Bending boundaries: A critical spatial analysis of students’ texts and identity work

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Abstract

In this article, we explore the relationships between critical literacy, academic identity, and school spaces. Drawing upon recent sociocultural research in literacy informed by critical spatial theories, we examine how students’ literacy practices and academic identities are situated in spatial contexts that often define and constrain them, but also how students can bend the boundaries of those spaces through their literacy practices in order to redefine their academic identities in relationship to them. The article features two examples from our ethnographic literacy research in school sites: 1) a combined 5th grade inquiry project at an elementary school that involved the writing and performance of a drama by a group of students, and 2) an email exchange program between immigrant students in a middle school English as a New Language class and first generation Latino/a university students. With each example, we show how mapping students’ membership identity categories in their writing and discourse to the perceived, conceived, and lived spaces they produced through them illustrates their agency in transforming school spaces and mobilizing new identities within them.

Vignette 1
Jasmine burst in to the portable classroom where her group met for their inquiry and asked to change into her costume. She proceeded to lay out a fully accessorized outfit in royal purple—with jewelry, matching shoes, and hair ribbons—an outfit that differed significantly from her uniform navy polo shirt and khaki pants. Alissa commented, “Ooh, that’s dope. You in trouble, but that’s dope.” Jasmine replied, “It’s for the project...not gonna be in trouble. You know for the character.” I listened to the exchange and marveled at Jasmine’s resourcefulness in transporting her costume from home to her classroom, to recess and lunch without it being confiscated. It seemed that being a character in the film had taken on new meaning.

Vignette 2
Today Beth introduced Making Connections to the students. Using a laptop and projector, she showed the class the website [of the Latino university student organization] while telling the stydebts about the collaborative project. Animatedly gesturing to a photo of the picturesque two-story limestone house that serves as the Latino center on campus, she compared it to her classroom, emphasizing the similar ways the two places function for the students who affiliate with them:
Beth: You know, it's kind of like how here my room is kind of like [the house belonging to the Latino/a student organization]; it's kind of like the ESL place. It's where you can go to be comfortable, to get away from the English world over there, you know what I mean? This is like your home place. That's what [the Latino university student organization] is....It's an awesome program, guys. And we think we've got six or seven students that are giving up their time to talk to you, writing you letters, and they're going to want to learn from you. Because they were in your shoes

Javier: [holds up his foot above the table to show his shoe]

Beth: [acknowledging Javier's foot] Exactly. And they're going to want to help you get to college, and talk to you, and help you with whatever they can do.

Introduction

These vignettes point to the complex kinds of interactions around identity that occur everyday in classrooms. As part of our larger ethnographic studies concerned with critical literacy, identity and power, we believe the stories illustrate the rich sites classrooms provide for better understanding the critical work of students' writing and discourse in inquiry-based projects. In this article, we apply an analytical framework to illustrate how students' literacy practices and identities in school are situated and co-constructed in relationship to specific spaces. We argue that a critical socio-spatial analysis enables us to consider how students' texts and interactions work towards the “disordering, deconstruction, and tentative reconstitution” (Soja, 1996, p. 60) of school spaces, and the identities students can take up within those spaces. We do this, first, by outlining a theoretical framework, briefly describing how socio-spatial theories help us to understand the relationships between school spaces and social practices, as well as how critical literacy, inquiry, and identity are interconnected. Our detailed analysis of two examples drawn from our research follows. We conclude by discussing implications of a critical socio-spatial stance for teaching and research.

Theoretical Framework

School Spaces & A Theory of Critical Socio-Spatiality

In education, the notion that “space matters” is now more readily accepted, as critical geography and spatial research have provided new understandings of the role of the spatial in how students learn and interact within their sociocultural environments. From a critical socio-spatial perspective (Lefebvre, 1991; Soja, 2011; Leander & Sheehy, 2004), school spaces can be physically experienced by students—for instance, as they move from the classroom and into a hallway. But they are also socially constructed. For example, a sixth grade student in a Grade 6-8 middle school may feel relatively young, invisible, and excluded as she moves alone through a hallway filled with 8th grade students, but as soon as she arrives at her locker and is surrounded by her sixth grade friends, she readily feels accepted and acknowledged as a student at the school. As Soja (2011) explained, “as real and imagined geographies they [spaces] shape our lives in various ways, at times enabling and enhancing, at other times constraining and oppressing” (p. x). Individually and collectively, we define ourselves and the significance of our social activities and the spaces in which they occur in relationship to other activities and spaces (Penuel & Davey, 1999). The polycontextual nature of social spaces in schools suggests students are frequently negotiating their identities as they
participate in activities with others (Leander, 2002). As Gruenewald (2003) described, “Being in a situation has a spatial, geographical, contextual dimension. Reflecting on one’s situation corresponds to reflecting on the space(s) one inhabits; acting on one's situation often corresponds to changing one's relationship to a place (p. 4). Understanding the dynamic relationship between the social and spatial, then, makes it possible to understand literacy and learning in new ways.

