Writing Ourselves In: Researcher Reflexivity in Ethnographic and Multimodal Methods for Understanding What Counts, to Whom, and How We Know

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Researcher reflexivity shapes what and how we know, because the background against which something becomes a site for analysis, and through which we position knowledge about it, result from our researcher gaze. We examine here an adolescent-produced multimodal story according to three different researcher gazes across space and time. By sidestepping a singular attribution of knowing what counts, our intercontextual analysis constructs different epistemological viewpoints on this multimodal story and contexts of its creation. [epistemology, ethnography, intercontextuality, multimodality, reflexivity]

Introduction

This article was inspired by a multimodal story titled, *Fan Ho: The Cinderella Boy*, that was collaboratively written by four adolescents (11–12 years old) as part of a three-year, ethnographic research project.[1] The four-minute, stop-action animated story was created during an after-school, drop-in multimodal storytelling workshop that our research team facilitated for over two years at a community center in Singapore.[2] Fan Ho is the story's protagonist who, along with his stepbrother Ran Ran and the help of a fairy godmother, wins the affections of two princesses at a royal ball despite his stepfather's protest. As is evidenced by the story's subtitle, *Fan Ho* is a version of the Cinderella story (see Figure 1 for the title screen shot of *Fan Ho* and https://vid.me/e/ICoR to view the full story).

Fan Ho represented a dramatic shift from prior stories that adolescents created during our time at this community center and was the kind of story we had hoped for since the project's inception—adolescent-initiated, collaboratively developed, iteratively revised, and not in direct response to a specific prompt by adults. *Fan Ho* thus signified an exemplar of sorts for the overarching project, and we were initially interested in understanding the processes and contexts that led to its creation. However, despite *Fan Ho* being a catalyst for this article, it is actually our analytic process and how we came to differently understand *Fan Ho* and its larger significance that is the primary focus of our analysis. In other words, we do not consider multimodal tools for doing ethnography nor examine multimodal texts in traditional ethnographic ways, but rather we aim to discuss epistemological negotiations while attempting to bridge the two.

Multimodality illuminates in large measure what is in the text, while ethnography illuminates what the text is in. However, our early attempts at either ethnographic or multimodal analysis drew from *a priori* methodological approaches within either tradition, which all led to the same feeling—that there was no *there* there. Adapting off-the-shelf analytic approaches to make sense of *Fan Ho* as a multimodal text, its related authoring practices, and the ethnographic context were not particularly illuminative in resolving our particular analytic interests—that is, understanding what made *Fan Ho* possible and (initially) how we might create similar opportunities for adolescent authoring in school

FIGURE 1. Still of *Fan Ho*'s title screen.

contexts. It was only through unpacking our different research gazes on *Fan Ho* as a focus of analysis that we arrived at the main argument we present here: our ways of seeing (and knowing) stem from our positionality, which mediates any epistemological or methodological positions that might seem to come along with existing research traditions, like multimodality or epistemology. We propose the concept of researcher *gaze*—a process of coming to know from an explicitly positioned vantage point—to frame the act of seeing not as passive but as an active, particularized, perspectival, and of course partial, epistemological process.

We organize the remainder of this article around an unfurling of different gazes on *Fan Ho* in order to illustrate how formalizing researcher reflexivity in our analysis illuminates what our different ways of knowing about text, context, and most importantly, the so-what of our endeavors, meant when juxtaposed intercontextually (Bloome et al. 2009; Floriani 1994). In so doing, we argue for the need to take more explicit epistemological stance(s) when bridging traditions that themselves have rich historical roots and multiple methodological stances from which researchers might choose.

We next provide background context on *Fan Ho* and the research project out of which it grew before delving into a more nuanced discussion of different analytic traditions associated with multimodality and ethnography. We then offer researcher gaze as a methodological frame for explicating researcher reflexivity. Lastly, we present our own researcher gazes from which we came to understand *Fan Ho* through an intercontextual analysis.

