"*The Road to Freedom*": How One Salvadoran Youth Takes an Agentive Stance to Narrate the Self Across Time and Space

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Abstract

In this article, we use narrative theory to analyze and discuss how one Salvadoran youth, Thomas, constructed three different yet overlapping narratives, including a digital story, on his family's movement across borders. We describe how each telling of his narratives is situated in time and space, where Thomas reveals his understandings of current social, political and hegemonic forces. Further, we demonstrate how Thomas is taking an agentive stance countering U.S. national anti-immigrant narratives that position Latino immigrants unfavorably. We suggest that narratives and digital technology offer Latino youth a vehicle to become theorists of, and change agents of their own and of others' worldviews.

Introduction

> It was ten to two in the morning and I just couldn't drag myself anymore. Cuts and scrapes embodied my tattered torso, arms and legs. The lack of food and water had taken a serious toll on me. I couldn't climb another barbed wire fence. Helicopters desperately searched for any remnant of us... (Thomas[18])

So writes Thomas in his journal as preparation for the making of his digital story entitled, "*The Road to Freedom*." Thomas, a Salvadoran and Bilingual Spanish/English youth, created his digital story, *"The Road to Freedom,"* as part of the Young Men's Writing Project established in 2009 by the authors of this article. This after-school writing workshop focuses on supporting culturally and linguistically diverse young men, who attend middle schools in a New York suburban community, in writing practices and in the use of new digital technologies for multimodal composition. Thomas' narrative of migration, described in closer detail in this article, evokes a situated interplay among his family's experiences, history and culture, and the larger Salvadoran American community.

Thomas, like other immigrant youth or children of immigrants, whose histories and experiences involve migration, tells narratives that reveal transnational stories. These transnational biographies or testimonial narratives (testimonios) can be entangled with political discourse. More specifically, Latino youth, both from documented and undocumented families, are often positioned unfavorably by U. S. local and national politics. These national anti-immigration sentiments, which position Latino youth and their families, as "outsiders' to the dominant national identity, cannot be separated from the identity construction or narratives of Latino youth (McGinnis, Goodstein-Stolzenberg, & Costa-Saliani, 2007). Thus, in this article we discuss how narratives allow Thomas a space to define himself and his family, and also to make visible the sociopolitical structures that surround him.

More specifically, in this article we describe how Thomas constructed three different yet overlapping narratives on his family's movement across borders. Thomas' main narrative, the digital story "*The Road to Freedom*," is a first person account of an immigrant's border crossing. We view his digital story as a symbolic resource, and share an analysis of how Thomas constructs two more narratives around his digital story to describe its context and purpose. Drawing upon narrative theory (Georgakopoulou, 2006; Ochs & Capps, 1996; Wortham, 2000; 2001), we reveal how each telling of his narratives is situated in time and space, where Thomas

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[18]   Pseudonym has been used for the participant to ensure anonymity.

considers his particular audience with critical understanding of his positioning in the world.

Further, we discuss how these narratives surrounding his family's movement across borders become a civic dialogue; they demonstrate an agentive stance on Thomas' part, because each are situated in local and global contexts revealing his understandings of current social, political, and hegemonic forces. In addition, we raise new pedagogical possibilities and questions about Latino youth as producers of digital texts in the context of their multilayered and multimodal world, where they often encounter complicated and contradictory experiences in today's transnational processes.

Narratives as Socially Situated Activity and Identity Work

We situate this research within the theoretical framework of the New Literacy Studies (NLS). Work within the New Literacy Studies examines the ways literacy and discourse practices, like narratives, are situated in social, cultural, and political contexts, and the ways these practices and contexts play a role in identity construction (Moje & Luke, 2009; Street, 2003). More recently, NLS scholars have recognized the intersection of local and global contexts and the effects of that intersection on literacy practices (Street, 2003). Therefore, we consider how Thomas' narratives, including his digital story, produced within a local setting of an out-of-school-time program are connected to larger sociopolitical influences and to transnational processes.

