



Association of Mexican American Educators Journal

A peer-reviewed, open access journal

Volume 12 Issue 2

2018

AMAE Invited Special Issue

Linguistic Hegemony and Counterhegemonic Discourse in the Borderlands

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**“Too Much Cream on the Tacos”:
Narrative and Moral Personhood in *Transfronterizo* Experience**

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Abstract

Building on prior analyses of storytelling in migrant and transnational contexts (e.g. Baynham, 2014; De Fina, 2003; Haviland, 2005; Warriner, 2013), this article draws on research with *transfronterizo* (border-crossing) university students in South Texas to explore how transnational speakers use narrative to craft moral arguments in trying times. The article focuses on a single, lengthy narrative from a *transfronteriza* undergraduate named Araís in order to demonstrate how her narrative practice contributes to her “ideological becoming” (Bakhtin, 1981). That is, the analysis shows that the structural, textual, and dialogic features of Araís’s narrative are connected both to her emergent, dialogic understanding of her self and to value projects, or efforts to (re)shape the social world, implied in her narrative (Agha, 2015). The analysis illuminates the ethical affordances of *transfronterizo* narrative—i.e., the opportunities that storytelling offered *transfronterizo* students to evaluate their own and others’ actions in moral terms. Based on this analysis, I suggest implications for our understanding of narrative and moral personhood among *transfronterizo* students and other migrant and transnational subjects.

DOI: <http://dx.doi.org/10.24974/amae.12.2.398>

Introduction: “We’ve All Heard a Lot of Stories”

“He escuchado, como todos hemos escuchado bastantes historias”—“I’ve heard, like we’ve all heard a lot of stories,” remarked Araís, an undergraduate bilingual education major at the University of Texas at Brownsville and a participant in my study of *transfronterizo* (back-and-forth transnational) students in South Texas (cf. de la Piedra & Araujo, 2012). Araís was referring specifically to stories she had heard about Mexico from people with very different relationships to, and degrees of knowledge about, the U.S.-Mexico borderlands. In this article, I analyze one such story in depth—a story that Araís told me herself, but one in which she retold others’ stories and revoiced other narrators, real and imagined.

Elsewhere (O’Connor, 2018), I have discussed this particular story in general terms, as emblematic of *transfronterizo* students’ attempts to grapple with hegemonic representations of the borderlands and as indicative of the Janus-faced (Konrad & Nicol, 2011, p. 86), or two-sided, nature of the border in their everyday lives. On one hand, many of the research participants told stories that countered stereotypes of the borderlands as a poor, out-of-the-way, and violent place, instead emphasizing its potential as a site of cosmopolitan knowing (O’Connor, 2018). In their stories, Araís and other *transfronterizo* students contrasted their multi-angled vision—the ability to view people, places, and events from both sides of the border simultaneously—with the “wrong perceptions” (as another student put it) of people who could only see things from one side or the other. The students’ stories took issue with the “single story” of the border (Adichie, 2009) from the U.S. side, which is to say, its almost exclusive association with drug-related violence, unauthorized migration, and a host of other social ills.

On the other hand, despite students’ desire to show the borderlands (and border dwellers) in a positive light, students asserted the value of “life on both sides” with a good deal of ambivalence. Students discredited others’ stories of social upheaval in Mexico and the borderlands; at the same time, they acknowledged that they had to confront the effects of this upheaval on a daily basis. Thus, while they were skeptical of accounts that, in their view, unfairly depicted the Texas-Tamaulipas borderlands as a war zone, they also acknowledged the real impact of rising narco-violence and intensified border security on their lives. In the process of enacting and representing selves through storytelling (Wortham, 2000), they channeled the voices of other people, such as family members, friends, boyfriends or girlfriends, and journalists, in order to comment on these voices and contrast their own points of view with others’. Araís, for

instance, once parodied the circulation of sensationalized border stories as a game of “telephone,” where a whole chain of tellings and retellings resulted in a grossly distorted view of events: “ ‘Oh, I heard that my grandma’s sister’s brother’s little friend, this happened,’ and—,” she added dismissively, “I’m like, ‘Oh, okay.’ ” However, revoicing others also tended to unsettle the students’ *own* positioning within their narratives, causing them to question their own, inevitably partial perspectives. In effect, criticizing others’ stories as inaccurate or incomplete reminded the participants that their own stories could be criticized on the same grounds.

With these complexities and quandries as background, I explore the following questions in this article: How does Araís *bring about* as well as *bring along* her identity as a *transfronteriza* subject as she confronts “shifts, breaks, and ruptures in continuity” (Baynham, 2014, p. 78) in her narrative practice? To speak of bringing about identity as well as bringing it along is a reminder that narrators do not merely represent selves in a narrated event, or a storyworld. Rather, as Wortham (2000) argues, they also enact selves while narrating the events of a story during a conversation (that is, in the “interactional event”). Crucially, Araís’s acts of positioning in both the narrated and narrating events have a moral dimension. Araís presents herself as a certain kind of person, “situated relative to past, present, and imagined others” (Anderson, 2009, p. 293) in ways that presuppose “rights, duties, and responsibilities” (p. 292) associated with her own and others’ positions.

Furthermore, as I argue elsewhere (O’Connor, forthcoming), Araís’s and other students’ acts of self-positioning in narrative could be construed as ethical arguments for social action—for acting and behaving in certain ways—in their lifeworlds outside the narrative frame. Storytelling, then, was connected to students’ understandings and embodiment of moral personhood, meaning the ways that “they [drew] ideas about personhood ... from surrounding social relations” (Heyman, 2000, p. 638) in light of their ongoing evaluative activity and “in the context of their everyday struggles to cope with ... hopes, joys, regrets, losses, suffering, and pain” (Zigon & Throop, 2014, p. 4).

This article, then, takes up the question of what one *transfronteriza*’s discourse strategies contribute to her “ideological becoming” (Bakhtin, 1981), her emergent, dialogic understanding of her self, and the value projects, or efforts to (re)shape the social world, implied in her narrative (Agha, 2015). In other words, the article illuminates the ethical affordances of *transfronterizo* narrative, or the opportunities that storytelling offered students like Araís to “scrutinize and

elaborate [upon]" their interactions with other border-dwellers and outsiders (Keane, 2014, p. 11). Based on this analysis, I suggest implications for our understanding of narrative and moral personhood among *transfronterizo* students and other migrant and transnational subjects. Before moving to the analysis of Araís's narrative, I review literature on narrative analysis in migrant and transnational contexts.