Context of the Study

The larger, three-year funded project out of which *Fan Ho* grew was a multisite, ethnographic study that took place in Singapore. Its broad aim was to develop a culture around expanded literacy practices with academically marginalized adolescents, both in and out of school. For the out-of-school sites, we focused on fostering adolescents' interests and understanding their burgeoning multimodal authoring practices so as to inform our design of future in-school workshops.

FIGURE 2. Examples of Kids Town signage.

Fan Ho was created at our first long-term, out-of-school site, Kids Town (all names of people and places except for the authors are pseudonyms), during the first year of the project. We came to partner with Kids Town through a mutual acquaintance of Kate's and one of the lead staff members at Kids Town who knew that the center's leadership team were eager for adult volunteers to provide new direction and energy for the adolescent program. Three of our research team members (including Kate and Masturah) visited the center two afternoons each week for two-hour sessions as volunteers from 2009 to 2011 (with Masturah as the lead liaison). For the first few months before any concerted storytelling efforts began, we helped participants with homework, played cards and video games, and generally attempted to blend in as regulars. We then aimed to increasingly support and shape practices around multimodal storytelling. Center staff were eager for the multimodal storytelling to take off, as they thought it would engage adolescent center attendees and help them further develop their English skills as well as lead to projects and products about which their funders and member families would be proud and supportive.[3]

Kids Town was located in a community center serving residents of one of Singapore's typically dense neighborhoods, composed largely of high-rise government housing blocks. As of 2015, 81% of Singaporeans lived in government housing, which are typically owned by residents (Singapore Department of Statistics 2015: 11). However, the area surrounding Kids Town also included a significant number of older, low-rise rental apartments. Thus, some of Kids Town's surrounding area had a significant lower socioeconomic status (SES) demographic. Kids Town was open to any center participants enrolled in Primary 6 through Secondary 2 (11–14 years old) who agreed to the terms of membership—no truancy from school, gang involvement, smoking, or drug use. During our time at Kids Town, there were usually six to ten adolescent participants at any given time, with a roughly equal number of boys and girls. The majority, though not all, lived in the surrounding neighborhood or attended one of the nearby schools.

Kids Town occupied three rooms on a top floor of a newer high-rise, government-housing block and served all ages (featuring a karaoke room popular with retired patrons). The largest room (roughly 300 square feet) was often used during after-school hours for elementary-aged participant activities as well as center-wide programs like movie viewings, awards ceremonies, and dance classes. The second largest room (roughly 100 square feet) where much of the Kids Town adolescent activity took place was a hang out room that housed four aging desktop computers (two of which had working Internet connections), a TV with a Nintendo Wii, a small card table, and a couch. Adolescent participants often congregated here when not doing homework or engaging in other structured activities. Nestled between these two larger rooms was a much smaller room
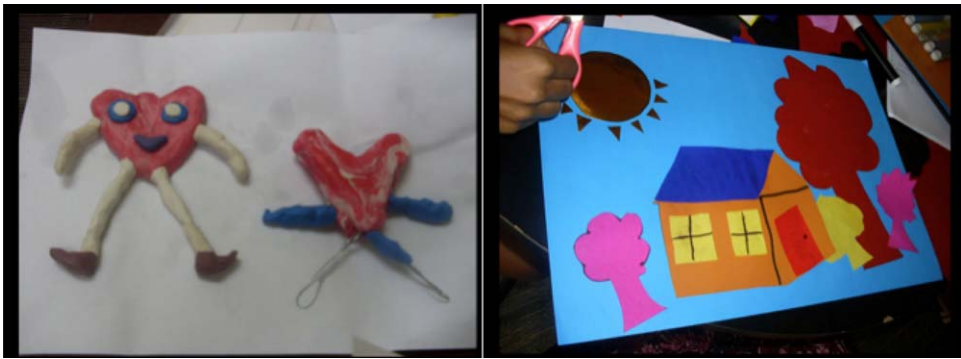
FIGURE 3. Images from *Fan Ho*'s production.

with another card table, a small refrigerator, and additional doors that led to an outdoor area and a meeting room; motivational posters and reminders of the rules decorated the walls and doors (see Figure 2 for photographs of examples).