With a view of narratives as socially situated practice mediated by context, audience, purpose and power, our study is informed by research in the field of sociolinguistics (Georgakopoulou, 2006; Hymes, 1996), linguistics and anthropology (Ochs & Capps, 1996; Wortham, 2000), and Latina/o critical race theory/testimonios (Guitiérrez, 2008; Huber, 2009). In addition, we consider the role of digital storytelling as a multimedia hybrid narrative form, which blends narrative with multimodal composing. Many researchers have discussed both the narrative power of digital storytelling (Davis, 2009; Hull & Nelson, 2005) and the power of the multimodal compositions of digital storytelling (Hull & Nelson, 2005; Vasudevan, Schultz, & Bateman, 2010). Hence, we also draw on the research in these areas to frame our discussion of Thomas's digital text.

Generally, narratives are viewed as stories where experience is shared and the experience itself is "storied" (Mishler, 1986), or as "small stories" occurring in ordinary conversational contexts (Georgakopoulou, 2007). Wortham (2000) conceptualized the self as narrated through mediated interactions with others, while Georgakopoulou (2007) suggests that narrative mediates between self and world so that narratives can be a way of making sense of one's world. Both Wortham (2000) and Georgakopoulou (2007) argue therefore, that narratives can link the micro with the macro, or connect local experience with global events.

In addition, Anh (2011) explains that youth "weave life experiences into coherent stories, or narratives, in ways that reconstruct images of themselves and the groups or communities with which they affiliate" (p. 416). Thus, narratives can be considered a way for how one constructs, deconstructs and reconstructs one's identity in relation to others and within social relations - how one narrates the self across time and space (Anh, 2011; Hall, 1997). Transnational social spaces and experiences shape the narratives and identities of immigrant Latino youth (Sánchez, 2007). As transnational biographies that span time frames and geographical space, Thomas' narratives are inextricably related to wider social and cultural formations (Giroux, 1997), and to the Salvadoran community with which he affiliates (Anh, 2011). Therefore, we specifically examine how Thomas' narratives are socially constructed through the ways he, as a Salvadoran youth, is situated and positioned in relation to others, and how his narratives are in dialogue with, and sometimes in struggle against wider, longer term social and political forces.

Digital Storytelling as Political Commentary

Digital storytelling is considered to be the modern art of oral narrative telling through which people make sense of their world, construct a sense-of-self, and/or narrate the self (Davis, 2009; Hull & Katz, 2006). The affordances of digital storytelling have been noted to include the youth's ability to develop an "authorial stance" or the "practice of taking on literate identities and claiming a presence as an author and narrator of one's own experiences" (Vasudevan et al., 2010, p. 461). Hull and Katz (2006) extend this idea in their discussion of the

potential for authorial agency, or the ways their case study participants "borrowed and repurposed texts, images, photographs, and music in their multimodal compositions" (p. 52). That is, they found that their participants took an agentive stance toward themselves and their social worlds through their multimodal compositions, which did not simply reflect social life, but also commented critically on that life.

The narrative power of digital storytelling is therefore seen in its ability to afford youth a space to mediate their experiences of the world, or to shape their interpretations of life in relation to broader sociopolitical contexts (Davis, 2009; Hull & Nelson, 2005). Thus, there can be a political aspect to digital storytelling where the producer can position himself in order to shape and tell his story (Davis, 2009). It is this relational nature of digital storytelling, the interpretation Thomas makes on the Salvadoran transnational story in relation to the broader sociopolitical issues of U.S. immigration, we consider in this paper. We view digital storytelling as a literate practice that plays a role in Thomas's identifications and positioning - as a means for enacting a self in relation to others (Hull & Katz, 2006). More specifically, we explore how Thomas uses the art of digital storytelling to counter official narratives about Latino immigrants and their families, and analyze Thomas's narratives within a framework that recognizes the relationship between textual production and its wider sociopolitical context.

The Salvadoran Community

The civil war of 1979-1992 in El Salvador produced massive migration of the Salvadoran people, who were fleeing for political and economic reasons (Baker-Cristales, 2004; Coutin, 2003). Many of the Salvadorans who left El Salvador did so without the necessary immigration status to enter the United States legally. These Salvadoran migrants hired smugglers or coyotes to help them move through Guatemala, Mexico, and into the United States (Coutin, 2003). The nature of these transnational movements was not easy, and the effects contributed to the personhood of the Salvadorans. Once settled in the United States, many Salvadorans made the effort to obtain refugee status. In the 1980's, humanitarian movement within the receiving states supported these efforts of the Salvadorans to be viewed as asylum seekers who were fleeing from persecution and violence (Menjívar, 2000). During the 1990's, however, there was a turn in the context of reception, and U.S. immigration laws made it more difficult for Salvadorans to seek refugee status.

