

Identity matters

Sarah J. McCarthey

University of Illinois, Urbana–Champaign, USA

Elizabeth Birr Moje

University of Michigan, Ann Arbor, USA

At a recent conference symposium session on literacy and identity, Allan Luke began his discussion of the conference papers by asking the presenters (one of whom was Elizabeth Moje): “Why does identity matter?” As literacy researchers interested in the relationship between literacy and identity, both of us recognize this to be an important, and too often overlooked, question in studies of literacy and identity. Why, indeed, should literacy theorists, researchers, and teachers care about how readers’ identities are constructed, represented, and performed in acts of reading? Why should it matter that certain literacy practices may be tied to or evoke certain identities for readers?

Because we see these questions as central to issues of literacy pedagogy, theory, and research—that is, because we do believe that identity matters—we have decided to use Luke’s question as our framing question for this conversation, in which we were actively engaged over electronic mail for approximately 4 months. Much of what appears here is our actual conversation, edited only for clarity. Other ideas were added as we read and reread what we had initially written and found gaps in the flow of ideas.

As we explore Luke’s question, we will discuss various theories of identity, the relationship between identity and literacy, and how identities and literacies are constructed and practiced within relationships of race, gender, class, and space. Woven into our conversation are findings of recent studies and our thoughts about what

these findings and theories mean for K–12 classroom literacy practices.

Sarah: Elizabeth, you have been thinking about Allan’s question of why identity matters for a while now. If he asked you the same question today, how would you respond?

Elizabeth: My immediate response is that identity matters because it, whatever *it* is, shapes or is an aspect of how humans make sense of the world and their experiences in it, including their experiences with texts. Links between identity or self and consciousness have been well articulated by philosophers and psychologists alike. Mead (1934), for example, developed a fairly explicit philosophical and psychological explanation of how mind, self, and society were constructed and acted in relationship to one another. Similarly, although Vygotsky (1978) did not use the terms *self* or *identity*, he laid out a scenario for the development of mind in individuals as they interact in society; they internalize practices, knowledge of, and beliefs about the world and about themselves as a consequence of their interactions. In both of these theories, and in countless others, the formation of self, as well as some level of awareness of self, is a critical aspect of consciousness or mind. Because it seems that selfhood and identity are linked, and because mind and consciousness (as socially constructed) have something to do with learning and using literacy, we can argue that identity and literacy are linked in important ways.

Identity also matters because people can be understood by others in particular ways, and people act toward

one another depending on such understandings and positionings. I recently conducted a focus group interview with four Latino/a teens. We had lunch together in a shopping mall restaurant, and as we walked to lunch I watched how people in the mall interacted with us. One woman looked at me and said, as she rolled her eyes, “Oh, you lucky woman.” Others made a wide berth around us as we approached. But most interesting was our waitress’s response to the youth: At the end of our meal she treated the four teens to ice cream, telling them that they were the sweetest, nicest kids she had waited on in as long as she could remember.

Each of these interactions reveal something about how teens, in particular, are positioned on the basis of their identities: They are people who are challenging to be with (you lucky woman), people to be wary of (the wide berth), and people who are not typically sweet or nice (the ice cream treat). What is especially interesting to me about the waitress’s comment, though, goes beyond what she might assume about the youth on the basis of their adolescent identity. As the waitress walked away, I looked at each one of the youths and wondered what their teachers would say about them. How are they identified in school? What is assumed about them as they walk or ride their bikes around their neighborhood? How is their dress understood? Their brown skin? Their age? These qualities represent aspects of identity and play a role in identity constructions. Each quality matters to these youth as they go about their everyday community and school lives, lives that require making sense of various kinds of text. For these kids, identity matters, and it matters a great deal.

The converse of the argument that identities shape people’s textual and literate practices is that their literate practices play a role in identifications and positionings: Street (1994) wrote of the differences in how housewives’ literate practices are read when compared with the literate practices of physicians. In my recent research on urban youths’ graffiti writing and reading practices (Moje, 2000b), I have observed that mainstream readers discount graffiti as a textual form and label graffiti writers as violent, deviant, or at risk of school failure. Despite the fact that graffiti uses alphabetic letters and other symbol systems, many mainstream readers and writers do not count graffiti among real reading and writing practices. The failure of graffiti to be counted among legitimate literacy practices stems more from its identification with deviance than from its textual forms. Similarly, several studies have illustrated that teachers make instructional decisions ranging from choices of texts to how much reading gets assigned based on what they believe is true about readers’ identities (e.g., Anyon, 1981; Sarris, 1993).

Sarab: In addition to the reasons you have provided, it seems to me that there is another major reason for researchers and teachers to consider identity as we think about students’ literacy learning. Who students are influences how they interact, respond, and learn in classrooms. That is, the experiences they have had in their families, their previous experiences with institutions such as schools, as well as the larger social and political frameworks in which they have operated, have shaped their classroom interactions. In turn, who they are as individuals in terms of race, gender, and class contributes to the classroom interactions.

Elizabeth: Your last point is especially important, Sarah. A number of the youth I worked with in past studies rejected the readings that teachers had chosen for them because they could not *identify* with the people in the stories. In some cases the teachers had chosen literature they thought would connect with students’ experiences and, in particular, ethnic backgrounds, but the youth felt that the experiences and backgrounds of the characters in the texts were too different or distant (Fecho, 1998; Moje, 2000a; Obidah, 1998; Sarris, 1993).

Both you and I, Sarah, have studied how literacy practices—whether reading a class novel or tagging up a wall—can shape, or at least have an impact on, identities and identifications. That is, readers and writers can come to understand themselves in particular ways as a result of a literate engagement (Faigley, Cherry, Jolliffe, & Skinner, 1985; Ferdman, 1990; McCarthy, 2001). On a personal level, I observed a shift in my own identities recently as I read Diamant’s (1998) *The Red Tent*, a fictional account of the biblical Jacob’s only daughter, Dinah.