During the early months of our partnership, most of the stories that participants created were show-and-tell stories about themselves or friends and family, or ghost stories (which were discouraged by center staff and at most schools as they were widely perceived as inappropriate due to religious reasons). These early stories were mostly short (2–3 minutes), simple, noncollaborative, and sometimes left unfinished. *Fan Ho* was the first story created at Kids Town that broke this trend. It was composed over the course of eight weeks by a core group of four adolescents, all in Primary 6 (11–12 years old) who led the authoring creatively and materially: Azri and Ruth (Malay girls) were best friends and primarily wrote the script (and imagined themselves as the two lead female characters); Ming Fong (Chinese boy) fancied himself as *Fan Ho* but was repeatedly told by Azri and Ruth that he was Ran Ran, the stepbrother; and Summer (Chinese girl) who along with the others created the materials and led the recording and editing of *Fan Ho*.

The early portion of *Fan Ho*'s production took place in the small vestibule room, during which core participants created clay figures with us one day when we happened to bring modeling clay. These figures became the inspiration for the story, which the participants began working on in earnest four weeks later (see Figure 3 for images of production). Participants next created scene backdrops using construction paper, markers, and cut outs from glossy, shiny, and glittery colored papers, which we helped them photograph using a stop-action software program (Animator DV). During this phase, we were in a quieter meeting room the staff let us use for activities. Lastly, we helped them record voiceover and sound effects and added postproduction effects. Even though the research team members provided support throughout the project, the participants set the agenda and most of the story's and artifacts' details. Next we discuss multimodality and ethnography in order to better situate our analysis in light of a larger methodological conversation and present the theoretical framework that grounded our analysis before turning to the analysis.

Multimodality and Ethnography

In brief, multimodality entails meaning making through multiple modes, in tandem with different media. This meaning making takes place through the actions and intents of those who create multimodal texts (with texts being defined very broadly, sometimes including movement or even identity, for example). Modes are immaterial resources for meaning making that are culturally shaped by audience and contexts and have related

affordances and constraints (Jewitt 2009; Kress 2003). Modes (and their interpretations) are inseparable from social, cultural, and affective matters (Kress 2003). Examples of modes include the written word, pictures, music, or gestures. Together, modes and media (the material resources through which modes are expressed) allow authors to realize concrete and situated possibilities for meaning making. Multimodality therefore addresses how resources are remade in interaction and mobilized in specific socioculturally shaped situations by people with particular histories and interests.

The social semiotic approach to multimodality that brings considerations of social context to the foreground runs wide and deep in education, especially in studies of literacy practices, written communication, and language education (e.g., Jewitt, 2005, 2008, 2009; Kress and van Leeuwen 2001; Rowsell et al. 2012). However, we should note that social semiotics is not the only approach to multimodality. As is discussed by Kate Anderson (2013), systemic functional linguistics is another prevalent theoretical approach to multimodality (e.g., Bezemer and Kress 2008) that, while drawing on some social semiotic traditions, focuses more on the availability and use of resources for meaning making. In contrast, situative approaches focus more on culturally embedded practices and how artifacts mediate those practices (cf. Street 1984).

As Carey Jewitt (2009) and Gunther Kress (2011) both assert, multimodality is not a singular theory but rather represents a set of approaches broadly concerned with meaning making via multiple modes. As a set of approaches (e.g., including situative and systemic functional linguistics), scholars interested in multimodality can draw from different methodologies: logics of inquiry comprising coherent assumptions about what counts as knowledge, what constitutes evidence thereof, and appropriate methods given a guiding set of goals or research questions. These methodological variations can range from post-positivistic inquiry concerned with the ways modes correspond to particular, realized affordances in finished texts (assuming a separation between researcher/participant and ways of knowing that aim for objectivity) (e.g., Chen 2010; Martin 2009), to participatory action research whereby meaning is seen to lie with participants who are brought in as co-researchers (e.g., Turner 2012; Vasudevan et al. 2010), and everywhere in between. Thus, multimodality is not a unitary approach and can be used in concert with a variety of methodologies. Similarly, ethnography, with its long history, can also draw on a variety of methodological and philosophical assumptions, ranging from post-positivist versions (especially in early-20th-century cultural anthropological tradition associated with Malinowski [1927]) to critical and participatory approaches to ethnography that have become prevalent in the last few decades (e.g., Carspecken 1996; Vasudevan 2014; Weis and Fine 2013).