Narrative Analysis in Migrant and Transnational Contexts

Narrative is a discourse genre in which people transform personal experience in and through storytelling (Labov & Waletzky, 1997/1967) as they organize events according to temporal or logical order (Ochs & Capps, 2001, p. 2). The temporal dimension has often been seen as central to narrative (e.g., Labov, 1972), in that canonical narratives involve a recounting of temporally ordered events from the past. Recently, however, it has been argued that space may play just as important a role as time, if not a more important one, in organizing accounts of migration and displacement, in which movement between spaces is a primary concern (De Fina, 2003, pp. 370-371).

Early treatments of conversational narrative focused on structural similarities across narrative accounts. Labov and Waletzky (1997/1967) famously observed that stories often begin with background information (orientation), followed by complicating action (the temporally and/or logically ordered sequence of events) and some sort of resolution. Such "classical" narratives can be bookended by a short abstract at the beginning and coda at the end; importantly, narrators also provide evaluation throughout (i.e., perspective or commentary on the narrated event and characters). Structural analysis remains a useful starting point for scholars of narrative. However, researchers have recently pointed out that the canonical structure identified by Labov and Waletzky is not ubiquitous cross-culturally and that not all narratives fit this mold—for example, people often tell "small stories," or very brief narratives that lack most of the elements listed above (Georgakopoulou, 2007). Other scholars (Linde, 1993) differentiate between *stories*, narratives that are organized to make a single point, and *chronicles*, or retellings that may not have an overall message.

Narrative researchers have established that telling stories is a deeply moral activity, whether or not narrators conceive of their narratives in these terms. Although stories typically report events in a descriptive way, it is generally understood that they also have to be told for a

reason. In that sense, they impose a moral obligation on the teller. The audience expects that, in reporting events, the narrator is also making a point, and the audience is entitled to hold the narrator accountable for the “tellability” of the story—i.e., why it is worth telling at all (Ochs & Capps, 2001, p. 33). Narrative also reveals the extent to which human beings are “inevitably evaluative creatures” (Keane, 2015, p. 4). Evaluation pervades narrative accounts and, in addition to communicating the point of the story (Labov, 1972), works to position the narrator vis-à-vis interlocutors as well as characters in the narrated event. For example, narrators may attempt to “solicit [listeners’] sympathies for the teller’s moral stance” (Ochs & Shohet, 2006, p. 44). Just *how* they do this, however, is another matter. As Wortham (2000) observes, “participants and analysts cannot read the meaning of a cue right off the linguistic or paralinguistic form itself” (p. 168). Rather, they must infer which aspects of the context are being made relevant—i.e., evaluated—through specific cues in the story.

People in migrant and transnational contexts often deal with a loss of stability and predictability, which might contribute to a desire to impose order through narrative. As Baynham and De Fina (2016) point out, when the old stories no longer apply, people need new kinds of stories to make sense of what is becoming of them—and *who* they are becoming—as they refashion their lives. As people cross national, cultural, and linguistic borders, they also tend to find themselves interacting with unfamiliar people in unfamiliar situations. These intercultural encounters provide migrant and transnational storytellers with rich material for reflecting on and reshaping elements of their own identities (Baynham, 2014). Narratives of mobility and displacement can be analyzed as situated practices, in which narrators’ presentation of self is tied up in their representation of time and space in the storyworld (De Fina, 2003; see also Schiffrin, 2009). In such narratives, shifting frames of spatial and temporal reference come to index and even presuppose aspects of migrant personhood—see, for example, Haviland’s (2005) analysis of how shifting referents for the spatial deictics *here* and *there* index a Zinacantec man’s ambivalence about belonging in both the United States and his Mexican community of origin. Warriner (2013) documents the interconnectedness of space and time in the narratives of a Bosnian refugee woman in the United States, in which temporal elasticity becomes a resource for making sense of spatial displacement. In other cases, displaced narrators draw on spatial and geographical resources in their narrative self-presentation, anchoring storytelling in features of the local migratory landscape (i Dalmau, 2018). Recent work on transnational narratives of Mexican

migration to the U.S. (e.g., Chávez, 2015; Dick, 2010; Relaño Pastor, 2014) has continued to explore the moral stances narrators enact as they navigate shifting frames of reference.

Research Site, Participants, Data Collection, and Researcher Positionality

The data I analyze in this article are drawn from a participatory qualitative study of cross-border mobility among *transfronterizo* university students, both graduate and undergraduate, at the University of Texas at Brownsville on the Texas-Tamaulipas border, where I was a new assistant professor in the Department of Language, Literacy, and Intercultural Studies at the time of data collection.¹ The study was designed and implemented in collaboration with two undergraduate *transfronteriza* co-researchers, Valeria de León and Grecia García, who assisted in writing a small internal grant, developing survey questions and the interview protocol, drafting consent documents and translating them into Spanish, and helping to recruit participants. Many of the participants were my former students, with whom I had spoken on various occasions, inside and outside the classroom, about their experiences pursuing postsecondary education while navigating regular border crossings; others were trusted members of my students' peer networks or friends of the undergraduate researchers. Ultimately, we collected background data on 38 students' cross-border mobility through an online survey and conducted in-depth face-to-face interviews with a smaller group of 16 focal participants, representing twelve different areas of study (majors). However, I approached formal data collection in the context of informal conversations and longer-term relationship building with students, which often started in the classroom but moved beyond it (cf. Ingold, 2014, p. 385).²

At the time of the study, Araís was a twenty-two year old bilingual education major at the University of Texas at Brownsville (now the University of Texas Rio Grande Valley). We met when she was a student in one of my teacher preparation courses, "The Intercultural Context of Schooling," and I quickly came to value her lively, inquisitive, and lighthearted presence in the

¹ The undergraduate researchers and I decided that it was important to use the real names of the university (which is now part of the University of Texas Rio Grande Valley) and the cities in question, owing to the social, cultural, economic, and political diversity in different areas of the U.S.-Mexico borderlands and the distinctive characteristics of the Brownsville/Matamoros area. We received permission from UTB's Institutional Review Board to identify the university in published research from the study. The consent documents stated that the university's real name would be used and that participants might be more identifiable as a result. All names of participants are pseudonyms, selected by the participants. The undergraduate researchers' real names appear in the article.