Diamant’s account is completely fictional, mainly because women of that time had no voice in daily practices or in written accounts of people’s lives. Dinah’s only representation was as a victim of rape. When I finished reading the book, which positioned Dinah very differently from the biblical version, I was stunned to realize that throughout my life—and my very religious upbringing—I had never really recognized the voicelessness of women in the Bible. My reading changed the way I thought about my understanding of my upbringing, my religion, and my feminism. My identities were challenged in important ways and my everyday practices were certainly changed: I reread parts of the Bible; I had conversations with other women about the book. What’s more, I will bring these challenges and changes to my subsequent readings of all sorts of material.

Sarab: Your example of your own identity shifts links to another reason that identity is worth studying. Clearly, the shifting you experienced occurred as the result of reading new material within a particular context, material that challenged some of your previous beliefs

that were based on your social and cultural background. I think it is important not only to challenge our own identities but to question previous views of what identity is. Traditionally, many educators have relied on essentialist views to explain why certain kids do not do well in school. We have tended to use labels to characterize students as *shy* or *aggressive*, *motivated* or *lazy*, and this has given us license to dismiss our own roles as educators in promoting school failure. When we consider identities to be social constructions, and thus always open for change and conflict depending on the social interaction we find ourselves in, we open possibilities for rethinking the labels we so easily use to identify students. By considering identity as an important concept that needs to be embraced, challenged, and reconceptualized, we might be able to think about students and their literacy practices in ways that will help us reconsider those labels.

Elizabeth: Right. What you are saying is that identity matters because of the way the construct has been defined and used in the past. In addition, identity matters because so many new ways of thinking about identity have been proposed, conceptualizations that move beyond not only the labeling you have pointed out, but also the dichotomizing of possibilities for identity. One might argue that people can be both motivated and lazy, both aggressive and shy, depending on the spaces they are in and the relationships they enact within those spaces. What is more, educational and psychological literatures are replete with studies of identity, and these literatures draw on a variety of conceptualizations of the construct. In short, as long as people keep studying identity, it matters.

Assuming that we've established some reasons for studying identity and literacy, and studying them in ways different than traditionally studied, what theories seem helpful to you in reconceptualizing identity?

Sarab: Some of the theories that derive from social constructivist and postmodern theories have acted as catalysts for my own thinking because they emphasize the constructed and dynamic nature of identity. For example, Sarup (1998) defined identity as "a construction, a consequence of interaction between people, institutions and practices" (p. 11). Mishler (1999) suggested that identity was relational, that is, individuals make claims about who they are by aligning or contrasting themselves with others.

Both of these theorists talk about identity not as a *thing* but as an abstraction; their ideas are helpful in moving us away from more traditional views of identity that focused on identity as a unified, cohesive essence belonging to an individual whose core unfolds or develops in stages (Erikson, 1968). However, when we start to pin down these abstractions to conduct studies, it becomes

rather difficult. How do you measure a consequence, or how do you find out how identity is relational?

Elizabeth: That is something I have struggled over in writing about youth. I could paint two or three different portraits of the same teen depending on relationships and interactions in the youth's life I chose to examine. The student I watch struggling in an English-dominant science classroom seems completely different from the same student in the classroom of a fluent Spanish-speaking Latina teacher. The students I see dressed in school uniforms are different from—or act differently from—the same youth playing pop music CDs for me in their homes. The central question is, of course, are they enacting different identities or are the differences just performances of one identity? How do we examine the differences in these performances of identity or in the relationships that enact those identities? And how do we write about them? Most publication venues do not allow us to show people in all their complexity. But how do we move identity theory forward if we cannot write about identities in their complexity?

Sarab: Your examples connect with issues I have grappled with as well. Much of the postmodern literature concerned with identity suggests that identity is multiple, fragmentary, and contradictory. These terms seemed to fit well with what I saw in a third- and fourth-grade classroom I studied (McCarthy, 1998). For example, a student, Rosa, described as very shy by her teacher was reticent in large group settings and in a small-group setting with a dominating white male. However, in a different small-group setting she was eager to act as a tutor to another student who was struggling to read. I concluded from studying several students in the classroom that the task demands and setting as well as markers of social class, gender, and ethnicity influenced their interactions.

Yet, when I set out to look at how some of these postmodern ideas played out in a different context I was surprised to find out that, at least, for the fifth-grade students in another study, their identities were not so multiple, fragmentary, or contradictory (see McCarthy, 2001). For at least half of the students, there was much overlap in how they described themselves and how others saw them. Especially for the avid readers and writers, much of their identity seemed to be tied to their literacy achievements. Rather than being multiple or contradictory, their literacy and other social practices were almost isomorphic with one another. My data made me rethink a number of things. First, while I do not subscribe to the old unfolding core claims made about identity by more traditional psychologists, I do think that we may be more than an incoherent mass of contradictions. Our individual histories, cultures, and languages provide us with a kind of gel that holds us together. Second, the role of lit-

eracy in shaping who we are is probably even more important than I suspected.

Elizabeth: That last point raises an interesting question. Is it, perhaps, less that literacy shapes who we are, but that literacy and literate practices are tools for representing or performing particular identities? In other words, is it possible that the identities of the children you studied were actually more contradictory than they or their families and friends realized, but that the literacy practices available to them constrained their identity representations and positioned them in particular ways? I am reminded of Finders' (1996) work here. She found that junior high school age girls carried books with them that they knew would represent them in socially acceptable ways, but they actually read different books. These same girls constructed socially acceptable writings in class, but wrote different things in Finders's interactions with them outside of school (see also Fassio, 2000; Moje, Willes, & Fassio, 2000; Willis, 1995). While I agree that we are more than an incoherent mass of contradictions, I wonder if the coherence that we see when we examine people's literacy practices as emblematic of their identities is actually a coherence borne of the literacies that are considered acceptable in their particular relationships?

Sarah: Yes, I had not thought about coherence in quite that way. Acceptable literacies, again, are going to depend on the social context; likewise, our identities (even our cultural and ethnic identities) are constructed in relation to others' perceptions (Tatum, 1997). These perceptions come together and may blend or clash, as Sarup (1998) suggested. In a conference presentation, Anzaldúa (1999b) captured the notion that our identity is constructed by not only our own but also others' views in an identity-as-clusters-of-stories metaphor. Anzaldúa claimed that we are "clusters of stories we tell ourselves and others tell about us."