Critical socio-spatial theories have emphasized that space is more than a context, setting, or place; spaces become significant in relationship to the social practices that are produced in relationship to them (Lefebvre, 1991). In other words, spaces like hallways are not empty vessels (Massey, 1994) that social interactions fill up; rather spaces (like the “sixth-grade hallway”) are created in the process of (re)producing social relations through practice (Sheehy, 2011; Massey 1994). Lefebvre’s work challenged “the way in which space was either avoided, set apart, or moved to the background in social analysis,” by showing how “the social and spatial aspects of human life are mutually constitutive, with social life routinely producing spatiality and with spatiality producing social life” (Rowe & Leander, 2005, p. 319). Lefebvre defined this notion as the (social) production of (social) space (Soja, 2011). For Lefebvre, this trialectical construct consists of perceived, lived, and conceived spaces: perceived space (first space) is physical space, constructed through social practices and daily routines; conceived spaces (second space) are mental spaces, spaces represented through writing, speech, and design; these planned spaces are normative or naturalized as right. Lived spaces (thirdspace) are experienced spaces, where perceived and conceived come together in a dialectic convergence, a social space that is “a dynamic, unstable articulation of physical space and perceived space” (Leander, 2002, p. 216) which the imagination seeks to change and appropriate. Representations of conceived space are changed in lived space, which makes symbolic use of the objects of the physical space (Lefebvre, 1991, p. 39; Soja, 1996, p. 66-68; Leander, 2002, p. 216). For us, acknowledging the spatial dimension in our research recognizes “how people invest everyday environments with richly symbolic, aesthetic, moral, and above all, identity-relevant meanings” (Dixon & Durrheim, 2004, p. 457). Further, understanding the material and symbolic spatiality of these school spaces and those produced by students through their social interactions with one another help us understand literacy events as spaces that can, as Hetherington (1998) argues, “take on a symbolic significance around which identities are constituted and performed” (p. 106).

Spatial metaphors in education tend to reference space as bounded—often, in ways that emphasize power or hierarchical relationships. For example, students are described as going in or out of a class or grade; a child labeled as an English Language Learner (ELL) moves up a proficiency level. Institutional boundaries and criteria support these rigid separations; for instance, students are duly sorted for remediation, accelerated learning, and tracked courses. The labeling of students is often reinforced by defined physical spaces, as was the case in our research sites: The fifth grade classrooms were divided largely by standardized test scores and reading levels, resulting in a high-ability group, a middle-ability group where all English Language Learners were placed, and a designated special education class. The inquiry groups were drawn from these three classrooms; students met outside the school in a portable classroom near the fifth grade hallway. In the other site, the students in the Advanced English as a New Language (ENL) class were identified based on their scores on the state’s language proficiency exam. The ENL class replaced “regular” English Language Arts classes. The windowless ENL classroom was segregated by a separate entrance and hallway. In both sites,
the spatial boundaries were often referenced by both those who identified with these spaces and those who defined the spaces according to the kinds of students, practices, and expectations they believed belonged to them.

However, a critical socio-spatial perspective suggests that spaces have flexible rather than fixed boundaries, and they overlap simultaneously (Massey, 1994; Thomson, 2007). We will see that identities, as Massey (1994) writes, “are not aligned with either place or class”—or in our sites, as inquiry, language or ability groups—“but rather are constructed out of both, as well as a whole host of other things” (p. 136). Moreover, concepts such as third space (Gutiérrez, Rymes, & Larson, 1995) and the second classroom (Campano, 2007) acknowledge the possibilities of creating hybrid spaces by bending the rigid boundaries around curriculum, teaching, and learning. The notion that second classrooms can be created to run “in tandem with and sometimes counter to the mandated curriculum” (Campano, 2007, p. 4) highlights the dynamic co-construction of spaces that is possible when we understand that “social space is always heterogeneous and conflictual, and more or less charged with potential for the transformation of learning and identity” (Leander, 2002, p. 217). We challenge educators to foreground the idea that all spaces are inherently social and shift attention to the simultaneity of their co-construction by elaborating upon lived spaces in our contexts. As Massey (1994) writes, spaces are “woven from a web of phenomena/activities/relations” and the “spatial spread of social relations can be intimately local or expansively global, or anything in between” (p. 265). Spatial boundaries then, as well as the perceptions that reinforce them, are changeable; it is the potential of these permeable boundaries that our examples highlight.