² For purposes of space, I refer interested readers to the lengthier discussion of data collection and analysis procedures in O'Connor (2018).

classroom. Unlike many of my students in South Texas, who had internalized the well-documented local stigma toward language mixing (see, e.g., Anzaldúa, 1987) or vocally disapproved of such practices, Araís was a proud, unabashed user of TexMex, the regional hybrid variety, for academic as well as nonacademic purposes. She was born in the United States “by accident,” as she put it, while her family was returning from a trip, and spent the first year of her life in Matamoros before her family moved to Ciudad Juárez for her father’s work as a supervisor in the *maquiladora* (manufacturing) industry. When Araís was in fourth grade, the family returned to Matamoros, and an aunt who was living in Brownsville convinced Araís’s parents to allow her to live with her aunt and “continue studying over here [in the U.S.] because of the opportunities,” in Araís’s words. While attending school in Brownsville, she would spend weekends in Matamoros with her parents. Eventually, her parents also moved to the U.S., where her mother obtained permanent resident status while her father returned to Matamoros, following her parents’ separation.

Like many students in the study, Araís commented extensively on how the borderlands had changed during her lifetime, and, like many students, she identified two major contributing factors. For one, she remarked, “*Se pusieron más estrictos, y poniéndose más estrictos, pues afectó*”/[Authorities in the U.S.] got stricter, and since they got stricter, it affected [us].’ In other words, the increasing militarization of the border on the U.S. side—which began in the late 1970s, intensified in the mid-1990s with the “prevention through deterrence” strategy, and gained momentum after the attacks of September 11, 2001 (Andreas, 2009; Nevins, 2010, *inter alia*)—had a profound effect on Araís and her family’s movement across the border. As she said, “*La migración está más difícil, las cosas que han pasado, entonces cualquier cosita castigan*” [‘Migration is harder, (because of) all the things that have happened, so they punish every little thing’], adding that one of her uncles had recently been banned from traveling to the U.S. for ten years because of an unauthorized crossing.

In addition to border militarization on the U.S. side, Araís and other students pointed to the unprecedented surge in narco-violence in Northern Mexico from around 2007-2013 as the other major contributor to changes in family and academic life in the borderlands. Very briefly, an exceedingly violent territorial conflict between two paramilitarized international criminal organizations, the Zetas and the Gulf Cartel, coupled with the Mexican government’s military response, disrupted everyday life profoundly for many border dwellers (Correa-Cabrera, 2013,

2014; Treviño & Genna, 2017). When I moved to Brownsville in 2012, I was warned in no uncertain terms (by friends, colleagues, and students) not to travel to Matamoros, regaled with stories of *balaceras* (shootouts) and blockades, and shown, as evidence of the hopelessness of the situation, examples of businesses that had relocated across the border to Texas. I was struck by people's discourse about Mexico and the border in light of my own prior experience: About ten years before, I had lived in another part of the Rio Grande Valley, two hours upriver, at a time when it was entirely unremarkable to divide one's life between both countries. At that time, Mexico was not seen as a dangerous place, generally speaking, and it was an accepted part of life to drive or walk across the river to go shopping, attend *quinceañeras* [girls' 15th birthday parties] or wedding receptions, go out to eat, visit the doctor's office or pharmacy, or, for native Valley-dwellers, spend time with family. The contrast between my Brownsville students' border stories and the stories I was accustomed to was part of the impetus for the wider study of cross-border mobility at UTB.

The situation affected different *transfronterizo* students at UTB differently. Some students who had previously gone to school in Mexico decided to move to the U.S. to attend college, sometimes bringing family members along; others continued living in Matamoros, but changed their plans in order to attend UTB (i.e., instead of a university in Mexico), crossing the border almost daily. Other students, like Araís, who had already been living and attending school in the U.S., started crossing to Mexico less frequently because of the violence, at the same time that their family members were less able to cross to the U.S. because of changes in border security. In general, the situation resulted in *transfronterizo* students' spending more time in the U.S. and reorganizing their social networks accordingly, whether they were crossing more frequently, in the case of students living in Mexico, or less frequently, in the case of students living in the U.S. (O'Connor, 2018).

Time, Space, and Emergent Moral Personhood in *Transfronterizo* Narrative

In keeping with previous research on migrant and transnational narrative, the following analysis explores how "personal identity sits at the crux of time and space" (Schiffrin, 2009, p. 423; see also Warriner, 2013), such that enactments of personhood are intertwined with spatial and temporal constructions in narrative discourse (cf. De Fina, 2003). Thus, notable textual features of Araís's narrative (e.g., patterns of English/Spanish code-switching) are analyzed in the

context of the “time/space coordinates” that anchor her descriptions within the narrated event and form the basis for her creative referential practice (Schiffrin, 2009, p. 423). Examining how Araís takes up different footings, in navigating shifting spatial and temporal frames of reference (Rumsey, 2000), reveals her struggle to find her own voice amidst conflicting and contradictory cultural expectations.

I use a wide variety of tools to examine how stories are told—including what events are recounted, how narrative affords particular identity performances, and the consequences of such “tellings” for the narrators’ sense of belonging. Following Labov and Waletzky’s (1967) seminal example, I attend to narrative structure, identifying the various sections of the story and organizing my discussion accordingly. I also consider the function of textual features, such as general extenders and vague utterances, within specific sections of the narrative. Per Wortham and Reyes (2015), I focus on three categories of indexicals: spatial and person deictics (words like ‘there’ and ‘I’, whose referents shift according to the context), reported speech (quoting other speakers or oneself), and evaluative indexicals (speech that directly evaluates or comments upon the people and events in the narrative). As a preliminary step in the analysis, I constructed a deictic map of the entire narrative (Wortham, 1996), which revealed patterns of deictic use deserving of closer attention (see “The ‘I’ of borderlands discourse,” below). Among other things, focusing on indexicals helped to clarify how the representational text of the narrative (i.e., the speaker’s description of the storyworld) was related to the interactional text of the narrative, or the identities and positionings that she enacted in the storytelling event (Wortham, 2000).