The cluster-of-stories metaphor seemed to resolve for me (at least temporarily) some of the extreme points of view defining identity as either a core or a mass of unresolved tensions. Similarly, Mishler (1999) has contributed significantly to theory and research by collecting data from craft persons who described their life experiences, complete with continuities and discontinuities, that shaped their "sub-identities" (p. 86). His work, told in narrative form, provides data to support the argument that settings and practices define who we are and aspects of our identities may conflict with one another. I also found the cluster-of-stories metaphor a helpful rationale for doing interviews with several people who are close to students when conducting studies about identity. We need to talk to the individual under study, but also others with whom they interact on a daily basis to find out their

perceptions. What about you, Elizabeth, what researchers or theorists have shaped your ideas?

Elizabeth: How much space do we have for this conversation? My list is long, particularly because the list includes theorists who did not explicitly write about identity. For example, I'm influenced by the writing of Mead and Vygotsky, as I've already mentioned. More recently, my work has been shaped by Gee (1996), who has argued that there are ways of knowing, doing, believing, acting, reading, and writing (he called them Discourses) that are tied to cultural models by which people live. Although Gee did not focus on identity per se, his theories about literacy and Discourses certainly have implications for identity work. As people develop what Gee called primary Discourses, which are embedded in the cultural models available to them, they also develop identities and identifications. The link between cultural models and identities is important. Identities, following such a perspective, are at least in part culturally situated, mediated, and constructed. They are not solely an innate quality that one is born with. Identities are built within the social interactions one has within a particular Discourse community. Furthermore, as people work to learn secondary Discourses, those Discourses that derive from cultural models different from their own, people come up against other identities.

Here's where the work of hybridity theorists such as Anzaldúa (1999a), Bhabha (1994), Hall (1996), and Luke and Luke (1999) plays an important role in my thinking. Whereas Gee described discourses in a somewhat hierarchical way, these theorists argue for a sense of identity as hybrid, as constructed from multiple experiences and relationships that are enacted within particular spaces and places. Thus, a person's identity is not necessarily incoherent and contradictory, as you point out, Sarah. But identity can be hybrid, it can be complex, and it can be fluid and shifting as a person moves from space to space and relationship to relationship.

Anzaldúa's (1999b) notion of identities as clusters of stories that we tell about ourselves and others tell about us is useful because the *cluster-of-stories* emphasis allows for the sense of hybridity, complexity, and contradiction that I see in identity, without diminishing identity to *incoherence*. The fact that *others tell those stories about us* calls to mind the important point that identities are always situated in relationships, and that power plays a role in how identities get enacted and how people get positioned on the basis of those identities. I might tweak this notion of story *telling* by saying that these clusters of stories are *performed* or *enacted*, rather than only told. Seeing the stories as performed allows us to see identities as lived and relational, rather than as something set that we narrate to others. It is especially useful for me to

think about identities as performed or lived stories in light of a comment made to me by a research participant when I asked her why she engaged in certain practices. She responded that she “just wanted to be part of the story” (Moje, 2000b, p. 652). Her comment certainly underscores the idea that we live our identities in a sort of narrative, and that many people are searching for ways to construct or represent identities and stories that allow them to belong.

Sarah, your idea that our histories, cultures, and languages serve as a gel that holds us together is an interesting one. Is that what identities are, a gel or glue that allows us to enter a relationship with someone else in a particular space? Does that mean that conflicting or competing histories, cultures, and languages could be seen as *solvents* that can dissolve, or at least weaken, an individual's identity gel, particularly when an individual is immersed in a context or space distinctly different from her own? When I think of your gel notion, I'm reminded of Bourdieu's (1980) notion of habitus, which he defined as,

systems of durable, transposable dispositions, structured structures predisposed to function as structuring structures, that is, as principles which generate and organize practices and representations that can be objectively adapted to their outcomes without presupposing a conscious aiming at ends or an express mastery of the operations necessary in order to obtain them. (p. 53)

Bourdieu located these systems in people's past and present everyday relationships and argued that people carry their habitus into different fields of relations. The question then becomes what to make of this gel or habitus? Is it unchangeable? Can it be stretched? Adapted? Hagood's (in press) work on distinctions between identity and subjectivity are instructive here. Hagood distinguished between the idea of multiple identities that people must negotiate, and a *decentered self* that “pushes back on those identities, continuously shifting and changing, never fully locating oneself once and for all in a particular identity.” According to Hagood, the idea of a decentered self allows for more of a sense of individual agency, a resistance to identifications that others make. Does Hagood's notion of subjectivities allow us to stretch the identity gel? Or is subjectivity the gel and identity the way others see the shape the gel takes? And are there ways that we could work productively with these as conceptions of identity and subjectivity to help teachers, education researchers, school administrators, parents, and community members think about how to bring competing histories, cultures, and languages together without threatening to dissolve one or another?

Sarah: It seems that we are trying to work through how identities are coherent, yet hybrid and stabilizing, yet dynamic.

Elizabeth: Yes. At some level the stability of an identity allows us to act—we would not be able to get through the day if we didn't have some sense of self (here's Mead speaking). And yet I know that the self I present or perform changes in different relationships. So what is the gel? Is it a sticky substance that binds these different identities together, but is it also a stretchy, elastic substance that allows people to manipulate their own identities and perform in different stories and relationships? Is it like colored dough, in that you can add different colors and some parts of the color still show up, but the colors blend and create new colors?

Sarah: Although the colored dough metaphor seems a little silly (here is where our identities as two moms with 4-year-olds come into play), it has some potential as long as we keep in mind it is the *practices* associated with the *dough* that define it. Otherwise, it is just dough. Your daughter and my son probably share a lot of similar practices in their identity constructions because they have shared background in terms of having white, middle-class, professional parents and live in university towns. Most likely they use their dough (both actual and metaphorical) in quite similar ways, rolling it, shaping it, trying to make figures out of it (well, those are the acceptable ways, along with throwing it, eating it, or segmenting it into the tiniest of pieces that we can never get out of the carpet or bricks on our porch), as opposed to ways that kids unfamiliar with this substance in a different culture might use it. I am thinking of the movie *The Gods Must Be Crazy* (Uys, 1981), where the young man in Africa sees a soda bottle in quite different ways than an urban American might.