**Critical Literacy, Inquiry & Identity**

Our partnerships as literacy researchers and teacher educators with the two schools provided opportunities to collaborate with teachers to co-create literacy inquiries. We situated this work theoretically through critical literacy, a stance that emphasizes the connections between language, power, knowledge and subjectivities in order to “use language to question the everyday world, to interrogate the relationship between language and power, to analyze popular culture and media, to understand how power relationships are socially constructed, and to consider actions that can be taken to promote social justice” (Lewison, Leland, & Harste, 2008, p. 3). In both sites, we worked closely with the teachers who partnered with us, designing critical inquiries around students’ interests and thus situating literacy in the specific sociocultural and political contexts of the schools (Lewison, Leland, & Harste, 2008). By engaging students in making decisions about their learning, our goals were to negotiate a curriculum, inviting students to participate in reading and writing in ways that “explor[ed] the spatial dimensions of lived experience [and] provide[d] important inroads...into critical literacies which are material, imaginative and creative” (Comber & Nixon, 2008, p. 233). In both the 5th grade drama/film and the ENL class’ email exchange, students negotiated the design and production of content. The conversations and interactions around these negotiations reinforced the idea that “literacy education is about institutional access and inclusion, and potentially about discrimination and exclusion. It is about setting the conditions for students to engage in textual relationships of power” (Luke, 2000, p. 449).

Shaping our collaborative pedagogical work in these classrooms was a commitment to teaching literacy through critical inquiry. More specifically, we drew on a model that suggests four synergistic purposes for literacy: engaging in critical inquiry, constructing spaces, enacting identities, and establishing agency (Beach, Campano, Edmiston,
Borgmann, 2010, p. 21). Engaging in critical inquiry is an effort to establish an “equitable pedagogical relationship” that positions students who are persistently marginalized by educational, legal, and socio-political structures as “critical and dialogic generators of knowledge...intellectuals whose diverse social locations afford them ‘privileged’ epistemic access to the world, including insights into how it is unjust and how it might be improved” (p. 17). Understanding that their identities offer a position from which to author both a personal and collective sense of self, students engage in literacy to reposition themselves, mobilizing their resources and experiences for change.

Thus the model recognizes the potential for students to use literacy tools for the purpose of transforming the spaces in which they live and learn. For “when students and teachers have greater freedom to shape classroom environments and social relationships, these material and relational alterations make possible different ways of knowing” (Beach, et al., 2010, p. 17-18). In theory and in practice, the model enacts a Freirian pedagogy, as literacy tools—such as drama and letter-writing—are utilized to engage students in reading, acting in, and changing their worlds (Beach et al., 2010).

Research Contexts

As Street (2001) argued, “there is little point...in attempting to make sense of a given utterance or discourse in terms of its immediate ‘context of utterance’ unless one knows the broader social and conceptual framework that gives it meaning” (p. 440). To that end, we provide next a brief context for our two examples, The Bake Job and Making Connections. Though situated in different sites, the two are connected through our analysis.

5th Grade Literacy Inquiry: The Bake Job

The Bake Job was a focal group of fifth grade students in an urban elementary school near a large US Midwestern city. The larger, year-long study explored what happens when heterogeneous groups of students from ability-grouped classrooms participate in alternative, multimodal literacy projects. Each inquiry group in the project was heterogeneously mixed from the three academically stratified fifth grade classrooms and met for 8-week sessions during the regular school day. Inquiry groups began with shared literacy experiences to highlight common interests and develop inquiry questions, and culminated with designing a project to share with their families and classmates.

Jasmine’s inquiry group, The Bake Job group, shared an interest in food, specifically baking. Three of the students claimed that The Cake Boss, a reality TV show highlighting a New Jersey bakery, was “their show”. One student hoped to become a chef and another “just loved sweets”. Their common interests in baking and suspense inspired them to write a film script about a mystery at a bakery. The group researched bakeries, read mysteries, wrote an original script, and produced a film entitled, “The Bake Job: A Mystery Featuring the Special Cake Shop that Made the Perfect Cake for President Obama”.

7th and 8th Grade ENL Inquiry: Making Connections

Making Connections was a new partnership between the Advanced ENL class at Eastside Middle School and a Latino/a cultural organization at a large state university. Part of a larger inquiry focused around the 7th and 8th grade immigrant students’
concerns about their futures in the United States, *Making Connections* was initiated to help the students access the university through an older Latina/o “big sister/brother” who would be willing to correspond regularly via email. First-generation university students affiliated with the Latino/a center on campus were invited to participate in the program, which required writing a couple emails to a student each month and meeting with students for a campus visit in May.

Over a 10-week period, the students each wrote 4-5 letters to their *Making Connections* partner. The letters were written during class using laptops the teacher, Beth, reserved for this purpose. Students saved their letters to a shared folder on the school’s server and then, to comply with school policies, Beth facilitated the email exchange.