Framing the Story: Illustration and Argumentation

Jefferson (1978) observed that, very often, stories in conversation are not produced as “sudden remembering[s]” but as “continuous with prior talk” (p. 223)—that is, narratives are prompted by elements of ongoing talk, and in introducing them, narrators often “index the element of the prior conversation that triggered the story” (Wortham, 2000, p. 170). Stories are frequently “sequentially implicative”: the story’s telling presupposes its appropriateness in the context of ongoing talk. As Hymes (1975) noted, the meaning of stories as emergent, dialogic phenomena also hinges on their performativity, in the sense of their addressivity—their “quality of being directed to someone” (Bakhtin, 1986, p. 95)—and the ways that narrators’ stances vis-à-vis the audience may shift during the telling.

This is the case with Araís's story, which came up during a longer discussion about people's perceptions of Matamoros. Araís complicated the commonplace observation (among *transfronterizo* students) that people who regularly crossed the border perceived life in Matamoros differently than those who only spent time in the U.S., commenting that there were varying perspectives *within* those two groups (i.e., *transfronterizos* and "one-sided" border dwellers). She contrasted people living full-time in Matamoros who, in her view, were "already used to it" (i.e., the risk of danger and violence) with "people who [went] every weekend" but only spent time with family members, people who visited weekly and went elsewhere in the city, and people who crossed less frequently (like Araís) or not at all. Each of these groups, said Araís, had a different experience of life in Matamoros and a different degree of knowledge: "*¡Ay! Pues they have the whole picture, but they only saw a little picture, they have never been there, you know*"—where each 'they' referred to a different group. Shortly afterwards, she prefaced the story as follows:

- 1 Like- **for example**, my cousins were-
2 'cause my cousins were laughing for- because um.

"For example" (1), which precedes the abstract ("My cousins were laughing"), introduces and frames Araís's story as an *illustrative* narrative, one that "describe[s] a particular instance of a more general experience" (Schiffrin, 2009, p. 425). The story about her cousins laughing, in other words, is meant to illustrate the general phenomenon that she and I had been discussing: the gap in perceptions and experience among people who spend different amounts of time in Mexico. Araís explicitly indexes the illustrative nature of the narrative twice more—once, slightly over a minute later, in the coda to her first telling of the story about her cousins:

35 A: You know, like **that's what I mean**.

36 BO'C: That's interesting.

and again, another minute later, in the coda to her second, highly performative, partial retelling of the cousin story:

56 A: And **that’s what I mean**. It’s just different.

57 BO’C: That’s so funny.

These utterances index the story’s embeddedness in my ongoing conversation with Araís and its proposed usefulness to illustrate a point. As such, they also constitute an invitation to respond, as is evident in lines 36 and 57, where I comply by ratifying the tellability of Araís’s narrative—i.e., affirming that it is interesting, funny, and, by implication, relevant to surrounding talk.

However, Araís’s story is also a case of *argumentation* intersecting with narrative (Schiffrin, 2009, p. 422): She is not merely offering up an example, but using this example as evidence to support her position, not just within the storytelling event but in the larger context of our conversation about cross-border mobility. From the very beginning of the narrative, then, its illustrative and argumentative aspects demand close attention to the interactional text, or the ways in which Araís’s telling is responsive to me, her interlocutor. Furthermore, as we will see, Araís’s use of constructed dialogue to voice characters in the storyworld plays a crucial role in connecting the narrated and narrating events and making her moral stance-taking possible (Hill & Zepeda, 1993).

Vagueness in Orientation Devices: Connecting the Storyworld to the Interactional World

In telling the story, Araís presents herself as a certain kind of person as she seeks to bring me around to the point she is making, using her story for support. This becomes clearer in the orientation section of the narrative, following the abstract, where Araís provides some of the context needed to make sense of the (not-yet-told) story about her cousins’ laughter:

3 You know that- that little girl that when- that got like
4 the highest um test score on-
5 **I don’t know on what test. I can’t remember.**
6 It was an elementary girl.
7 She got like a really high grade and-

8 BO'C: *¿Aquí en Brownsville?*
 [Here in Brownsville?]

9 A: *No no no. En Matamoros.*
 [No no no. In Matamoros.]

10 BO'C: *En Matamoros.*
 [In Matamoros.]

The orientation devices Araís uses are connected to our relative positioning in the narrating event and to relevant aspects of my identity—an outsider to the borderlands, but one who has been living there for awhile and might be expected to have some knowledge about the context. She begins this section of the narrative by asking, “You know that ... little girl” (3), appealing to my knowledge (or ignorance) of the topic. There are superficial similarities to features of orientation that, De Fina (2003) argues, are typical of unauthorized border-crossers’ narratives: vagueness (5) and collaborative negotiation of orientation details (8-10). Her story is riddled with general extenders (i.e., expressions “appended to ... grammatically complete utterances,” such as *blah blah blah, this and that, and I don’t know what*, etc.; Levey, 2012, p. 258) and disavowals of epistemic access (i.e., professions of ignorance about details of the story, such as *I don’t know, I can’t remember*, etc.; Stivers, Mondada, & Steensig, 2011). These features serve to anchor Araís’s story (and the various stories within it) in the ongoing context of our conversation. As an involvement strategy (Tannen, 1989) targeted at me, her interlocutor, they imply that it is not necessarily the *details* of the story that are important, but the story’s overall relevance to the point Araís is making. Her vagueness (“I don’t know on what test. I can’t remember”; 5) does not point to the speaker’s disorientation because of geographical displacement, as in De Fina (2003), but fits a broader pattern in which Araís uses vagueness as a discourse strategy to index the story’s illustrative nature.

The exchange in lines 8-10 suggests that further orientation is required, since I do not even know if the little girl in question was from Brownsville or Matamoros. Araís then continues with the orientation, in the form of another small story, introducing the event that prompted her

cousins’ laughter: a news story about the little math genius, which Araís and her cousins had read and considered to be hysterically overblown in its depiction of Matamoros.³

- 11 And then, she she was like recognized
12 **and blah blah blah and this and that.**
13 And then, when the report came out from the-
14 Somebody, I don’t know if it was Yahoo News or
15 an actual um newspaper or a magazine.
16 They did a report on her.
17 And then one of the things that they said is like
18 “Oh, María **blah blah blah blah**”
19 I don’t know her name but it was um,
20 “Ex- Succeeded in front- in the middle of of um
21 cartel wars” **and I don’t know what.**

bold = general extenders; dotted underline = disavowals of knowledge

Again, Araís uses strategies to downplay the importance of details, claiming her own ignorance as to the source of the backstory and the girl’s name. In the process, she casts a Bakhtinian sideward glance (1984, pp. 196-7) at untrustworthy Internet discourse, commenting