The point is that the gel or the colored dough can be shaped, mixed, torn apart, and reshaped, but at each point in time there is some substance, some coherence in order for it to be discussed, analyzed, and changed. The models of what it can become, the multiplicity of shapes and forms, and the ways in which it is used are, of course, all culturally constructed. Does this help us think through the relationship between Bourdieu's habitus and some metaphor for coherence, however temporary it might be?

Elizabeth: My first thought is that the colored dough metaphor is especially useful not only because it illustrates how people draw from practices that emerge from our daily lives (and carpets), but also because the metaphor illustrates the risk in identifying in particular ways and in particular forms. Although we might feel safe in using this metaphor in our casual or electronic conversation, we feel some risk in positioning ourselves in a

scholarly publication as the *mommy theorists*. To identify as mothers in a scholarly work may diminish our authority as scholars; we take a risk in choosing to reveal our hybrid identities and, in fact, to bring them to bear on each other. Similarly, when students identify in particular ways in classroom literacy interactions, they may risk positioning themselves in dangerous ways.

Exposing this risk connects to Bourdieu's notion of habitus (1980) in important ways. While the gel and dough metaphors for identity hold some promise for helping us think through conceptions of identity, neither make power relations explicit in the way that Bourdieu's habitus does, especially when read in light of his theories about fields of relations. Bourdieu situated habitus in relation primarily to social class values, beliefs, and practices, and he argued that habitus structures the way members of different social groups (or classes) interact within different fields of relations. Fields of relations, wrote Bourdieu, are structured by power. Bourdieu further argued that habitus is largely unconscious or unaware; in fact, his sociological project revolves around revealing the unconscious ways that people's interactions and everyday practices reproduce structural power relations.

We could draw from this to argue that identity constructions might be unconscious—we construct identities within particular social, cultural, and political relationships—but that identity representations can be conscious and strategic. We have made a strategic choice to represent ourselves as researchers, theorists, and mothers. We have also chosen not to represent other qualities of our identities, recognizing that those qualities might have different implications for our scholarship or our lives. We could further build on this idea by arguing that all learning—and literacy learning, in particular—can be conceived of as moments in identity construction and representation. Teaching literacy, then, could be considered acts of supporting and challenging learners' identities and providing spaces for learners to explore how their identities are hybrid, and how hybridity can be stabilizing.

Sarah: Distinguishing between the unconscious identity constructions and the more strategic choices of the ways in which we represent ourselves is very helpful. The distinction allows us to consider those pervasive social structures that influence us at the same time the distinctions account for individual agency. While the social class structure allows some to wield power over others, people have some choices within those structures and people can work against structures, but our power to work against structures depends at some level on our positionality. As white, middle-class professionals we have more choice and more privilege to decide how to represent ourselves than do others from less privileged groups, who might feel the need to repress aspects of their iden-

ties in order to be accepted. Although we hesitate to share with our audience our identities as mothers, we have cultural capital, we have tenure, and we have a desire to tweak academic norms, all of which give us the power to represent ourselves in print in multiple ways.

At the same time, our distinction between construction and representation might mislead us into thinking that there is a sharp division between the unconscious and the conscious, between construction and representation, or between institutions and individuals—exactly the dichotomies we have been hoping to avoid.

Elizabeth: Yes, in fact, my second thought was that our colored dough or gel metaphors fall apart a bit when we try to extend them. If we think of our kids playing with colored dough, they are shaping and molding the dough, in ways that count as valid cultural constructions. But what are people shaping and molding when they engage in identity construction and representation? What is the stuff being shaped, what is the dough? Is the dough a compilation of our past experiences and interactions at the same time that it is shaped by them? And is either of those equal to identities? Some might argue that identities are what we represent—consciously or unconsciously—in particular relationships, whereas the dough corresponds to our subjective experiences, values, and beliefs: our subjectivities.

Sarah: And this is where our conceptualization may diverge from others, such as Hagood's (in press). Hagood argued that the very term *identity* conjures up notions of a "fixed, autonomous self who thinks rationally and logically, defines him/herself, and develops a stable self over time" and suggested that categories such as nationality, gender, race, ethnicity are mechanisms that tend to stabilize our notions of identity. According to Hagood, instead of emphasizing the ways that identities are produced in texts, subjectivity focuses on "readers as subjects" and "the process of the ways that readers construct themselves." Hagood used the example of Timony, an eighth grader who actively used the discourses of school to construct himself in ever-changing ways, to illustrate the power the reader has to negotiate positions within social interactions. Rather than seeing Timony as a text formed through competing identities such as a bad student, avid reader, and disturbed teenager, Hagood argued that Timony himself had authority and agency and was in a constant state of transforming who he was.

Elizabeth: Hagood's distinctions are important because these two words often get used interchangeably, or with little discussion as to how they are distinct. And subjectivity makes agency central, something that I find compelling because of the power and agency I have seen among groups typically labeled as marginalized. Even if we turn to the use of subjectivity, however, it does seem

like the construct of identity needs to be pushed and reshaped to include a focus on agency. Conceptions of identity as suggested by Mishler or Anzaldúa, among others, leave open the possibility for identities to be considered relational constructions. The value of keeping the term *subjectivities* in the discussion is that it reminds us that people bring beliefs, experiences, and practices to bear on their relationships. The constraint imposed by the use of subjectivities or decentered selves is that the terms do not necessarily highlight the possibility of *hybrid* identities or subjectivities. The concept of decentered selves evokes a self always in contest, always changing, always resisting positionalities, rather than a self that might identify and be identified in many different ways throughout one's life.