Studies of multimodality focus on meanings made (usually from the vantage point of the researcher interpreting text[s]) but not always the processes of the meaning's unfolding or multiple perspectives on what meanings could be made of a text, however socioculturally situated the account may be. Ethnographic studies, on the other hand, often highlight verisimilitude and embodiment in order to ground findings through rich description of a context's features, especially from the perspectives of those involved. Thus, part of the analytic goal of ethnography includes situating meaning according to a specific perspective. However, any single study or approach to research can only accomplish so much, as we work within constraints of space, time, and the limits of our own and our audience's familiarity and rhetorical patience.

Building on Ingold's (2008, 2014) critiques of the overuse of the terms *ethnography* and *ethnographic*, we too claim to sit outside of purely descriptive ethnographic approaches of the 20th century that rely on a retrospective and authoritative version of encounters. Rather, we relate particularities to both the contexts in which we come to think we can understand them as well as the ways of knowing that always already filter our abilities to

see and know. We thus hold as objects of analysis here our ways of seeing texts, contexts, and, as we describe below, intercontexts through accounting that makes our ways of seeing analytically explicit. As Ingold (2014, 386) aptly stated, "what we could call 'ethnographicness' is not intrinsic to the encounters themselves; it is rather a judgment that is cast upon them through a retrospective conversion of the learning, remembering and note-taking which they call forth into pretexts for something else altogether."

This brings us to the topic of how multimodality and ethnography offer complementary vantage points and foci from which to analyze how meaning is made of texts and of contexts. For instance, in a special issue on ethnography and multimodality in *Qualitative Research*, Rosie Flewitt (2011) highlighted how multimodality offers tools for considering micro-social aspects of meaning making (i.e., of a moment), while ethnography offers tools to situate those micro-social meanings against a broader sociocultural backdrop including practice, beliefs, and values. Rachel Hurdley and Bella Dicks (2011) similarly argued that, together, multimodality and ethnography might illuminate each other's blind spots, giving the researcher a fuller, more comprehensive picture. Continuing that thread in the special issue, Kress (2011, 253) drew a connection between the epistemologies that different methodologies afford for seeing the world and answering research questions in certain ways, claiming that, "modes themselves offer potentials for different 'transcriptions' of the world." In other words, the modal affordances available in any given socio-historically situated moment shape what can be known and signified (e.g., epistemology) as well as how that can be accomplished (i.e., methodology). Just as our epistemologies shape what can be known, methodologies afford and constrain what we can see in our research representations. We take up Kress' (2011, 253) discussion of methodologies as tools for "holding still" aspects of the world by explicating how we construct interpretations and explanations according to the ways we frame our attentions, ideally in ways that provide epistemological consistency between ways of knowing and seeing.

Finding a way to "transcribe" *Fan Ho* and hold it still so we could understand what it represented as well as signified (i.e., what it showed versus what its implications were for our project) required something that neither multimodal nor ethnographic analysis, in isolation, could provide, even if we engaged both from an epistemological perspective that acknowledged our active construction of meaning and interpretation. We therefore consider how multimodality's textual affordances and ethnography's contextual affordances for understanding meaning making together comprise a third space for understanding intercontextually, which we highlight in the form of a methodological focus on researcher reflexivity through gaze. In the following section, we explain our approach in terms of theoretical framings and how we organized analysis of *Fan Ho* around a methodology of reflexivity, which specifically acknowledges that what something means, as well as what we can possibly know, is ultimately partial and perspectival.