³ The article that Araís and her cousins read appeared on a website called *Latin Times*, which is owned by the Newsweek Media Group and describes itself as “an online publication that strives to serve the needs of the ever growing and changing Latin audience.” The article, by Oscar López (2013), was entitled “*Wired Magazine Names 12-Year-Old Mexican Paloma Noyola Bueno the Next Steve Jobs*” and, to add yet another layer of mediation, summarized the original *Wired* story about Paloma Noyola, published just three days before and written by Joshua Davis (2013). The article that directly inspired the incredulous reaction from Araís and her cousins, then, was in fact a Latino-oriented repackaging of content from *Wired* that was deemed relevant to an online Latino audience. To give a flavor of López’s article, here is the description of Paloma and her milieu from the first paragraph:

The 12-year-old lives in Matamoros, Tamaulipas in Mexico’s far north. Her tiny school sits next to a trash dump across from the U.S. border: the Bureau of Diplomatic Security reports that drug related violence is of high concern in the area with people being “victims of armed robberies, sexual assaults, auto thefts, murder, and kidnappings.” Despite all this, the José Urbina López School has captured the attention of the nation thanks to the remarkable, ground-breaking teaching methodology of Paloma’s teacher Sergio Juarez Correa.

Davis described the school this way in the first paragraph of the *Wired* article:

The school serves residents of Matamoros, a dusty, sunbaked city of 489,000 that is a flash point in the war on drugs. There are regular shoot-outs, and it’s not uncommon for locals to find bodies scattered in the street in the morning. To get to the school, students walk along a white dirt road that parallels a fetid canal.

“I don’t know if it was Yahoo News or/an actual ... newspaper” (lines 14-15). Araís’s lack of concern for the specifics of the backstory helps to establish her own authority as a narrator, placing her firsthand knowledge and experience in stark contrast with what other people have said from afar (whether or not their utterances were classified as “actual news”). The phrase “cartel wars” serves as the pivot for Araís’s argumentative work in this section and beyond, in that it describes an undeniable aspect of *transfronterizo* experience while also standing in for the “single story” Araís has to confront in telling her own.

Throughout this section, Araís continues to append general extenders to her utterances, commenting that the girl was “recognized **and blah blah blah and this and that**” and that the story had described her as succeeding “‘in the middle of *cartel* wars’ **and I don’t know what**” (21). General extenders are often multifunctional, simultaneously serving “referential, textual, and interpersonal functions” (Levey, 2012, p. 258). Here, the discourse function of “blah blah blah” and similar constructions seems to be set-marking (Dines, 1980), in the sense that “recognition” was part of a set of laudatory things that had happened to the girl, and that the story’s mention of “cartel wars” was part of a set of troublesome references to Matamoros. The interpersonal function of these discourse strategies, however, is arguably more crucial to the functioning of the narrative. The information in the orientation section prepares me, the interviewer, to understand what comes next in the story about Araís and her cousins. At the same time, Araís’s purposefully vague presentation of this information implies that it is not this *particular* story that is of interest; rather, the point is that the backstory illustrates a more general case of the *kinds* of things that people say about Matamoros and Mexico, as well as the struggles and failure they expect of students in the borderlands—like the little math genius and Araís herself—who have to pursue schooling in such circumstances.

It is worth pausing to consider the spatiotemporal dimensions of the occasioned telling of this story. At an earlier point in time, Araís had crossed the border to see her cousins in Matamoros, where they laughed at a story about a girl in Matamoros, written by someone at a U.S.-based publication. At the time of the storytelling event, by contrast, Araís and I were in Brownsville, where we both lived. Crossing a border is an opportunity for people to reassess their relationships with other people and places (Rumford, 2014) and intercultural encounters provide especially rich opportunities for such reassessment (Baynham, 2014). In *representing* an intercultural encounter with her cousins—whose feelings about life in Matamoros, it turns out,

differed from Araís’s own—in the context of other intercultural encounters (with the imagined author and readers of the news story), Araís was also *enacting* an intercultural encounter with me. The argumentative nature of her narrative, as indexed by her orientation devices, was directed toward a trusted teacher with limited local knowledge, but one who was still inarguably an outsider in ethnoracial, linguistic, and geographical terms. Likewise, her moral positioning within the narrative—accomplished, in part, by revoicing others (Hill & Zepeda, 1993)—was connected to a struggle to think well of herself (Zigon & Throop, 2014, p. 4) in a difficult scenario where there was much at stake and few, if any, morally defensible courses of action. Araís’s self-positioning could also be seen as a form of face-work, as she sought to present herself and her actions in a positive light for me, her interlocutor.

Habitus and Ambivalence in Intercultural Encounters: The First Telling of the Cousin Story

Narratives of intercultural encounters in Texas-Tamaulipas sometimes owed their tellability to the time and space of their telling. They also exposed profound differences in habitus that could be taken up and dealt with in narrative. Habitus refers to people’s embodied dispositions to relate to the world in particular ways, built up through long-term processes of socialization (Bourdieu, 1991, p. 51). That is, students often commented on encounters with other people whose habitus differed noticeably from their own—not so much because of what people *said* about the border or Mexico, but because of how they *felt* about it (or how the students perceived them to feel about it). Students sometimes addressed differences in habitus in the midst of storytelling events: “Maybe it’s bad that we’ve gotten used to seeing things,” mused a student named Alex (July 8, 2014)—we meaning “people in Matamoros,” who were habituated to the situation there (like Alex and his family) as opposed to those who, being removed from Mexico, feared it to an irrational degree, according to Alex. Similarly, a student named Cristina, who spent most of her time in the U.S. and crossed only occasionally, recalled telling her Mexican boyfriend and his friends how someone else might respond very differently to spending time in Matamoros:

Like you may have gotten used to it, but especially for someone who doesn't live over there, and goes, it's really scary. And you need to understand that. (July 9, 2014)

Cristina, who did not feel particularly safe in Mexico, and Alex, who mocked others' fears, were two sides of the same coin, to some degree. Neither student could stand completely outside his or her relationship to Mexico; because they had differently embodied histories of life in the borderlands, each was disposed to feel differently about *transfronterizo* student life.