Sarah: While I find the emphasis on individual agency in poststructuralist views of subjectivity to be critically important, we cannot underestimate the role of institutional forces and factors such as race, social class, gender, and language in how selves and identities get shaped. In fact, there have been several ethnographies that have investigated the ways that students represented their racial and cultural identities in high school settings. I am thinking particularly of Daniel Yon's (2000) ethnography of a high school in Toronto in which he found that youth were continually in the process of negotiating and renegotiating their identities. They invoked racial and cultural categories in relation to others in the group, and context influenced how they talked about themselves and others. Several individuals used the strategy of keeping their public and private positions on race and interracial relations quite separate from one another. Yon suggested that racial and cultural identities emerged as "unstable and contested" (p. 103) and that youth constructed their identities "in relation, and often in opposition, to the constraints imposed by gender, race, and culture" (p. 122).

Weiler's (2000) study of an alternative high school, in which she focused on the identity construction of young women from diverse backgrounds, makes important points about identity. Weiler's work challenges traditional views that assume that young women of a certain social class or racial or ethnic group share the same values and aspirations. By demonstrating how young women attached different values to schooling, future employment, marriage, and children, she showed how fluid gender identity is and discussed the importance of schooling processes in shaping those identities. Both studies contribute significantly to our theorizing about the roles of race, gender, and social class in identity construction.

How do you see gender, social class, and race? What does it mean that these categories, which were previously considered essentialist, are coming to be viewed as fluid?

Elizabeth: Questions of gender, social class, race, and other qualities of difference are particularly important to consider as we talk about identities as hybrid, fluid, or shifting (or selves as decentered). It can be a really easy move from seeing identities as hybrid and shifting to the argument that social categories of difference cease to matter, and that is a dangerous move. It is important to keep in mind that qualities of difference—especially ones that are physically marked, such as race and gender, and sometimes social class—do not disappear as we move from space to space and relationship to relationship. I am always a white woman, regardless of where I am and who I am with, and those physical markers play a critical role in my identity representations, in how I position myself and am positioned in relationships, and in how I read and make sense of gender, race, and class representations in texts.

In other words, physical markers of identity do play a role in stabilizing, to some extent, how identities are enacted and interpreted, read and written, and how selves are performed. What literacy scholars need to study, then, is how those physical markers intersect with one another, with particular spaces and relationships, and with literacy practices to construct hybrid identities. We should not dismiss the categories of difference because identities are hybrid and fluid; in fact, it is even more important that we study these categories and their intersections, but we should examine them in relation to particular interactions in particular spaces (Yon, 2000).

Sarah: I agree with the need to study the intersection of these features of identity construction, and I have noticed that some of your recent work has focused on the role of space in identity construction. Can you summarize some of this work and note how it relates to our discussion?

Elizabeth: I am using theories of spatiality (e.g., Foucault, 1986; LeFebvre, 1996; Soja, 1996) to examine the literacy practices of two groups of young people in relation to the different physical and social spaces in which they live/d (Moje, 1999, 2001). Spatiality theories refuse to accept the naturalness of physical space as simply some neutral artifact of progress or even of simple acts of human tool use. Instead these theories provide a means to examine how material spaces are constructed as people fight for resources and privilege, and how bodies are distributed throughout particular spaces. Moreover, spatiality theories provide an analytic framework for examining how those constructions of space shape the social and literate practices in which people engage and the identities that they represent. Such perspectives encourage the study of how spaces are central to people's *identifications* in terms of their race, ethnicity, social class, or gender relations, and how those identifications shape engagements

in spatial tactics of power and in everyday social, cultural, and literate practices.

My interest in spatiality stems from my work with youth in or connected to street gangs, in particular, but also, more generally, from studying youths' literacy practices in urban spaces. I am especially interested in how constraining, dangerous, or unwelcoming urban spaces push youth to use literacy in particular ways to claim, reclaim, or construct new spaces. In addition, the youth I have worked with have also pushed me to think beyond singular notions of ethnicity, gender, race, and class as I try to understand their practices, and I have found spatiality useful in understanding these complex representations. That is not to say that qualities of difference such as race do not matter in the lives, literacies, and identities of these youth. However, their lives take them through multiple spaces and their identities are consequently articulated at and across multiple boundaries (Anzaldúa, 1999a; Bhabha, 1994). Spatiality theory can help to illuminate why people of the same gender and race, with similar ethnic and social class histories, might engage in different kinds of literacy practices.

My attention to spatiality is also prompted by research in urban and suburban schools that suggests a vast difference in the teaching and learning practices that occur in those two different settings (Anyon, 1981, 1997; Weis, 1990). I want specifically to examine how the urban space—and concomitantly, the urban school—shapes what happens in urban school settings. Why do urban teachers and administrators often engage in practices of dismissal and control? Certainly race, class, and gender relations are implicated in such practices, but the work of Astor, Meyer, and Behre (1999) on mapping school violence and beliefs about violence suggests that perceptions of and practices in particular spaces are also at work in these violent behaviors. For teachers and other school personnel who are outside of the urban spaces of the youth with whom they work, marginalized youths' literacy (and other communicative) practices are foreign, resistant, villainous, even when the practices may simply be different rather than negative. The teachers' and administrators' lack of understanding of youth's out-of-school practices, coupled with their fear of difference and of the dark and shadowy spaces of the city and school, shapes practices of control that are enacted implicitly and explicitly in language and literacy teaching (Moje, 1999).

Sarah: As my interests in the relationships among identity, literacy, and learning have developed, I have become particularly interested in the role of *language* and *development* in identity construction. I am about to launch a study examining how first graders, fifth graders, and secondary students who are native Spanish or native Chinese speakers learning English think about their identities as

writers. This study offers the possibility of exploring the role of development from a social cultural perspective while interviewing writers who may have very different perceptions of themselves in two different languages.

I am reminded of a story told to me by my bilingual friend who is raising her child to speak Spanish at home and English at school (although it is not as dichotomous as it sounds). Her 3½-year-old daughter, Lea, announced that she no longer wanted to be read stories in Spanish, only English. However, if her mother wished to read in Spanish, she could read to Victoria (Victoria is Lea's Spanish-speaking alter ego who is named after her 6-year old Argentinean cousin).