**Methodological Design: Data Collection and Analysis**

The data discussed in this article is drawn from prolonged engagement (over a year to almost five years) in the two schools. In both cases, we worked the dialectic between inquiry and practice (Cochran-Smith & Lytle, 2009) recognized by the students as adults who were researchers, but who frequently also took up roles as teachers, homework helpers, and group facilitators. The studies involved extended time in the schools: two to three times per week for the six-month *Making Connections* study, and twice weekly throughout the school year for *The Bake Job* study. Our ethnographic research involved the collection of video and audio data; formal and informal interviews with teachers, administrators, and students; student writing, reflections and surveys; digital photographs; institutional data; and community profiles. We video recorded student interactions and used audio-recorders to capture conversations in small groups. Students produced written artifacts, videos and photographs as they created their projects in both sites. We regularly observed focal students in various school spaces such as the cafeteria, other classes, hallways, and the playground. During our time on site, we used notebooks, much like the students in our classes, to jot down bits of conversation, observations, and questions. Detailed field notes were recorded immediately after leaving our sites. Research memos were crafted weekly from our fieldnotes and the audio and video data sources.

In this paper, we have chosen to examine two extended focal student examples within these larger studies: Jasmine’s leadership development and performance in *The Bake Job*, and the exchange of letters between one pair of students, Myra and Susanna, through *Making Connections*. In these examples our analyses focused on the students’ texts: the writing and interactions produced by the students during the eight weeks of *The Bake Job*, and the eight letters exchanged between Myra and Susanna over a two-month period. The analysis also included related fieldnotes, video excerpts, interviews, student work and research memos. Though these studies were designed and carried out independently, they shared a similar pedagogical stance and set of assumptions about literacy, identity, and agency as discussed earlier. In ongoing dialogue about the emerging importance of space in our respective research, we collaboratively selected the examples for this study. Our purpose was to better understand the spaces students co-constructed through their texts and the indexicality of their identities in that work. Our analysis was guided by three primary questions: 1) What happens when a critical spatial perspective is foregrounded in the analysis of student text production (writing, sketching, rehearsing)? 2) How do students negotiate their identities in their letters and scripts? 3) What shapes students’ social constructions of identity and space?
Our analytic process involved multiple, iterative stages. We began by inductively coding for membership categorization devices (MCD), a method of analyzing identity “based in systematic analyses of social action in everyday settings” (Benwell & Stokoe, 2006, p. 67). As we read students’ letters and scripts, as well as transcripts of their oral interactions, we noted the devices they used to signal their membership in various identity categories (e.g., ENL student, daughter, character in a mystery film script). The technique focused our attention on the situated ways in which the participants oriented themselves in their social interactions with others, as well as to the spaces and contexts around them. Because Membership Categorization Analysis (MCA) does not make assumptions about which categories will be relevant in any social interaction, the process allowed us to trace how the students’ “production of the world was itself informed by these particular categorization devices” (Schegloff, 2002, p. 30, as cited in Benwell & Stokoe, 2006, p. 66).

Drawing on Lefebvre’s (1991) notions of perceived, conceived, and lived spaces, we then added another layer to our analysis, critically examining the spatiality produced in the discourse of students’ texts and interactions. Guided by questions we adapted from Rowe & Leander’s (2005) analysis of the embodied and spatial nature of literacy practices and learning in classrooms, (see “Analysis of Production of Social Space”, Table 1), we generated thematic matrices (Miles & Huberman, 1994) and memos (Corbin & Strauss, 2008) with each example. We then met to share and test our interpretations. The process also involved mapping our analysis of the MCDs to the social spaces we had identified. We generated another set of questions for this layer of analysis (see “Analysis of Production of Spatial Identities”, Table 1) and created diagrams to visually represent our work. Again, we shared our interpretations in regular debriefings, inviting scrutiny that often inspired further analysis and discussion.

### Table 1. Spatial Analysis

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Notions of Space</th>
<th>Analysis of Production of Social Space</th>
<th>Analysis of Production of Spatial Identities</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>First Space Perceived space (“Real” space)</td>
<td>What are the material features of the space?</td>
<td>What material and embodied aspects of identity are made visible? What are the observed relationships between people and between people and objects? How do people visibly move through spaces? How are identities performed?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Second Space Conceived space (Imagined space)</td>
<td>What are the dominant and marginalized rules, norms, and representations that shape spatial practice?</td>
<td>What identities are imagined or represented? What rules and norms shape how they are conceived? How are they imagined to be performed?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Third Space Lived space (“Real” &amp; imagined space)</td>
<td>What Discourses are present? What cultural frames are being indexed? What non-dominant practices are being introduced? How are they valued by various participants?</td>
<td>How do real and imagined identities converge in daily, lived experience? What discourses shape how those identities are negotiated? How are they challenged or altered (or new ones created or imagined)?</td>
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Adapted with permission from Rowe & Leander, 2005, p. 320-321.