Araís also used narrative as an opportunity to reflect on differences in perception in light of differences in habitus, or the ways people were disposed to feel about life on both sides. In the section of the narrative that follows, which constitutes the complicating action and resolution (of the first telling), Araís uses reported speech to evaluate other people's words and actions, implicitly and explicitly. That is, her voicing of characters in the story amounts to a form of moral stancetaking, as it allows her to reframe other people's speech and behavior in light of her own moral commitments—specifically, an aversion to sensationalistic discourse about Mexico, but one that was coupled with a reluctance to minimize or diminish the effects of violence on everyday life there. This creates a back-and-forth effect in the narrative structure, akin to Araís's own *transfronteriza* back-and-forthness, which has afforded her the opportunity to develop an ambivalent stance. Throughout this section, she brings herself in and out of alignment with her cousins and the imagined author/audience of the news article, as these voices vie for dominance in the narrative.

- 22 And then me and my cousins were reading, like,
 23 “Oh my God this is not even true” this and that.
- 24 But as I thought about it, I'm like,
 25 “Pues it's kind of true but you just don't see it
 26 'cause you're used to it.”
- 27 I mean, it's not as bad but it's- but they're-
 28 And then, I see it when I-

Initially, Araís quoted herself and her cousins as negatively evaluating the truth value of the news story with comments such as: “ ‘Oh my God this is not even true’ this and that.” (Also note the continuing reliance on general extenders throughout this section). Just afterwards, however, she quoted her own internal dialogue (24-26) during the narrated event—i.e., what was running through her head during the interaction with her cousins—to suggest that she did not join uncritically in their laughter: “But as I thought about it, I’m like, ‘Pues it’s kind of true but you [her cousins] just don’t see it ‘cause you’re used to it’ ”. In line 27, Araís pivots again, using “I mean” to reposition herself and distance herself from the content of her previous (internal, reported) utterance: “I mean, it’s not as bad.” In line 28, she appears once more to reconsider (“And then, I see *it*,” possibly referring to the effects of violence); then, in line 29, she brings herself back into closer alignment with her cousins, dismissing the news story but in slightly different terms: “Ay, but it’s not that dramatic.” That is, rather than taking a stance on the truth value of the story by calling it “not even true,” as they did initially, Araís and her cousins criticized the “dramatic” or sensational tone of the story.

The ‘I’ of Borderlands Discourse in Araís’s Narrative

Araís’s narrative is an argumentative one, in that it provides support and evidence for her position, but it is also an argument with herself, inasmuch as it gives rise to different voices vying to constitute an internally persuasive discourse for Araís (Bakhtin, 1984). Thus far, the voices involved have been Araís and her cousins (in the past), Araís’s interior voice (in the past), and Araís in the present—the narrator of the story, evaluating what happened in the narrated event. In lines 30-33, however, Araís introduces a new voice in the context of a new small story, nested within the story about her cousins. Unlike the preceding narrated event, the new narrative does not report and evaluate past experience, but describes a hypothetical event: Araís imagines how a distant, unspecified audience would receive and respond to the news article. This is keyed to the interactional text of the larger narrative: in line 30, she prefaces the small story with “But, I mean, **when you read it**,” meaning either me (her interlocutor) or a generic ‘you’; either way, I am included among the non-*transfronterizos* whose reaction to the news story is of particular concern to Araís. This framing also points to the illustrative nature of her story: The problem is

not necessarily with what a certain media outlet says about Matamoros/Mexico, but with how it will be (mis)understood elsewhere, among people without firsthand knowledge of the borderlands.

In what follows, the back-and-forthness of the narrative structure—the characters' alternating perspectives on the news story, reflected in the stanza breaks—has a parallel in Araís's referential practice, or the interplay of different 'I's and 'we's in the voices of the characters.

- 30 But, I mean, when you read it and when someone-
 31 Like, for example, when somebody reads it over there
 32 and like, “Oh my gosh, I'm never gonna go over there.
 33 Look at this little girl **blah blah blah**.”
- 34 And we're like, “Ay, whatever. It's not even that bad.”
 35 You know, like that's what I mean. It's like-

underline = person deictics; double underline = spatial deictics; **bold** = general extenders

In her revoicing of others throughout her narrative, and especially in this section, Araís exploits the creative possibilities of person deixis (i.e., pronominal reference) to do the moral work of evaluating others' speech and behavior and positioning herself in contrast. Some background on the nature of pronouns is in order: Benveniste (1971) famously observed that most nouns refer to relatively fixed objects or notions, but pronouns like “I” and “you” do not have any fixed meaning outside of a particular interaction or text, depending entirely on the reality created in discourse (or interaction) for whatever meaning they obtain. The general phenomenon is known as *deixis*, and such expressions are called *deictics*, or sometimes *shifters* (Silverstein, 1976), since their meaning shifts with the context, and contextual information is needed to decode them. (The same is true of spatial deictics like *here* and *there* and temporal deictics like *now*, *later*, and *years ago*).

In an influential follow-up to Benveniste's work, Urban (1989) observed that, much of the time, when speakers say “I,” they are *not*, in fact, referring to themselves as the person who is currently speaking. For example, when Araís declaims, “Oh my gosh, I'm never gonna go over

there” (32), ‘I’ does not index Araís herself; rather, it indexes the self of the (imagined) person she is quoting. In order for this to work, argued Urban (1989), the listener has to be able to regard the ‘I’ in question as basically metaphorical. As the interlocutor, I have to imagine that I am looking at the hypothetical person in the narrated event—the one who says, “Oh my gosh, I’m never gonna go over there”—from that person’s own point of view. In this case, the hypothetical reader of the news story serves as a foil for Araís’s own construction of moral personhood, allowing her to contrast her own clear-eyed view of Matamoros, based on direct experience, with a pearl-clutching horror inspired by clickbait headlines.⁴

In considering how this functions in the context of Araís’s narrative, and why it matters, there are two main points to take into account. The first is that inhabiting other ‘I’s—voicing other speakers—opens up a dialogue “within the individual over everyday ‘I’ and the ‘I’ of discourse” (Urban, 1989, p. 50). In effect, bringing these other voices into her narrative forces Araís to contend with them. The second point is that narrators “move in and out of footings *strategically*” as they introduce and shuffle these different frames of reference, taking advantage of the tension between “normal,” direct-indexical uses of ‘I’ and ‘you’ and creative, anaphoric uses of these pronouns and other shifters (Rumsey, 2000, p. 107; my italics). The outcome is nothing less than “a kind of socialization of the self, as it is brought into a culture-specific structure” (Urban, 1989, p. 29). In Araís’s deft toggling between the different ‘I’s, ‘you’s, and ‘we’s that populate her story, we get a sense of how her selfhood emerges from her grappling with cultural dilemmas and expectations. She presents herself as a savvy, clear-eyed *transfronteriza*, unfazed by mass-mediated hyperbole about the borderlands, equally disinclined to resign herself to the status quo in Mexico, and fully aware of the effects of violence *and* stories about violence (from both sides) on border-dwellers.