Theoretical Framework

This article brings together concerns from multimodality about the richness of texts and their semiotic resources for meaning making and concerns from ethnography about the richness of contexts for understanding situated practices and their consequences. We do so under the guise of researcher gaze, which we offer as a methodological tool for active epistemological stance taking, by which different vantage points and goals are explicitly seen to shape what we see and know. This framing offers reflexivity regarding how the meaning of a multimodal text, or the contexts that led to its creation, are not fixed or singular but are rather multiple, perspectival, and ultimately partial facets of a fluid intercontextuality of the researcher's making. This is an epistemological and methodological argument with implications for expanding readily available ways to approach multimodality and

ethnography in concert. Before delving deeper into intercontextuality, we first unpack context a bit further.

Context

   In Ole Dreier's theory of persons as situated participants in social practice, one of his conceptual foci was the "practical and structural relations between local social contexts" (2008, 21). According to this view, individuals shape the social world through their participation in it—that is, through specific, situated, and embodied forms of social practice. Social practice, in turn, comprises "diverse local contexts" that are spatially and translocally "linked in a social structure" (Dreier 2008, 23). Rejecting a view of context as an abstraction or a structural "whole," Dreier further argued that contexts are instead parts, which "hang together" in complex relations of parts to parts:

> The idea of an overall structural whole is associated with the belief in an overall point of view, a privileged nowhere, in the construction of knowledge. Such an unsituated, extralocal view on knowledge reflects and serves an institutional epistemology in the study of concrete contexts…By subsuming everything under abstract, general categories in isolation, we bracket the particular arrangements, events, and links to particular contexts and silence the particular perspectives and concerns of particular persons to them. [Dreier 2008, 26]

We draw on Dreier's treatment of context in our analysis in two nested ways: (1) gaze, which situates our ways of seeing from a somewhere, rather than "a privileged nowhere"; and (2) juxtaposition of our gazes, as well as the texts and contexts onto which we gaze, hang together as parts rather than wholes.[4] This analytic arrangement, which we describe in more detail below, acknowledges both spatial and translocal aspects of how we come to know, foregrounding reflexivity by recognizing the parts that at once hang together but are always particular to our relations in a context. This framework thus enables us to represent the complex process of how we transformed *Fan Ho* into an exemplar through explicating our research epistemologies.

Intercontextuality

   Intercontextuality refers to how individuals draw on contexts to position themselves and frame meaning (Floriani 1994, 255). Although most writing on intercontextuality focuses on understanding participants' meanings made of texts and contexts (most often learners), we extend this construct to also include how we as researchers position and frame our own ways of knowing. Dreier (1999, 270) discussed intercontextuality, claiming that contexts can only be understood in light of their juxtaposed relationships to each other and from individuals' situated perspectives. Intercontextuality is thus a construct for understanding the interpretive process by which meanings are made of events (such as interactions, texts), contexts, their interrelations, and the social practices and relations implicated therein (Bloome et al. 2009, 319; Ingold 2014).
   This intercontextual lens illuminates how ways of knowing are interrelated, which we organize via the concept of gaze (and the positionality it evokes with regards to ways of seeing) as well as the structuring relationship it has on a logic of inquiry (methodology) through which our knowing and seeing are explicated. Intercontextuality therefore entails unpacking how meanings—of a moment and over time—as well as larger cycles of activity in which those meanings and parts hang together must be accounted for in analyses (Dreier 1999; Floriani 1994; Ingold 2008). Isolated events, just like isolated texts, can be understood quite differently when the larger contexts and flows of meaning are brought into consideration through explicating researcher gaze. This brings us to our overarching methodological assumption: our differential access to texts, experiences, and shared

meanings gained from the iterative processes of interpretive analysis (e.g., synthesizing scholarly literature, theorizing, applying concepts, interpreting various forms of data) is all filtered through our gaze as researchers. We thus aim to show below how the acknowledgment of our different researcher gazes augmented researcher reflexivity and helped to explicate our epistemologies, or ways of knowing, which are especially important when bridging traditions (and even more crucial when bridging traditions that themselves comprise multiple epistemological options).