### Analyzing Students’ Texts and Identity Work: Two Examples
The Bake Job: Jasmine
Jasmine’s insertion of her multifaceted identity into various school spaces pushed against rigid boundaries dictating how she could inhabit and reconstruct those spaces. Her spatial practices and indexed identity categories are highlighted through discussions of her: 1) Mayoral Candidacy, 2) Becoming Keisha, and 3) Key Performance.

Mayoral Candidacy: Blurring Perceptions of Competency
Jasmine valued peer relationships and interactions in all spaces. She completed most of her work on time in the middle ability classroom, but was often reprimanded for talking with her girlfriends in class. She seemed unfazed by these reprimands and rarely curtailed her conversation on the first warning. She referred to her “talking problem” as a potential challenge for her in the small group (Student Reflection 1). Typically, Jasmine interacted with peers who lost behavior marks, which contributed to her membership as an “at risk student” from her teacher’s perspective, despite her academic potential (Personal communication) and popularity with her peers (Fieldnotes). While a participant in The Bake Job, Jasmine ran for an elected position as part of a social studies economic simulation in her classroom. In this simulation, her spatial competency—evident through campaign talk and social networking—supported Jasmine’s win for mayor and role of a leader during a school sanctioned academic event. This was a significant social risk as the election marked academic leadership rather than social leadership. After the election, a staff member remarked that Jasmine had so much potential, yet she “continued to talk ghetto when she gave her speech to the group” as mayor (Fieldnotes). Competence-based spatial practices involve being able to read the world and indicate normative assumptions of appropriateness (Lefebvre, 1991). Jasmine established performative spatial practices in the case of her speech and used her verbal prowess and social connections to her advantage, yet in the eyes of the staff member had yet to realize spatial competency in using a less formal register throughout her speech. This disruption reinforced concern for her future because it appeared she seemed to deviate from appropriate discourse and interaction in some spaces. The experience also marked Jasmine as part of a new, more flexible membership category of social academic leader.

Becoming Keisha: Shaping Jasmine’s Character
Students in The Bake Job created their own characters, a task Jasmine took very seriously. Jasmine described her character as a “cheerleader” and “cool girl” who “likes lip gloss”, is “all about glamour but secretly brilliant”, as “people don’t know she can do challenging stuff” [Original Script]. While planning, Jasmine also stated she wanted to “be a cool girl”, reflecting identity markers of valuing social interaction from her lived experience and revealing social academic leadership potential. In the following excerpt, Sarah encouraged students to consider the costumes and personalities of their character more deeply. Figure 1 is Jasmine’s sketch, which she worked on without interruption seated at the table with her peers.
Figure 1. Character sketch. [Jasmine wrote: “Always wears random colors, mostly pink +purple, cheerleader, all about beauty, is popular, mean and nice, fashionable, wants to be a professional cheerleader for career”.

Character sketch planning
[Students are seated around the table with paper and pencil in front of them. Sarah has just completed an example on the board with labels and a sketch.]

Jasmine: I don't know how to spell my name.
Sarah: What's your name?
Jasmine: Keisha
Sarah: Keisha. K-E-I-S-H-A (writes it on the board, Gabrielle says under her breath, don't tell me you mean ke$sha?)

Alissa: Do we have to show our hair?
Sarah: Well, this is a character sketch. In a character sketch you are trying to show--what are they like, who are they. You want as much detail as possible. It's just like in writing, when you use descriptive language, right? To describe something...this picture is going to be helpful for us so that when you are acting...think about what kind of character you are... all right?

(overlapping)...can I be?
-Do I have to-
-hold off, that ain't even right.

Sarah: Guys. Guys. (as if frustrated) You can be multiple...you decide who you are...

Days later, as students prepared their roles, Jasmine burst into the room holding her costume as described in the opening vignette. It seemed that developing her character in the film disrupted institutional boundaries regarding decisions about appropriate dress and behavior. Jasmine’s character sketch illustrated how the perceived notion of a cheerleader could be disrupted by including “professional cheerleader” and claiming that she is “smart but people don’t think she can do challenging things.” By marking intellect and profession as identity categories, Jasmine’s lived character identity shifted from the
culturally positioned “airhead on the sidelines” to a savvy performer. She further accentuated the development of a complex character through rehearsals where she fine-tuned her tone, gesture, and interaction with the other characters in the scene described below.