I find this fascinating on so many levels. The first level, of course, is that Lea is beginning to simultaneously reject and maintain her Spanish native language, even as her parents made concerted efforts to retain their language and culture. But the second issue of interest is the belief by a 3-year-old that she can assume identities that are different from each other and that are directly connected to languages. Lea's response certainly relates to Gee's (2001) view that "meaning in language is tied to people's experiences of situated action in the material and social world" (p. 715), but it also relates back to the issue of relationships among language, literacy, and identity. How can we examine these relationships among them without separating language, literacy, and identity into distinct categories or without lumping them altogether? That is why I want to look at students who speak different native languages such as Chinese and Spanish, not necessarily to look at broad cultural or language patterns, but to examine in depth the language and identity practices of students in different settings who speak different national languages.

I also am intrigued by the role of development in relation to language, literacy, and identity. I find it fascinating that a child who is not yet 4 years old could use language to represent herself in different ways.

Elizabeth, your work has focused more on youth. What do you see as the role development plays in identity construction for youth?

Elizabeth: Typically, youth, ages 12–20, have been identified as people in the process of *becoming* (Mosenthal, 1998, Neilsen, 1998). Although I find the notion of becoming troubling from a philosophical standpoint, and I have found little empirical support for the idea that adults (ages 21–100) have reached some stable identity (i.e., have *become* something), adolescence or youth *is* a unique time period in a person's development. Youth typically have more freedom outside of school than do children, and in some cases even than adults (although youth are more often monitored and tracked within communities), to pursue different uses of literacy

and different forms of representation. Because they engage in and with many different textual forms and literacy practices, youth perhaps have more opportunities than adults or children to develop hybrid identities and to experiment with different identity representations in different spaces. In general, young people have access to a wide range of funds of knowledge at school, home, work, community-based organizations, and peer groups, and sometimes outside of their local communities.

I think that we see more studies of identity and literacy conducted with youth than with children in part because adolescents can be more metacognitive about their practices and in part because adolescents are in between (see Bhabha, 1994) multiple spaces. Whether or not one agrees with the concept of becoming, youth are popularly construed as being between many spaces: childhood and adulthood; work and play; home, school, peer group, and community; romance and sex; popular culture and academic culture; science class, history class, and English class; comic book and Internet; local community and global marketplace. The list of “in-betweens” goes on and on.

What’s more, because youth are often viewed as being in the process of becoming adults, they are often treated in different ways from children. Contrary to what intuition might have us believe, the treatment of young people is often more controlling than the treatment of children (Eccles, Lord, & Midgley, 1991). And yet young people invent ways—using literacies in the process—to manipulate and reshape the controls placed on them. In the process, they develop *new* literacies, literacies of attention, navigation, and critique that are unique to a global and technologized world (Lankshear & Knobel, 2001). Drawing from their work with teen ‘zine (magazine) writers, Knobel and Lankshear (2001), for example, argued that “young people are not held necessarily in a ‘consumer trance’ without sophisticated critical capacities” (p. 19), but are continually generating new ways of communicating and representing their identities, and of questioning dominant norms.

Sarah: When I look at the work you cite, it highlights the ways in which youth react against institutions like school to reshape the controls and develop new literacies. It also seems that the most interesting practices that engage youth are those outside of the school setting. I think also of Heath and McLaughlin’s (1993) work in nonschool settings in which youth are engaged in the arts to develop a sense of connection and community. But this raises some interesting questions: Do we always need an institution to react against in order to create new literacies? Is there something inherently interesting in the nonschool settings that school may not ever be able to match? Is there any hope for changing pedagogy in the

classroom? Do you think there are some classroom literacy practices that might promote students’ understanding of their own identities as literacy learners? For example, I know that you and other colleagues have done some work in the area of writing practices that go beyond expressivism. In what ways do you see some of these practices developing readers’ and writers’ identities?

Elizabeth: Heath (personal communication, July 17, 1999) has argued that there is not much hope for traditional, public educational institutions to provide spaces for positive identity development for youth, especially for those who are typically marginalized in society. A number of studies of literacy classrooms could be used to support her argument (e.g., Fassio, 2000; Finders, 1996; Lensmire, 1994; Willis, 1995). For example, in the research that I conducted in a junior high school English classroom, my teaching colleague and I found that the students engaged in reading, writing, and talking that they thought was socially acceptable within the classroom and school space and within their school-based relationships (Moje et al., 2000). Because of their past experiences in English classes, and in part because of the way we had cast the literacy practices of the classroom in terms of personal experience and fiction reading and writing, stories performed for the whole class spoke only of family vacations or experiences with family pets and were devoid of any mention of ethnicity, race, or culture.

Thus, despite the claims made by expressivist pedagogues that reading and writing workshop approaches build on and allow for diverse experiences and identities, only mainstream genres and texts are typically valued. Not only does a privileging of the mainstream stifle any learning that theoretically should occur as a result of self-expression, but it also teaches students to subvert their identities to those of the dominant culture. This issue is not unique to expressivist pedagogies; social culture defines and delimits any pedagogical approach, but expressivist pedagogies have been expressly offered as a way to meet the needs and engage the interests of *all* students. Such claims fail to take into account the social and cultural norms of schools and society that shape the constructions of literacy practices that teachers and students bring to, negotiate, and reconstruct within classrooms.

Sarah: Your critique of expressivist pedagogies is important for pointing out the limitations of expressivist pedagogy at the same time it highlights the dilemmas that teachers face in introducing strategies that might allow students to explore issues of gender, race, and social class. I am somewhat optimistic that if we implemented some of the practices that have been described to address the needs of diverse learners in general, we could encourage students to explore their multiple identities (and reader subjectivities) at the same time. For example,

supporting students' native language in the classroom is essential for students' cognitive and social development as well as sustaining their cultures and the sense of identity that comes from using one's native language (Gutiérrez, Baquedano-López, & Turner, 1997). Additionally, having students read multicultural literature so that they have opportunities to see people from a variety of cultures represented is appropriate for helping students develop, maintain, or challenge their sense of cultural identity (Au, 1993; Harris, 1992).

