhere, being dismissed: “Rachel, lighten up. We’re just kidding.” My paradigm-shift had taken me to an unfamiliar, alien place, and I felt lonely in these new Borderlands.

Professor Sarah Dart also gave me my first opportunity to perform my own quantitative research as a college student; it was a much different experience from performing the qualitative research I was used to. For my final project in Sociolinguistics, I coded and analyzed actors’ and directors’ dialect choices in popular American films to expose their exploitation of language to perpetuate racist, sexist, classist, and regionalist stereotypes. I found that, in this instance, quantitative research was able to help me illuminate an oppressive social practice. But in spite of all these dizzying paradigm-shifts I was experiencing, the most invaluable lesson I learned from Sociolinguistics was yet this: the understanding that I, too, am deeply biased, in ways that I have not even begun to comprehend. This knowledge is terrifying, but also exhilarating. What I hope for more than anything else is to remain open to these revelations always, in order to have the courage to reflect, grow and evolve.

Because Macalester had reciprocity with several other local colleges, I was able to take classes at other universities, too—including Hamline, Saint Thomas, and the University of Minnesota. As much as I loved my fellow Macalester students, it was important to me to interact intellectually with students outside of the Macalester student body, too. I even had the opportunity to study at the Libera Università Internazionale degli Studi Sociali (LUISS) in Rome for one semester. There I studied Commedia

dell'Arte, Modern Italian Literature, and Cinecittà, but my favorite course was Roma come un museo in vita (Rome as a Living Museum). Professors Irene Baldriga and Pier Paolo Raccioppi led our exploration of the tensions within an ancient city obsessed with preserving its literally epic past, while also struggling to build a new future. The colossal monument built to Vittorio Emanuele II in the early 20th century, for instance, destroyed a large area of Michelangelo's 16th century Capitoline Hill. When politicians and art historians make decisions about restoration projects, which version of history should they choose? Several years later I would encounter echoes of these questions in pursuit of my Master of Library and Information Science degree, although at the time I had no idea that the discipline of librarianship was in my future. At LUISS I also encountered the Neorealist literature of a culture in pain trying to make sense of its recent fascist history: Pier Paolo Pasolini, Primo Levi, Natalia Ginzburg, Luchino Visconti—authors whose work is part of the Italian canon, but of whom I had never heard despite my education in literature. I wasn't satisfied with learning only from an American liberal arts point of view. Throughout my undergraduate education, I repeatedly chose to put myself in contact with those who could challenge my paradigms even as they were taking shape, rupturing old boundaries to create new Borderlands.

Now

At the moment I'm writing this, I am weeks away from finishing Library School—a true Borderland unto itself. Are we humanists, scientists, or social scientists? Librarians, scholars, or information specialists? We can't seem to agree—and maybe that's why I feel so at home here. As students, I think many of us are disoriented at first. We wish someone would just tell us what to be. But for those of us who can find our footing, we realize immense freedom. While at the University of Iowa's School of Library and Information Science, I have been a computer programmer, journal editor, policy analyst, youth services librarian, business administrator and critical theorist, and I have had to produce both practical and theoretical, quantitative and qualitative, work.

In my first few weeks as a graduate student, my Conceptual Foundations professor introduced me to several of the core intellectual questions asked by those in Library and Information Science—questions that bore faint traces of my earlier studies. Should information specialists impose controlled vocabularies or folksonomies? Structuralism or constructivism? Authority or freedom? It should come as no surprise that I was absolutely *elated* when Professor Padmini Srinivasan told her students that we didn't have to choose! She argued that sophisticated technologies have made it easier for us to catalog and index items using controlled vocabularies *in conjunction with* folksonomies; the two modes can inform and enhance one another, becoming more than the sum of their two parts. In this way, information specialists are able to represent multiple perspectives and ways of knowing. Of course, not all librarians and information scientists think this way—some believe that their role is to be conservative, prescriptive and authoritative. And even if they do believe in representing multiple viewpoints, like so many other things it ultimately becomes a question of economy: do you have the resources—the time or the money—to implement both? Yet in spite of

these issues, I have felt great solidarity here in these Borderlands, meeting kindred who believe, as I do, in being inclusive, in choosing both.