**Jasmine’s Key Performance: (Re)constructing Leadership**

Jasmine’s lived identity space, the context in which her perceived and conceived roles in school combined, was continually shifting in the small group as well as throughout her school days. For example, Jasmine was caught up in a Romeo/Juliet-esque romance. Her parents and teacher forbid her to speak with her boyfriend from another class because interaction often resulted in emotional distress. Frequent efforts to meet up on the playground for dates behind the slide and away from prying teachers’ eyes ultimately resulted in an office referral during the final filming date of what Jasmine called her “key performance” (described below). Jasmine’s relationship marked her as “fast” among adults. However, it also positioned her as cool among her female peers and desirable among some of the boys as evidenced by several who listed her as their “top girl” on their notebooks (Fieldnotes).

These competing and artificially bounded membership categories housed in various school spaces were evident when the project began. First, Jasmine tried out her diversionary social tactics typically successful in other school spaces. Her coy requests for help and whispered side comments garnered little reaction from the boys in the group. Later, Jasmine tried unsuccessfully to entice the girls into misbehaving. She then took a different approach and organized the scenes into one cohesive story, suggested costume ideas, and offered feedback during rehearsal sessions to facilitate completing the film. Jasmine ultimately navigated her way to become a leader in the group by reframing her spatial competency through literacy practices the group valued (Lefebvre, 1991; Modan, 2007). Jasmine was aware of the time constraints and was motivated to rehearse as much as possible to encourage the best result. By the 6th session, Jasmine captured the social support she seemed to thrive upon by reasserting herself as a productive group member rather than outlaw, moving from a marginal to a more central position.

It was on the final production day that Jasmine was called to the office and was unable to participate in her “Key Performance”. The group froze in shock, as one student repeated, “What are we gonna do? What are we gonna do?” Within moments, Alissa prepared a revised scene. Taking a deep breath, she adlibbed the line, “When Keisha gets back, she’s gonna be so surprised at how much I got done” and continued on with the scene (Fieldnotes). The group devised a way to complete the “key performance” without their leader, a feat likely accomplished because of Jasmine’s persistence for multiple rehearsals.

**Jasmine: Bending Boundaries**

Jasmine combined her earlier tactic of negatively seeking attention and her new leadership role to simultaneously redefine the boundaries of her membership communities (Benwell & Stokoe, 2006). During her mayoral speech, Jasmine reconstructed the assumptions ingrained in how a powerful academic role might sound through her language choices (Medina, Weltsek, & Twomey, 2007). In the character sketch, Jasmine fine-tuned her image as a cheerleader-plus, a popular girl who is smart enough to be professional. She entered the group session with a clear idea about her character’s description and was also the first student to bring in costume components.
from home; something she felt was essential to complete the “look of Keisha” (Fieldnotes). In the Key Performance, Jasmine was physically removed from the space; however, bolstered by her leadership, the group maintained her presence by supporting the adlib and therefore allowing her character to permeate the scene. Her attention to thinking about the project outside of the small group, where her leadership role was sanctioned, further reinforced her shifting perspective on how she might participate. This perceived identity space, mapped out on paper and described in the script (see Table 1), resonated with comments her classroom teacher made regarding Jasmine’s participation in The Bake Job group. “You know it’s like she found she can actually be smart in other spaces. I’ve seen a lot of growth in that area with her” (Teacher Interview). The lived space of the small group enabled a new identity script to unfold, co-constructed through Jasmine’s literacy and spatial practices.

Making Connections: Myra & Susanna

Myra was a diligent 7th grade student who took pride in her accomplishments, for example, confiding that she was anxious to see how many certificates she would receive at an awards assembly (Fieldnotes). Myra was also making a concerted effort that year to extend her circle of friends to include non-Latinos: “Last year I just played around mostly with people like me; now this year I hang out with people that are different” (Interview). As a result, she described the school year as “going really fast, like super fast”, as compared to 6th grade, which “was really slow...probably because I didn’t have that many friends” (Interview). Despite her attempts to bridge the social divides between Mexicans, Americans, and other cultural groups at Eastside, Myra also recounted several personal instances of exclusion and prejudice (Interview).

Myra’s family figured prominently in her day-to-day discourse and writing; her parents and siblings were featured in her poetry and a photo essay, and she wrote a powerful tribute to her mother. Myra wanted to be a teacher; she spent her afterschool hours helping her younger siblings with their English and schoolwork (Fieldnotes). Yet she knew the realities of her family’s economic and legal status; she did not even dare to dream about college.

Though much of the content of Myra and Susanna’s letters was about family and friends, their exchanges about the “Latino House” before and after the class’ campus visit were selected as an example, since they most directly reflect the critical goals of Making Connections.