Analysis

We organize this analysis into two overarching sections: (1) a brief backdrop to our initial analytic approach to *Fan Ho* as text and context, and (2) a more detailed intercontextual analysis of gaze and researcher reflexivity surrounding the meanings we made of *Fan Ho*. The intercontextual analysis unfolds across three subsections, one representing each author's reflection on *Fan Ho*, which we organize according to an experiential *then* and analytic *now*.

Fan Ho as Text and Context

When we initially analyzed *Fan Ho*, we unintentionally reified text and context as objects of analysis, or singular points about which we could know. From this vantage point, *Fan Ho* seemed a charming four-minute multimodal story in which adolescent authors used various semiotic resources to reflect their interests. For example, Azri, who came up with the initial idea, had shared that it stemmed from a Korean drama (i.e., widely popular South Korean daytime TV shows that are dubbed into local languages worldwide) in which a male character was cast in the traditionally female role of Cinderella. In these earlier attempts at analysis, we drew from widely existing multimodal methods. For example, Jewitt (2009) summarized the four basic assumptions that shape most approaches to multimodality, regardless of methodological tradition: (1) language is part of a "multimodal ensemble" (i.e., meaning is made through more than just the mode of language); (2) each mode within the multimodal ensemble is contingent on context and only becomes meaningful therein; (3) people make meaning by using and organizing modes; and (4) texts' meanings are socially embedded. Building on these assumptions, we looked to evidence of *Fan Ho*'s significance in the interplay of modes throughout the story and the social contexts according to which we could interpret further those modes' meaning potential and mediational significance.

We also considered analyzing the participants' habitus (Bourdieu 1977), or the lived experiences that affect how individuals interact with the world, by interpreting material artifacts of *Fan Ho*'s creation (Pahl and Rowsell 2010). This informed a possible vantage point on these adolescents' identities and interests as interpreted through artifacts and the story itself (e.g., interest in fabled romance and intrigue; playing out interpersonal crushes and social rejections via the story). Finally, we also considered a visual analysis of *Fan Ho* (e.g., Serafini 2010), through which we examined the story as detached viewers on the interwoven perceptual, structural, and ideological meanings based in the story as text. The interplay of the narration, clay figures, animation, music, lighting, and sound effects contributed to *Fan Ho*'s multimodal ensemble, which we also considered in light of what we knew of the processes and context of *Fan Ho*'s creation—what we understood about the participants, their relationships, and interests. According to these initial social semiotic-inspired analyses of text and context, we could have constructed knowledge about how participants drew on semiotic resources to create socially situated meanings within the story and the Kids Town context.

Our ethnographic involvement in *Fan Ho*'s creation also afforded interpretations of *Fan Ho* beyond the text as the primary site of analysis and to examine the process as well as the product. To these ends we examined field notes, videos, photographs, and other artifacts. We wrote analytic memos and consolidated interpretations of them to position *Fan Ho* as a lived experience in an attempt to get at the participants' perspectives. In so doing, we rediscovered the relationships between *Fan Ho*'s authors and details about how it emerged as a story. We realized how much detail and texture was created through artifacts and field notes as well as how much memories blur and fade. We also recognized that without having brought the adolescents in as co-participants we did not have the kind of data that would allow us to make claims about their experiences. We did, however, form interpretations about competing ideologies between stakeholders (participants, staff, researchers) as well as the sorts of authoring practices in which participants engaged.