My paradigm has shifted here in Library School, too. In *Literacy and Learning*, I learned to interrogate the supremacy of book-based literacy over other semiotic domains that we use to convey meaning, and in *Analysis of Scholarly Domains*, I've been interrogating the nature of academic disciplines. In his book *The Archaeology of Knowledge*, Michel Foucault convinced me that disciplines are little more than arbitrary, fragile, man-made constructions; I began to regard disciplinary differences, then, as artificial borders used by institutions to police subversive voices and perpetuate coercive social hierarchies. Using genre theory, Michelle Holschuh Simmons has responded to this critique by arguing that academic librarians can be "disciplinary discourse mediators," empowering students by teaching them practical skills for researching and writing within their chosen disciplines. For Holschuh Simmons, it is a responsible, pragmatic gesture to "mak[e] tacit knowledge visible and therefore accessible to all" (302); she claims that this practice will teach students to think critically about information, knowledge, and disciplinary difference. Although I admire Holschuh Simmons' work and believe she has furthered the dialogue about critical information studies, ultimately I believe that she uses genre theory to rationalize her complicity within repressive institutional structures; by normalizing disciplinary discourse differences, students learn that they must conform to privileged modes of communication. This pedagogical practice forces those who speak from within marginalized discourse communities to erase their language and their history, and to surrender to the dominant culture. Embedded within this pedagogy is the assumption that all students want to assimilate into the dominant culture, but it may indeed be the case that some students desire to learn critical thought, insurgency, and resistance instead.

Consider the following example: several of the most insightful educators from whom I've learned teach through a discourse that is completely excluded from the Academy—the discourse of hip-hop. As Hank Shocklee commented during the 2010 panel discussion, "Two Turn Tables and a Mic," hip-hop is an excellent tool for critical dialogue and debate because the rapid beats allow the speaker ("MC") to pack in a lot of text. The MC usually has a thesis ("the bridge") that she supports with textual evidence ("verses"), and she also frequently engages with and critiques other MC's claims ("beef"). And like many academics, MCs too are fond of bibliographies ("shout-outs" and "disses") that inform their listeners who else's work they admire or disdain. A few of the MCs who have challenged me to evolve intellectually include: KRS-One, also dubbed "The Teacher," who preaches radical subjectivity while critiquing violence, poverty, and capitalistic exploitation; Lauryn Hill, who critiques misogynistic practices in secondary education; and Chuck D, who exposes icons of white supremacy in popular American culture. Of course, not all hip-hop is critically sound—but then neither is everything indexed by EBSCO. As I have "read" more and more hip-hop, I have begun to understand that it was dismissed in the 1980s and 1990s as macho, violent, and uneducated, when in fact it was critical, insurgent, and intellectual. And once the dominant culture had drained it of its social threat, they were able to appropriate and then commodify hip-hop.

Although my academic background in English literature has disciplined me to appreciate the form of the MLA paper, my hip-hop education has reinforced my conviction that valid arguments are also constructed in other ways. I contend that English literary scholarship can be improved by engaging hip-hop, and vice-versa. MCs Aesop Rock and Vinnie Paz both rely on classical references and motifs to support their social critiques; I'd like to see more academics quote MCs in their scholarly work, too, in contexts that will enrich their arguments. Disciplinary tunnel vision serves only to stifle the heterogeneity that could ultimately strengthen academics' critiques about vital social and intellectual issues.