“The Latino House”: Susanna

In her first letter (L1) to Myra, Susanna identified herself as a first-year university student and business major, the daughter of Puerto Rican immigrant parents who was “born and raised” in a large U.S. city. She then explained her decision to move away from the “big city” to a “small town” to attend the university:

It is a lot different going from a big city to a small town for college, but I am loving it! The reason why I decided to come to [the university] was because I felt very comfortable here and the people at [the Latino house] were really nice and made me feel at home. It is always hard going somewhere that you feel there is no one else like you out there, but [the house] really helps out with showing familiar and friendly faces so that a big school like [the U] doesn’t seem so scary.

In this excerpt, Susanna explores the spaces of her identity as a university student: i) her affiliation with “the house” as the Latino/a students called it (or “the Latino cultural center” as it was officially known), and ii) the larger university campus. The perceived, “real”
space of the Latino house is where Susanna writes from; she feels “very comfortable here” (italics added). This use of proximal deixis contrasts with the distal metaphors (Benwell & Stokoe, 2006) ascribed to the university, which Susanna locates “out there,” “somewhere”. She describes it as “big” and “scary”; surprising, perhaps, given that Susanna identifies with the “big city” where she is from. But she suggests it is not the size of the campus alone that makes it big or scary; rather, it is her experience of the university as “somewhere that you feel there is no one else like you out there” (italics added). In contrast, she evokes discourses of comfort, familiarity, and hospitality to describe the house: it is a space where she sees her Latina identity reflected in the faces around her, where she can go and feel at home within the larger space of a campus that otherwise feels too foreign. She illustrates how the negotiation of a Latina cultural academic identity occurred in relationship to the space of the house, an example of the “landscapes of meaning within which individuals and groups may establish rich social and psychological connections” (Dixon & Durrheim, 2004, p. 458).

The “Latino House”: Myra’s Campus Visit
Myra’s visit to campus with the ENL class was also initiated from the space of the Latino house. There, the middle school students met the center’s director and several undergraduates who talked about their experiences as first-generation immigrant students. During lunch, Myra met Susanna and then a group who had participated in Making Connections gave the class a campus tour. In the letter she wrote after the visit, Myra (L4) reflected:

I had a lot of fun with you the other day. You are really nice. It was really nice to meet you. You are exactly the person I imagined. Some people, when you talk to them on the computer, they sound different, and when you meet them in person it’s different. When I met you it was not that way. I had lots of fun with you and [the others]...Thanks for showing us some or all the important buildings at [the U]. We all had a lot of fun with you and your friends. I love [the Latino house] it is a cool house. Do you like [it]? I did a lot.

Here, Myra’s lived experience emulates that of Susanna’s: Myra echoes the phrase Susanna used to describe the students she met at the house during her first visit—it was the “really nice” people who made her feel at home and ultimately, the reason she chose to attend the university. Myra adds, “It was really nice to meet you.” More than an expression of her good manners, Myra acknowledges how the abstract has been made concrete in the lived experience of the visit: Myra describes how the imagined Susanna, known to Myra only through her emails, became real in the space of the Latino house. Moreover, she marvels at how the real Susanna was exactly like the one she imagined. She expresses her appreciation to Susanna and the others, moving from her individual experience to that of the collective group: “We all had a lot of fun with you and your friends.” She ends the paragraph by returning (discursively, but also spatially) to where the tour began—the Latino house. “I love [the Latino house]”, she writes, “it is a cool house. Do you like [it]? I did a lot.” Then, for the first time in her letters, Myra (L4) expresses her hope that she might attend the university:

I hope that I go to [the U]. I think it would be a lot of fun. [The U] looks really pretty. [The U] has a lot of flowers. If my mom was there she would love it too! Do you want to know why? Well, it’s because she loves flowers. In my house she has a lot of flowers. Some are real and some of them are not. Thanks a lot for showing us [the U].

Myra: Bending Boundaries
Myra allows herself to imagine being a student at the university, a place she describes
as “really pretty.” Again, Myra unpacks a rather generic phrase in more concrete and personal terms: She explains, revealing what she told Michelle as they walked around the campus that day, that she was impressed by the beauty and knew her mother would love it there, too (Fieldnotes). For Myra, the space of the campus was made more familiar—more like home—in the extensive gardens and planters that were in full bloom that sunny day in the first week of May. The flowers reminded her of the arrangements used by her mom to decorate their home (also referenced in Myra’s other writing and photographs). As she imagined herself as a university student, at home at the Latino center, she also imagined her mother at home there, amidst the ubiquitous flowers. The visit, and particularly the tour, mediated the connection of these spaces. The somewhat abstract, metaphorical worlds of the house and campus that Susanna discursively created in her letters had now become physical and material in Myra’s lived experience. Her letter points to a convergence—at least for a time—of these fields of spatiality (Soja, 1996) as her middle school identity was connected with Susanna’s university identity, but also as a new imagined identity as a Latina university student emerged from Myra’s privileged identities as a family member and daughter.