To return to the line-by-line analysis: the discursive contrast in person deixis (between different kinds of ‘I’ and ‘we’) is matched with an analogous contrast in spatial deixis, as Araís places her everyday self and assumed selves in different imagined spaces (Urban, 1989, p. 49). This underscores others’ findings that constructions of personhood are intimately tied to representations of time and space in narrative (De Fina, 2003; Schiffrin, 2009; Warriner, 2013). In lines 31 and 32, for example, Araís embeds spatial information in the quoting clause: “When

⁴ Thanks to Maisa Taha for suggesting the memorable pearl-clutching image and also for alerting me to Chimamanda Adichie’s discussion of “the danger of a single story.”

somebody reads it over there”—meaning, wherever the article is being read, presumably somewhere far from Brownsville/Matamoros. She then juxtaposes this “over there” with the “over there” in the imagined reader’s response to the article: “Oh my gosh, I’m never gonna go over there,” referring to Matamoros, the setting for both the article and Araís’s own story, but from the distal perspective of the imagined reader. The poetic pairing of these spatial deictics underscores the incommensurability of the speakers’ viewpoints, but it also dramatizes Araís’s own struggle to position herself discursively and morally as a *transfronteriza* between her cousins’ desensitized habitus and the hypothetical reader’s overreaction (cf. Irvine, 2004 on paired “possible worlds”). As we will see, this spatial contrast is echoed and elaborated upon in Araís’s highly performative retelling of the cousin story, following the pre-coda in line 35 (“You know, like that’s what I mean”).

“Too Much Cream On the Tacos”: Breakthrough Into Performance

In the final section of the narrative, Araís retells the last part of the story that she has just finished telling—namely, her and her cousins’ disbelieving reaction to the news article.

- 36 BO’C: That’s interesting
- 37 A: And then my cousins and me, we’re like,
- 38 “¡Ay no!” like “no manches” **y que no sé qué.**
 [“Give me a break”- and I don’t know what.]
- 39 “Nomás le quieren hacer- no está tan feo” **y que no sé qué.**
 [“They just want to make it- It’s not that bad” and I don’t know what.]
- 40 “Por eso nadie viene **y blah blah blah.**”
 [“That’s why nobody comes [to Matamoros] and blah blah blah.”]
- 41 But I’m like, “¡Ay!”
- 42 But you see, like, we read it
- 43 and then somebody else is gonna read it
- 44 from like Minnesota from Canada **whatever**
- 45 or not even that far from- Roma? Or from McAllen
- 46 and they’re gonna be like, “Oh my God, look, it’s really bad.”

- 47 Like, “Look she did it and there-
48 there are wars there and the cartel.
49 Oh my gosh, I can only imagine.”
50 And the- the article kept going and kept going, and we’re like,
→51 “Ay no. Ya. Ya. Ya le exageraron bastante”
[“Ay no. Enough. Enough. They’ve already exaggerated plenty.”]
→52 *y que mucha crema en los tacos **y que no sé qué.***
[And that (they’re putting) a lot of cream on the tacos and I don’t know
what.]
53 And then, over there, *todos* “Oh my gosh, look at this.”
[everybody]
54 Like I can just see their faces and like *ay no.*
55 And we were just laughing because of that.
56 And that’s what I mean. It’s just different.

italics = Spanish elements; [] = English translation; **bold** = general extenders; underline = person deictics; double underline = spatial deictics

What distinguishes the retelling (lines 37-56) most obviously from the first telling (lines 22-35) is Araís’s code-switching in reported speech, specifically in the lines identified with arrows above, where she uses Spanish to quote her and her cousins’ collaborative response to the article. In the first telling, she glossed their response simply as, “Oh my God that’s not even true.” In the second telling, Araís expands upon this evaluation in several ways: She and her cousins appear to speculate about the intentions of the article’s author (39), disagree with the severity of his assessment of Matamoros (39), and, significantly, reflect on the possible social and economic implications of this circulating discourse (40). As I mentioned earlier, Araís often preferred to communicate in TexMex; it is perhaps surprising, then, that her long, nested narrative contains few Spanish elements until the retelling, where the young women’s scorn boils over into an emotional dismissal of the news article, culminating in the memorable accusation that the journalist was “putting too much cream on the tacos,” or overdoing it. As was discussed previously, Araís nimbly and strategically moves between different footings, linked to various

spatiotemporal frames, as she dramatizes her own effort to locate her voice and moral positioning among the dissenting voices she reanimates in her story (Rumsey, 2000). In this section, though, the presence of Spanish for emphatic and comic effect (e.g., non-serious “*No manches*”—‘Give me a break!’— in line 38), alongside other semiotic elements, indexes a different moral stance than in the first telling. Araís’s code choice is connected to a different sense of self (Koven, 1998), imbued with solidarity and conviviality with her cousins in Mexico, and lacking the back-and-forth ambivalence that characterized her voice in the first telling.

Araís’s discursive practice in this section recalls Hymes’s (1975) discussion of the “breakthrough into performance” among the American Indian storytellers with whom he worked. In research encounters, Hymes (1975) contended, speakers may shift their stance continuously, taking up different positionings—with respect to the audience and the topic of discourse—according to “what the speaker thinks the hearer is capable of understanding” (p. 19). The outcome of such encounters, per Hymes (1975), is not just the reproduction of “traditional” texts in expected ways, but a dynamic, emergent breakthrough into performance “in our own time” that makes the past newly relevant to the present and positions the speaker as someone “who would help to shape history” (p. 134; cf. Nevins, 2013, p. 93).