Immigration law played, and continues to play, a powerful role in the identities and challenges for many Salvadorans living in the United States (Coutin, 2003). Within many Salvadoran families, like Thomas' family, members have differing immigration status, which often carry crucial invisible characteristics that shape their everyday experiences (Yoshikawa, 2011). In addition, the differences in family legal status remain as "hidden stories" (Yoshikawa, 2011), and can result in conflict and turmoil within families due to both social and legal factors.

Baker-Cristales (2004) indicates that Salvadorans continue to migrate to the United States. With a steady flow of immigration to the Northeast, data from the 2005-2009 U.S. Census Bureau American Community Survey indicate that Salvadorans constitute the largest foreign-born population in the New York suburban community where our work is located, and where Thomas and his family live (Winslow, 2010). Within this suburb, a Salvadoran community has been developed creating a new designation of space with many Salvadoran small businesses lining the main street of the town. Life in the suburbs has not been easy, however. The Salvadorans have experienced issues of poverty, discrimination, segregation, and anti-immigrant sentiments (Garland, 2009). In addition, the schools in this suburban community, are labeled as "high needs," and the experiences of the students in school and their educational outcomes mimic those of their low performing urban counterparts (Ascher & Branch-Smith, 2005).

Because this Salvadoran community and its youth are an under researched population, educators often have access to information that is inaccurate or inadequate at best. What has been written about the community focuses on youth gang involvement (Garland, 2009), or on the nature of undocumented families living in crowded conditions (Berger, 2008). We believe, therefore, our research is a small contribution that offers an alternative view of the lived experiences of one Salvadoran youth and his family, who shares his understandings of complex sociopolitical and global influences on his life in this suburban community of New York.

Context and Methodology

Thomas' case study is part of a larger project conducted in an after-school writing workshop that met in a University-based literacy clinic in a suburb of New York City. The overarching goals for the project, co-directed by the authors of this paper, included developing a writing workshop for youth, specifically male middle school students. The project focused on supporting culturally and linguistically diverse youth in their development of 21st century literacies through participation in a digital storytelling workshop, where the young men would be introduced to multimodal composition.

Participating youth were enrolled in four local middle schools from three different school districts and were recommended to the project by their guidance counselors. Participation in the writing workshop entitled, *Young Men's Writing Project*, was voluntary and a total of twenty African American, Caribbean American, and Latino young men accepted the invitation to attend the program during the summers of 2009, 2010 and 2011. In the program, they used technology and writing for self-expression, as spaces to explore identities and as a way to consider issues they faced as adolescent males of color

The youth in this project lived in communities with a long history of changing demographics due to shifts in local immigration patterns, thus resulting in communities with rich cultural and linguistic diversity. Thomas, the focal student in this paper, attended a middle school that reported the following demographic composition in the 2009-2010 academic year: 39% of the population identified themselves as Hispanic or Latino and 63% as African American. Other socioeconomic indicators of his community revealed that 80% of the students qualified for free lunch, while 12% were eligible for reduced lunch. In terms of language, 13% of the students in his school were English language learners, identified by the school as limited English proficient students.

Since we view narratives as situated within the social and cultural contexts of activity in everyday practices and in relation to audiences, the ethnographic approaches of the New Literacy Studies were adopted. This approach allowed for an investigation of the intersection of the youth's identities with their hybrid narrative and discourse practices across time and space. We combined several data collection methods: in-depth and ongoing interviews, observational data obtained during the project hours, and review of their textual productions. In particular, the use of ongoing interviewing provided information on the youth's production and story choices, and provided more of an understanding of the youth's experiences. Our data analysis was informed by narrative theory (Georgakopoulou, 2007; Wortham, 2001), and by the concept of "design," or how the maker of the digital story combines multimodal forms to express and convey meanings, and to enact and maintain socially situated identities (Hull & Nelson, 2005).