**Conclusion**

**Implications: Bending the Boundaries of Students’ Identities in School Spaces**

As Comber et al. (2006) remind us, critical literacy is not about the development of critical materials; it is about taking up a critical stance through engaging in critical inquiry, constructing spaces, enacting identities, and establishing agency (Beach et al., 2010). As literacy researchers and practitioners, we acknowledge how immobilizing it is to feel bounded in the classroom by the rigid geographies of student labels, school test scores, and educational policies. It is difficult, but also increasingly necessary, to recognize how we, our students and curricula, are shaped by the spaces in which we teach and learn. Reflecting on the situational locations we inhabit in schools allows us to begin to consider alternative spaces, to act in ways that change our relationships, and to intentionally move the boundaries around us to create spaces that are enabling and enhancing (Soja, 2011; Gruenewald, 2003).

When we recognize how the social and spatial aspects of literacy and learning are mutually constitutive (Lefebvre, 1991; Rowe & Leander, 2005), we can also be attentive to the work students are doing—especially that which we may dismiss as resistant or insignificant. That is one way educators can reshape school spaces for boxed-in students like Jasmine. Had Jasmine’s teacher punished her for bringing in her costume or her peers ostracized her for enacting the mayoral speech, her experience might have been shaped very differently. Noticing and listening to students’ explanations regarding the significance of their actions and discourse can bend some of the notions normalized in many institutions regarding power, agency, and success.

Adding a spatial perspective to a critical literacy stance also acknowledges the inevitable conflicts inherent in crossing and shifting boundaries (Leander, 2002; Beach et al., 2010). Jasmine, Myra, and Susanna were flexing the rigid boundaries around their social spaces and identities, revealing their contradictions as they also sought to transform them. As Lefebvre (1996) argued, the trialectal of lived, perceived, and conceived spaces are simultaneously produced. However, humans seek to separate them to serve various purposes, revealing contradictions. For while “spatial contradictions express conflicts between socio political interests and forces; it is only in space that such conflicts come effectively into play, and in so doing they become contradictions of space”
In Jasmine’s case, figuring out how she could participate in the group shifted her identity markers to fit various contexts. At first, her efforts to attract her peers’ attention in the small group were unsuccessful, a different experience than her daily life. Her perceived identity space, constructed through daily social practices, was disrupted. She took on a conceived identity space: that of a student leader and motivated project participant, and in the process of social interaction, produced a lived identity space that linked both in a new way. Her leadership role was not relegated to a compliant student. Rather, Jasmine maintained and acculturated leadership into a vehicle for taking action, such as wearing her costume rather than uniform and using marginalized language (i.e. “talking ghetto”) as reshaping spatial competence.

Thus, the examples begin to make thirdspace identities visible as a “disordering, deconstruction, and tentative reconstitution” of those in perceived and conceived spaces, “producing an open alternative that is both similar and strikingly different” (Soja, 1996, p. 60-61). In “The Latino House” example, the reconfiguring of relationships to and identities within a space occurred around another politically controversial issue: access to the university. Symbolized in recruitment materials through its much-photographed front gates, access to the university for the mostly undocumented immigrant middle school students in the ENL class was instead experienced through a figurative “backdoor”: the Latino center. As Susanna explained in her response to Myra, it felt like home to her: “Whenever I walk in it feels like I am walking into a family member’s house!” (Susanna, L4). Known as the “house” or more officially, as the “center”, it was both: a recognized academic center for research, teaching, and service, located in a physical home in the center of campus, that for many, functioned as a symbolic home at the center of their university lives. Through the space produced by their correspondence and tour, Susanna made it possible for Myra to imagine the campus as a lived space. By her identification with the house, Susanna could connect Myra “to the multiple established meanings and identities of that place” (Taylor, 2003, p. 193; in Benwell & Stokoe, p. 216). This made it possible for Myra to reconfigure her own identity in relationship to the campus; for “this can work as a claim to an identity as, for example, the kind of person who belongs there” (Taylor, 2003, p. 193; in Benwell & Stokoe, 2006, p. 216).

In conclusion, the negotiation of Jasmine’s, Myra’s, and Susana’s academic identities around the contradictions in these school spaces worked to produce new social spaces “through reconfigured relations to institutional, historical, and imagined social spaces” (Leander, 2002, p. 220). With the understanding that spaces are socially constructed comes the possibility for those spaces—“our human geographies”—to be changed through social action. As our examples demonstrate, “It is precisely this possibility of meaningful spatial transformation that gives to the production of space a significant practical and political dimension” (Soja, 2011, p. x). Therefore educators must begin with the expectation that students can and will push back on predetermined structures in schools and begin to envision schools as territories of possibility.

References