In the context of Araís’s argumentative narrative, the retelling is her closing argument, as it were, and it is likely influenced by my laughter and encouraging response in line 36 (“That’s interesting”). Notwithstanding her earlier ambivalence, Araís erupts into a flamboyant, humorous retelling of the cousin story to drive her point home: Whether or not her cousins have come to accept an intolerable state of affairs as the norm, she, as a *transfronteriza*, cannot countenance the circulation of damage-centered discourses (cf. Tuck, 2009) about the borderlands without regard for their consequences. But, as Hymes (1975) would remind us, her repositioning comes in response to her shifting interpersonal stance vis-à-vis her interlocutor (me); she takes my ratification that her story is tellable and worthwhile (in line 36) as an invitation to expand, but also as an opportunity to take a different moral and discursive stance.

The subsequent breakthrough into performance is discernible on multiple levels of discursive practice: For example, in addition to the use of Spanish in revoicing, Araís employs breathy voice quality to embody the faraway, English-speaking narrator in lines 46-49, making it sound as though this person is nearly hyperventilating in their shocked reaction to the article. (One might even say that Araís is also putting a lot of cream on the tacos). Meanwhile, she

continues the contrastive use of spatial deixis, paired with salient contrasts in person deixis, that was observed in the previous section: again, “there” meaning Matamoros (spoken by the distant, quoted “I” in line 48) is bookended with “over there,” meaning wherever Araís imagines the article’s reception. Note, however, the movement from relatively more distant to more proximal spaces in the following strip of narration:

42 But you see, like, we read it
43 and then somebody else is gonna read it
44 from like **Minnesota** from **Canada** whatever
45 **or not even that far** from- **Roma?** Or from **McAllen**
46 and they’re gonna be like, “Oh my God, look, it’s really bad.”

Someone from Minnesota or Canada might read the story—someone with no prior knowledge of the border, perhaps, or one of the many “snowbirds” from the Midwest and Canada who winter in the Rio Grande Valley, often with minimal involvement with the local Mexican-American population (Foiles Sifuentes, 2015). But someone from “not even that far” (45) might also read the story and come away with a distorted view of Matamoros, as Araís sees it, from the town of Roma, about two hours west of Brownsville/Matamoros, or even from McAllen, a major city about one hour to the west. Thus, in locating her imagined speaker, Araís begins far away and moves closer and closer, considering the implications of mass-mediated depictions of the borderlands not only for the perpetuation of stereotypes among distant readers, but for Valley-dwellers’ present-day relationships with Mexico. It bears mentioning that Roma, a relative backwater in Starr County, Texas, seldom visited by Brownsville residents (in my experience), is a strikingly odd choice for this list of places—or it would be, if Araís were not aware that I had once lived and taught elementary school there. Her repositioning in this section, then, as accomplished through her creative referential practice, is finely tuned to the interactional text of her narrative—in particular, to her concern with what *I* will think her story has amounted to (Jefferson, 1978) and what I, as a teacher, might make of other stories about the borderlands and the students therein.

Conclusions: Moral Personhood in *Transfronterizo* Narrative

This narrative, I have argued, gives a glimpse of one *transfronteriza*'s ideological becoming: For Araís to bring about and bring along her identity in the story (Baynham, 2014), she must contend with a rabble of other voices, which open up a dialogue within her (Urban, 1989), manifested in the textual features of her narrative. These other voices are persistently linked to other times and places: Mexico, in the recent past, when she laughed with her cousins; elsewhere in North America, in the future, when an imagined (white, English monolingual) reader will affirm pathologizing representations of the borderlands; somewhere closer, elsewhere in the Rio Grande Valley, also in the future, when someone—someone like me, maybe—may rely on eye-catching headlines to frame their understanding of *transfronterizo* students like Araís. But if Araís's narrative is a struggle over representation, it is also a struggle over self-representation. Its argumentative nature is, in part, a way for Araís to dramatize an argument with herself about how to mediate between conflicting representations of Matamoros and Mexico. Crucially, she is not doing this merely in order to transform and make sense of personal experience for her own benefit, but is doing it with me, her interlocutor, in mind (Wortham, 2000), and the shifts in stance (e.g., her re-alignment with her cousins in the last section) that accompany her shifts in footing can be understood in this light (Hymes, 1975).

However, as I argued at the beginning of the article, this is not just a matter of self-positioning in discourse; rather, Araís's discursive practice is a deeply moral activity, both in the sense that it allows her to enact a particular moral stance, in contrast to others, and that it makes implicit moral claims on her interlocutor (Anderson, 2009). Intercultural encounters, real or imagined, among people whose types of habitus disposed them to relate to the border differently, when transformed in narrative, gave *transfronterizo* students rich opportunities to work out their own identities and relationships to other people and places. But, as in Araís's case, they also constituted ethical affordances, or "aspects of people's experiences of themselves, of other people, or of their surround, that they may draw on as they make ethical evaluations and decisions" (Keane, 2014, p. 7). On the one hand, her cousins' dismissiveness invited Araís to disalign morally from them, since they had come to accept a situation that was "not normal" (as another student commented) as the status quo. On the other hand, hegemonic damage-centered discourses about the borderlands afforded Araís the space to take a clear moral stance against "putting too much cream on the tacos," a discursive move that had, she suggested, negative

repercussions for people in her corner of the world. Araís and other *transfronterizo* students in this study and beyond, whatever their relationships to the border, are engaged in a long-term, multifaceted value project (Agha, 2015) of figuring out how to live ethically—in their own eyes, and the eyes of family, friends, and others—in a borderlands that has been irrevocably transformed by physical and political violence. Here, through fine-grained analysis of one *transfronteriza*'s narrative practice, I have shown that close attention to such stories can illuminate how the self gets into language (Benveniste, 1971), how culture gets into the self (Urban, 1989), and how transnational speakers make use of the ethical affordances of narrative to craft moral arguments in trying times.

Acknowledgements

Mil gracias to Araís and the other student participants, as well as my student co-researchers, Valeria de León and Grecia García. Erin Debenport, Maisa Taha, and Doris Warriner provided extensive feedback and the paper benefited tremendously from their efforts—thank you. Thanks also to two anonymous reviewers who commented critically on an earlier draft. I'm grateful to Carlos Vélez-Ibáñez for inviting me to present a version of this paper at the 77th Annual Meeting of the Society for Applied Anthropology in March 2017, to the other panelists, and to Patricia Sánchez for her generous commentary and editorial guidance. As always, Jennifer and Ellenor O'Connor made this work possible.

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