Educators can go beyond these possibilities, as well, by suggesting that we share books that specifically address children and youth struggling with who they are. I am not talking about books that valorize the lone, white boy surviving in the forest after a plane crash and coming to learn about his inner strength, like *Hatchet* (Paulsen, 1988), but rather books that highlight the dilemmas that urban youth might face as they come to grips with what it means to be working class, Latino, and male in Los Angeles or middle class, African American, and female in New York City.

I also see the need for teachers to share books with multiracial protagonists who are clearly struggling with or accepting their multiple identities. These books may help stimulate significant discussions about gender, race, and social class in relation to students. It is important for teachers to engage in explicit talk about these issues rather than considering identity as just one of those things that causes crises.

Elizabeth: I agree with your suggestions, Sarah, and particularly with the last point that classroom pedagogy should revolve around the notion of hybrid identity as a positive construction, rather than as a source of crisis. I also agree that teachers should offer students opportunities to explore identity constructions and representations, especially in relation to the various texts they encounter in classrooms. Reading a wide variety of fiction that represents diverse groups of people with different backgrounds and experiences is one way to engage students in explicit discussions about identity, subjectivity, positionality, and power.

Likewise, teachers of content classes can ask students to engage in writing and reading across different discourse communities so that students begin to develop an awareness of the ways that different groups communicate according to the values, beliefs, and practices of the groups. Students can examine how people use language and literacy to identify or distance themselves and to claim authority—through powerful identifications—within particular groups.

Another possible pedagogical approach is to engage students in explicit discussions about how they see themselves and who they want to be. Markus and Nurius

(1986) wrote about encouraging children and youth to articulate goals about who they want to be, their *possible selves*, and then to research the actions and practices necessary to attain their goals (see also Kemmelmeier & Oyserman, 2001). Such work moves beyond expressivist pedagogy by engaging learners in explicit self- and future self-analysis, rather than in mere expression of self.

Missing from the possible selves work, however, is attention to the asymmetrical relations of power that enable some people to attain more than others, regardless of individual achievement (MacLeod, 1987, 1995). Rather than assuming that learning as identity construction, representation, and contestation can be achieved if individuals simply learn to set and follow clear goals, we also need to provide learners with opportunities to examine how their identities (and, thus, their goals) are constructed within and mediated by cultural and structural relations. We need to examine identities as social, spatial, and institutional constructions and work with students to develop tools—especially literacy tools—for challenging oppressive structures and for playing with the power of hybrid identities. We need to build on Hagood's (in press) argument that teachers should engage students in resisting the identities that are often cast for them, to contest the positions that they are offered as children, as youth, and even as adult learners.

Sarah: I could not agree more. And I think it is a good place for us to end—on a note that encourages us to identify classroom practices that demonstrate that identity matters and is worthy of discussion, examination, and reconceptualization. Identity changes and challenges are, in fact, what literacy learning is all about.

REFERENCES

- ANYON, J. (1981). Social class and school knowledge. *Curriculum Inquiry*, 11, 1–42.
- ANYON, J. (1997). *Ghetto schooling: A political economy of urban education reform*. New York: Teachers College Press.
- ANZALDÚA, G. (1999a). *Borderlands = La frontera* (2nd ed.). San Francisco: Aunt Lute Books.
- ANZALDÚA, G. (1999b, October). *Nos/otros: "Us" vs. "them," (des) conocimientos y comprisos*. Presentation at the Conference of Territories and Boundaries: Geographies of Latinidad, University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign.
- ASTOR, R.A., MEYER, H.A., & BEHRE, W.J. (1999). Unowned places and times: Maps and interviews about violence in high schools. *American Educational Research Journal*, 36, 3–42.
- AU, K. (1993). *Literacy instruction in multicultural settings*. Fort Worth, TX: Harcourt Brace.
- BHABHA, H.K. (1994). *The location of culture*. New York: Routledge.
- BOURDIEU, P. (1980). *The logic of practice*. Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press.
- DIAMANT, A. (1998). *The red tent*. New York: Picador.
- ECCLES, J.S., LORD, S., & MIDGLEY, C. (1991). What are we doing to early adolescents? The impact of educational contexts on early adolescents. *American Journal of Education*, 99, 521–542.
- ERICKSON, E.H. (1968). *Identity, youth, and crisis*. New York: Norton.