"*The Road to Freedom*": Thomas's Digital Story

Moje and Luke (2009) state, "the access youth have to particular kinds of space shape the texts they consume and produce, which in turn shape the ways they choose to identify or are identified" (p. 431). We believe we had created the Young Men's Writing Project as this kind of space - where the young men could "communicate critically, aesthetically, lovingly, and agentively" (Hull, 2003, p. 230). Therefore, when Thomas, a quiet, serious 13 year-old Salvadoran American male entered the Young Men's Writing Project, he was provided choice in topic and language, and did not hesitate to write what he called an "immigrational story from El Salvador." Thomas' digital story, becomes his main narrative, and serves as an anchor narrative for the telling of the other two narratives.

Thomas titled his immigration story, *"The Road to Freedom,"* which is an approximately two-minute digital story. To explain his topic and his use of a first person narrative for his digital story, Thomas told us, "This is not my story, but my family's story." We consider this a "small story" occurring within the conversational context of the after-school program (Georgakopoulou, 2007). Through this "small story," Thomas positioned himself as knowledgeable of his family's history, of the use of first person as a narrative tool for his digital story, and of the fact that we were a respectful audience to whom he could make such a "hidden story" public. Thus his narrative of how he came to write his digital story begins to show his critical understandings of larger sociopolitical influences on transnational biographies, and reveals his agentive stance as the teller of the story.

Thomas narrates his digital story, *The Road to Freedom,* from a first person account, authoring himself into the narrative, or aligning himself with the immigrant story. Thomas has an artful command of the English language, using expressive language that depicts the feeling, or event he wants to convey. The images are downloaded from Google-images and are mostly literal representations of his words, however through the juxtaposition of the images with his authorial stance, Thomas has orchestrated a personal history of the immigrant experience of border crossing. His complex linking of narrative, imagery, transitions, and music evokes emotion in the viewer similar to a documentary portrayal of a transnational crossing. Through his digital story, Thomas aesthetically constructs a rendering of the transnational processes that are part of his identity as a Salvadoran American youth.

The Road to Freedom
(Thomas' formatting of his story frames for his digital story.)
It was ten to two in the morning and I just couldn't drag myself anymore.
Cuts and scrapes embodied my tattered torso, arms and legs.
I couldn't climb another barbed wire fence.
Helicopters desperately searched for any remnant for us.
The lack of food and water had taken a serious toll on me.
Dog barks could be heard in the distance. They had picked up our scent.
In a frantic moment, I stumbled upon a dead branch and fell, scraping my hands and face.
I knew it was over and as footsteps rapidly approached the dream of a better life faded with the moonlight.
In a futile attempt to avoid being discovered I rolled into a small shrub unfortunately possessing thorns.
Luckily the search man took a different route then the one I had previously taken.
It was pitch black and I couldn't see my bleeding hand in front of my face.
As I arose from the prickled bush, I found myself with a strange object.
And much to my surprise grass under my feet instead of sand.
My eyes had been sore from so many days of force vision through painful sand storms.
And violent winds
I tried to make out the words on the strange object. I approached it and it said, "Welcome to Arizona."
Incredulous, I couldn't believe I had made it.

Thomas carefully crafts every detail of his story of the Salvadoran experience of border crossing. He begins with the light of the moon as his title page; *"The Road to Freedom"* plays on the screen. His descriptions and images of crossing the desert and the heat clearly depict one's movement through, while not named, Mexico. His penultimate image, a sign stating "Welcome to Arizona!" does name his entry point into the U.S. And, his last frame of "incredulous I had made it" brings the story full circle as the shadow of a figure jumps into the air with the sun rising behind him.

Thomas's knowledge of multimodal composition is revealed through his complementary use of image with each line of his text. He engages in critical analysis and selection of images that would not only communicate his message, but would extend the meaning of his words to evoke emotions. Thomas invites the viewer into a multisensory experience, where the dust of the desert and the pain from the thorns pushed against his skin become vivid images of someone's lived-through-experience. This ability to narrate himself into the story adds to the power of his multimodal expression.