The educational moments that have most transformed me are those that have decentered previously cherished paradigms: in Sociolinguistics, to learn that national language denotes power rather than the innate goodness of the language itself; in Literature and Sexuality, to realize just how entangled our literature is with representations of normative heterosexuality; in Literacy and Learning, to question the privilege conferred by book-based literacy. Thomas Kuhn wrote about shifting paradigms in *The Structure of Scientific Revolutions*—he argued that even the scientific method, which is viewed by many to be absolute and positivistic, is not necessarily stable, that paradigms can shift to change what we once thought we knew to be objective empirical truth. Even “neutral” data sets are unstable, because they are used, interpreted, and manipulated by humans who all carry with us the weight of our social biases, be they economic, racial, national, sexual, or religious biases. For instance, even if it can be positively said that “cancer is caused by gene X and treated by chemical Y,” this is only part of the story. How come that gene is present initially, and what happens in a person's life to make that gene express itself as a disease? Does the person live in a polluted area that is exploited for its natural resources? And what are the short- and long-term global economic consequences of using this particular chemical treatment? These questions may inform one researcher's work but not another's; there are *always* multiple sides to the story—one theory or model is never enough to explain any question fully. The best we can do, as scholars and as humans, is to seek out as many models, or stories, as possible, and then to critically integrate these models into what we already know and believe. I don't mean to claim that there no is value in empirical scholarship. Yet I do claim that none of these empirical models can tell the whole story on their own.

Perhaps Caroline Haythornethwaite's theory of social network analysis can help me elaborate my views about disciplines—it would be naïve of me, after all, to deny *any* difference whatsoever between two disciplines like Chemistry and Comparative Literature. Haythornethwaite argues that social networks are made up of clustered nodes (actors, or people), and that some of the nodes just aren't as well-connected as others. It is these peripheral nodes, though, that ultimately renew and energize the network:

Brokerage can be measured by *betweenness*, the extent to which an actor sits between others in the network. An actor can maintain a central, brokerage role without being connected to many others... As an intermediary, actors with high betweenness measures can fill an important information role as broker or gatekeeper, filtering and importing information to the network. (336)

Perhaps a discipline is like a social network—although there may be a core in the center about which we can generalize, there are also always connectors and transgressors that keep the discipline alive by bringing in new ideas, preventing the discipline from choking on its own homogeneity. Around these disciplinary cores we like to erect borders, yet on the fringes of these territories exist Borderlands.

* * *

Someone reading this essay might think to herself: “but you have just moved from discipline to discipline; you haven’t shown me anything new about Borderlands at all.” What I have hoped to convey through this narrative, though, is that I don’t believe I have ever just moved from one bounded way of knowing to the next. The codes I use may vary depending on the context, much as Anzaldúa has said that she switches between Standard Mexican Spanish, North Mexican Spanish dialect, Chicano Spanish, Tex-Mex, and Pachuco (77). Yet I would not be the same librarian I am today without having located myself first in Borderlands—without also being a constructivist, post-colonialist, feminist, sociolinguist, physicist, and even a historian of Roman art. For me, these ways of knowing have clashed and collided, leaving between them a new space for me to stand while I try to make sense of the world.

Another skeptic might say, “this essay is only political, it’s not intellectual.” To him I respond that all knowledge is political; there is no such thing as a neutral intellectual truth. To believe otherwise is to center oneself within a fantasy wherein there exists only one subject, and all else are objects.

New Frontiers

In just a few weeks I’ll start working at the circulation desk of the Lawrence Public Library. It’s an hourly, part-time job that certainly doesn’t expect me to be a scholar. Yet it’s a library in transition—neglected by its taxpayers within a building long outgrown, the Lawrence Public Library is trying to grow. As soon as I start, I’ll be helping launch a teen volunteer program, as well as advocating for a November ballot measure to renovate the building. I’m looking forward to the challenge of being plunged into these “indeterminate, swampy zones of practice” (Donald Schön, 3) and incorporating the theories I’ve been dialoging with for the past two—or 22—years into the practice of my day-to-day life. As a public librarian, I’ll work daily in Borderlands—between scholar and practitioner, intellectual and social worker, philosopher and civil servant. Donald Schön has given me courage to think of myself this way in his book, *Educating the Reflective Practitioner*, in which he discusses the complex relationship between the “Ivory Tower” and the “Swamp.” Schön posits that practitioners can tacitly learn how to navigate confusing professional situations when rational theories crumble and uncertainty, uniqueness, and value conflict prevail. I do feel that my choice to practice librarianship rather than just to theorize it does require a sacrifice, though; it is both painful and humbling to watch my peers and friends moving on to do more

prestigious work within the Academy, and to know that my work will never be viewed with the same legitimacy and camaraderie by the educators and mentors whom I most admire. But for me, this choice is part of what it means to inhabit Borderlands.