- FAIGLEY, L., CHERRY, R., JOLLIFFE, D., & SKINNER, A. (1985). *Assessing writers' knowledge and processes of composing*. Norwood, NJ: Ablex.
- FASSIO, K.J. (2000). *The politics of young students' lives and literacy practices*. Unpublished doctoral dissertation, University of Utah, Salt Lake City, UT.
- FECCHO, B. (1998). Crossing boundaries of race in a critical literacy classroom. In D.E. Alvermann, K.A. Hinchman, D.W. Moore, S.F. Phelps, & D.R. Waff (Eds.), *Reconceptualizing the literacies in adolescents' lives* (pp. 75–102). Mahwah, NJ: Erlbaum.
- FERDMAN, B.M. (1990). Literacy and cultural identity. *Harvard Educational Review*, 60, 181–203.
- FINDERS, M. (1996). "Just girls": Literacy and allegiance in junior high school. *Written Communication*, 13, 93–129.
- FOUCAULT, M. (1986). Of other spaces. *Diacritics*, 16, 22–27. (J. Miskowicz, Trans.)
- GEE, J.P. (1996). *Social linguistics and literacies: Ideology in discourses* (2nd ed.). London: Falmer.
- GEE, J.P. (2001). Reading as situated language: A sociocognitive perspective. *Journal of Adolescent & Adult Literacy*, 44, 714–725.
- GUTIÉRREZ, K., BAQUEDANO-LÓPEZ, P., & TURNER, M.G. (1997). Putting language back into language arts: When the radical middle meets the third space. *Language Arts*, 74, 368–378.
- HAGOOD, M. (in press). Critical literacy for whom? *Reading Research and Instruction*.
- HALL, S. (1996). Who needs "identity"? In S. Hall & P. Dugay (Eds.), *Questions of cultural identity* (pp. 1–17). London: Sage.
- HARRIS, V.J. (Ed.). (1992). *Teaching multicultural literature in grades K–8*. Norwood, MA: Christopher-Gordon.
- HEATH, S.B., & MCLAUGHLIN, M.W. (1993). *Identity and inner-city youth*. New York: Teachers College Press.
- KEMMELMEIER, M., & OYSERMAN, D. (2001). Gendered influence of downward social comparisons on current and possible selves. *Journal of Social Issues*, 57, 129–148.
- KNOBEL, M., & LANKSHEAR, C. (2001, January). *Cut, paste, and publish: The production and consumption of zines*. Paper presented at New Literacies and Digital Technologies: A Focus on Adolescent Learners, Athens, GA.
- LANKSHEAR, C., & KNOBEL, M. (2001, January). *Do we have your attention? New literacies, digital technologies, and the education of adolescents*. Paper presented at New Literacies and Digital Technologies: A Focus on Adolescent Learners, Athens, GA.
- LEFEBVRE, H. (1996). *Writings on cities* (E. Kofman & E. Lebas, Trans.). Oxford, UK: Blackwell.
- LENSMIRE, T. (1994). *When the children write: Critical revisions of the writing process*. New York: Teachers College Press.
- LUKE, C., & LUKE, A. (1999). Theorizing interracial families and hybrid identity: An Australian perspective. *Educational Theory*, 49, 223–250.
- MACLEOD, J. (1987). *Ain't no makin' it: Leveled aspirations in a low-income neighborhood*. Boulder, CO: Westview Press.
- MACLEOD, J. (1995). *Ain't no makin' it: Aspirations and attainment in a low-income neighborhood*. Boulder, CO: Westview Press.
- MARKUS, H., & NURIUS, P. (1986). Possible selves. *American Psychologist*, 41, 954–969.
- MCCARTHEY, S.J. (1998). Constructing multiple subjectivities in classroom literacy contexts. *Research in the Teaching of English*, 32, 126–160.
- MCCARTHEY, S.J. (2001). Identity construction in elementary readers and writers. *Reading Research Quarterly*, 36, 122–151.
- MEAD, G.H. (1934). *Mind, self, society*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press.
- MISHLER, E.G. (1999). *Storylines: Craftsartists' narratives of identity*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press.
- MOJE, E.B. (1999, April). *To be part of the story: An analysis of the spaces available to urban adolescents in and out of school*. Paper presented at the American Educational Research Association, Montreal, Quebec, Canada.
- MOJE, E.B. (2000a). *All the stories that we have: Adolescents' insights on literacy and learning in secondary school*. Newark, DE: International Reading Association.
- MOJE, E.B. (2000b). To be part of the story: The literacy practices of gangsta adolescents. *Teachers College Record*, 102, 652–690.
- MOJE, E.B. (2001, April). *Space matters: Examining the intersections of literacies, identities, and physical and social spaces*. Paper presented at the American Educational Research Association, Seattle, WA.
- MOJE, E.B., WILLES, D.J., & FASSIO, K. (2000). Constructing and negotiating literacy in the writer's workshop: Literacy teaching and learning in seventh grade. In E.B. Moje & D.G. O'Brien (Eds.), *Constructions of literacy: Studies of teaching and learning literacy in and out of secondary classrooms* (pp. 193–212). Mahwah, NJ: Erlbaum.
- MOSENTHAL, P.B. (1998). Reframing the problems of adolescence and adolescent literacy: A dilemma-management perspective. In D.E. Alvermann, K.A. Hinchman, D.W. Moore, S.F. Phelps, & D.R. Waff (Eds.), *Reconceptualizing the literacies in adolescents' lives* (pp. 325–352). Mahwah, NJ: Erlbaum.
- NEILSEN, L. (1998). Playing for real: Performative texts and adolescent identities. In D.E. Alvermann, K.A. Hinchman, D.W. Moore, S.F. Phelps, & D.R. Waff (Eds.), *Reconceptualizing the literacies in adolescents' lives* (pp. 3–26). Mahwah, NJ: Erlbaum.
- OBIDAH, J. (1998). Black mystory: Literacy currency in everyday schooling. In D.E. Alvermann, K.A. Hinchman, D.W. Moore, S.F. Phelps, & D.R. Waff (Eds.), *Reconceptualizing the literacies in adolescents' lives* (pp. 51–71). Mahwah, NJ: Erlbaum.
- PAULSEN, G. (1988). *Hatchet*. New York: Penguin.
- SARRIS, G. (1993). Keeping Slug Woman alive: The challenge of reading in a reservation classroom. In J. Boyarin (Ed.), *The ethnography of reading* (pp. 257–271). Berkeley, CA: University of California Press.
- SARUP, M. (1998). *Identity, culture, and the postmodern world*. Athens, GA: University of Georgia.
- SOJA, E.W. (1996). *Thirdspace: Journeys to Los Angeles and other real-and-imagined places*. Malden, MA: Blackwell.
- STREET, B.V. (1994). Cross cultural perspectives on literacy. In J. Maybin (Ed.), *Language and literacy in social practice* (pp. 139–150). Clevedon, England: Open University.
- TATUM, B. (1997). *Why are all the black kids sitting together in the cafeteria?* New York: Basic Books.
- UYS, J. (Director). (1981). *The gods must be crazy* [film]. Hollywood, CA: Columbia/Tristar.
- VYGOTSKY, L.S. (1978). *Mind in society*. (M. Cole, V. John-Steiner, S. Scribner, & U.E. Souberman, Trans. and Eds.). Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press.
- WEILER, J.D. (2000). *Codes and contradictions*. Albany, NY: SUNY Press.
- WEIS, L. (1990). *Working class without work: High school students in a deindustrializing economy*. New York: Routledge.
- WILLIS, A.I. (1995). Reading the world of school literacy: Contextualizing the experience of a young African American male. *Harvard Educational Review*, 65, 30–49.
- YON, D. (2000). *Elusive culture: Schooling, race, and identity in global times*. Albany, NY: State University of New York Press.