It is therefore, not only through the appropriation of images and music through which Thomas reflects on the immigrant's story, but also through his appropriation of the immigrant narrative (Jenkins, Purushotma, Clinton, Weigel, & Robinson, 2006). This appropriation, a "process that involves both analysis and commentary" (Jenkins et al., 2006, p. 33), signifies Thomas's authorial agency (Hull & Katz, 2006), his self-identification with the Salvadoran immigrant's experience, and his self-positioning within the larger Latino immigrant struggle.

Presentation to Families and Community Members

It has been noted that once a digital story is complete, "its 'telling' does not require the participation of the storyteller: it stands as a work of art, a representation apart form the teller, an 'object' for reflection and critique" (Davis, 2009, p. 3). While we accept this as true, and assert that Thomas's digital story can stand alone as an artful representation of an immigrant narrative, Thomas's presentation of his digital story to an audience composed of the youth's families and of community members was critical to the positioning of his digital story, of his message, and of himself.

At the presentation in which we celebrated the digital productions of the project's participants, each youth gave a brief introduction to his story. Prior to the showing of his story *The Road to Freedom,* Thomas stood up and explained to the audience, "I made this story as a way to share the immigrant's story and as a way to honor the immigrant's story" (fieldnotes, July 2009). Through this third narrative in action, Thomas decenters himself and his family from the story of border crossing. As a "testimonio," he tells the events as he sees significant and as "an expression of a collective experience, rather than the individual" (Huber, 2009, p. 644).

We were struck by how in this context, Thomas is conscious of his self-positioning within the sociopolitical climate, and enacts a self of authority, a political commentator on the issue of immigration. Within this space, his digital story becomes a shared narrative of perseverance, strength, and survival as the immigrant searches for freedom. He positions the audience as viewers to the experiences and struggles of the immigrant as a story to be proud of, countering the national narratives that position Latino immigrants unfavorably, and more specifically, that position undocumented Latinos as lawbreakers and fugitives (Rodriguez, 2010).

We view this act as an agentive social critique on the way Latino immigrants are positioned by current national politics. Thomas was able to define and redefine his positioning within the Salvadoran immigrant story, enacting two different stances through his narratives. His dual stances involved one where he authored himself into the story, becoming the central character, and one where he enacted an authorial self, an expert on this immigrant experience. Thus, we consider his digital story a sociopolitical narrative/testimonio (Gutiérrez, 2008), and a political commentary on the Salvadoran immigrant experience.

Conclusion

In this 21st century, where youth's social worlds are influenced by transnational processes, we believe that narratives can be a powerful research methodological tool and a pedagogical tool for understanding the lived experiences of Latino youth and their families. As we have learned from Thomas' experience, narratives are constructed in relation to family transnational histories, to local audiences, and to broader sociopolitical issues. Narratives offer a vehicle for a transformative practice where Latino youth become theorists of and change agents of their own and of others' worldviews.

We also know that in the context of today's world, youth actively transform content and recreate their realities through the use of digital tools. We believe that Thomas's digital hybrid narrative exemplifies the nature of participatory culture, described as not only individuals consuming information but actively participating in the creation of content (Jenkins et al., 2006). In this digital writing workshop, new media literacies afforded Thomas the space to compose a counter-narrative about the Salvadoran immigration experience, thus exercising his agentive stance. He makes use of digital tools to represent, recreate, repurpose, and to retell a transnational experience that is not his own, but related to his family's history and to the history of the larger Salvadoran community. In essence, he authors himself into the shared experiences of the Salvadoran community while at the same time, counters larger anti-immigration sentiments.

Thomas's stance as a multimodal composer helps to ratify the idea that Latino youth living in transnational communities have access to complex sets of everyday knowledge that crosses boundaries, even if they have not themselves experienced that border-crossing. Their narratives are shaped by their understanding of the larger global experience as they live in communities where the flow of people, knowledge, and experiences across borders, both physical and imagined, is a source of knowledge. In the case of Thomas's narrative and political commentary made through his digital story, we believe these transnational funds of knowledge (Sánchez, 2007) provide him the ability to take an authorial stance that is intrinsically shaped by local, national, and global knowledge and understandings.

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