I'm also getting married in September, to Aaron—a brilliant, loving person who has also spent a lot of time in the Academy. We'll both work part-time at first, which we're excited about because we'll have some time to pursue a few of our goals together as a family, as well as enjoy simply being with each other. I hope that my scholarly pursuits have challenged me to reflect, act, and grow in ways that will also make me a better friend, wife and parent. Finally, I'd like to continue researching, writing and publishing. A few projects that have been on my mind include critical information literacy and community building, racism and “policing” in public libraries, and hip-hop as a scholarly discourse. I'd even like to collaborate with other scholars in my network who will remain in the Academy. Partnerships like these could bring academic and community voices together in stronger discourse.

When I leave the Academy, what I will most miss is the ready-made community of scholars who are willing to engage in conversations—who want to inquire, reflect and challenge the world around them. Although not every student or professor I have known has viewed herself in this role, for the most part my peers in the Academy have enriched me. This critical dialogue is what thrills me about education, and has kept me mostly happy here in spite of what I consider to be repressive disciplinary structures and suspect exercises of power and control. In my own experience, it has been rare to find the same commitment to critical thinking and discovery outside of the Academy. My way of theorizing practice can make others feel threatened, and at times I have been ostracized by my work and home communities because of this. My newest challenge will be to discover alternative communities that value education as the practice of freedom, and then to help build-up, support, and nourish these communities within settings such as neighborhood technology centers and public libraries.

Like the Academy, many public libraries also view themselves as disciplinary institutions—I learned this painfully during my year working at a “progressive” public library that used its elite status within the community to preserve white bourgeois order in a city that was experiencing the growing pains of racial change and diversification. Yet I do believe that public libraries are less bound by the institutional structures that make it so difficult for the Academy to evolve beyond its disciplinary functions. For now, I have chosen to practice public librarianship because I am deeply committed to helping community members democratically engage with information in ways that will help them pursue their own goals and forge stronger ties with each other.

* * *

The most difficult thing for anyone who dwells in Borderlands is to not know exactly where she fits. Throughout my education I've identified most deeply with insurgent cultural theorists who are often black or queer; yet having chosen to live my life as a straight white woman, I have often felt self-conscious about relating to their ideas. What undoubtedly sets me apart from black and queer thinkers is my privilege passing as white and straight. Secretly I wonder if I have any right to claim that I, too,

inhabit Gloria Anzaldúa's Borderlands, or if I am merely committing a privileged act of appropriation—this question haunts and shames me. But in Borderlands, I also find courage to construct my own transgressive identity and to defy the legitimizing boundaries that have been built to keep us apart. In her essay "Holding My Sister's Hand," bell hooks candidly yet lovingly confronts a schism between black and white feminists:

It may be that we give up so easily with one another because women have internalized the racist assumption that we can never overcome the barrier separating white women and black women. If this is so then we are seriously complicit. (109-110)

I think I feel close to some black and queer intellectuals because similar emotions inform our work—emotions related to the despair of growing up in a home or community that deprived us of our subjectivity, and our subsequent defiance and criticism of these oppressive power structures. Likewise I acknowledge that we are unlike because I have chosen to live the privileged lifestyle of marrying a white man and having children. Sometimes I balk at this identity because I think it alienates me even further from the thinkers whom I most admire. But in my heart I find sanctuary in Borderlands, knowing that I can be whomever I choose, living with and loving a person who holds dear the same constructivist ideals as I. Together, we will be multiple and whole, making our lives whatever we want them to be.

Shout-Outs

Here are the names of some of the people who have lent their voices to this conversation:

Aaron Smalter. Partner, fiancé, friend, lover, future father of my children; the one who listens to me until I calm down and we can finally discuss things like two people.

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Cat Castro. Friend, scholar, poet, transgressor.

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Christy Hall. Sister, lawyer, advice-giver, trail-blazer.

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B Sides Fall 2010

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- Rhea Datta. Friend, roommate, biologist, anthropologist, musician.
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