Examining *Fan Ho* as a text and context thus highlighted how we might better understand the adolescent authors' choices through artifacts like field notes and photos, or the difference between *Fan Ho* and other adolescent-produced stories in light of their multimodal qualities, semiotic potentials, or what these texts might illuminate about participants, their positionality, opportunities for engaging in literacy practices, and so forth. However, none of our analytic attempts rooted in either text or context as singular points from which to see and know allowed us to better understand what made *Fan Ho* exemplary. Rather, we realized that the significance of *Fan Ho* rested on how we viewed the story, context, and what those mean to us as researchers. Therefore, finding these previous analytic methods dissatisfying, we developed a framework for analyzing *Fan Ho* as a place from which the three of us constructed different gazes—translocal and temporal spaces of our own construction from which to see and know, which we organized through juxtapositions that comprised the intercontextual analysis we now present.

Fan Ho as Intercontext

Our initial analytic approaches described above were not epistemologically satisfying, in short, because they lacked a consideration of who deemed *Fan Ho* unique or interesting and why. Explicit reflexivity about how we too shaped *Fan Ho* through our researcher gaze, both at the time (in accounting for the experiential *then*) but more importantly, in the analytic *now* as we reconstruct it and present our ways of knowing about it as findings, creates an intercontextual view. This vantage point positions our researcher gaze as a view from somewhere and a way of knowing that links elements of contexts as they hang together from each of our partial views from somewhere. What continued coming to the foreground of our analytic meanderings was the process of trying to affix meaning to *Fan Ho* once and for all, the impossibility of that, and what we came to realize were the benefits of ambivalence, multiple perspectives, and the passage of time. To those ends, we now present each of our gazes, organized according to an experiential *then* and an analytic *now*, which we then synthesize below.

Masturah (Singaporean Research Assistant)

Experiential Then

Coming into Kids Town to work with the adolescent participants (I will refer to them as "kids" because that is what we and Kids Town staff called them), I had mixed feelings. Initially, I understood my role to be an ambassador of multimodal stories and to get the kids to create them. I was told by some of the center staff that the kids were rowdy, so I was not sure how I would be able to fulfill my role. My intentions were largely influenced by my sense of responsibility toward my work, and my goals were primarily getting my work

done at Kids Town. Although I aimed to befriend the kids, it started off feeling that even this befriending was a means to get them to warm up to me and work on a story as soon as possible. Despite these early feelings of detachment, after a few months I felt my role shift as I became emotionally attached. The kids were open and honest in a way that I had never experienced before. As their trust in me grew, it felt like an initiation ceremony after which I was let into their secret world (which they carefully guarded from the center staff, as their relationship to the kids was more like teachers, enforcing rules and promoting moral development). Given how their trust and openness seemed so hard won, I now wanted to give them something in return.

I also became more invested in the process of multimodal storytelling than in the product. I felt that the kids learning something was what mattered, whether or not they produced a finished story. At first, I located evidence of learning in skills development; I believed that they could not possibly express themselves creatively without first knowing how to use the tools (technological or rhetorical) effectively. However, I noticed a shift over time that changed my vision of both my role and what counted as learning. The kids began excitedly asking to work on stories they had begun during a prior session, and the nature of their stories shifted from slideshows to complex meaning making of their identities with a new sense of an "us" in stories. I progressively noticed bits of their lives and thoughts, those of their friends (which included us), and the Kids Town context and community woven into the stories.

Analytic Now

My initial fixation on evidence of learning as skills development and concrete elements of stories' composition is likely shaped by my formal education experiences in Singapore, which enculturated me into valuing structures and concrete and measurable skills. Having lived in Singapore all my life, mainly as a student for 20-something years and working in educational research for the past seven years, my perspective on *Fan Ho* and Kids Town is quite different from Kate and Olivia's. Looking back, I feel that my beliefs and intentions during our time at Kids Town were largely influenced by the governing educational institution's (Ministry of Education, MOE) widely communicated goals for the country's education and even more so by my own experiences as a traditionally successful student in the Singapore educational system. Structure was something that we held on to for dear life. High stakes examinations shaped a didactic approach to learning for most of my schooling, with rote memorization and drills predominating. As a result, we were accustomed to believing that in order to learn something, we needed to be taught. Everything was heavily guided and structured by the teacher. Such expectations of structure made independent learning difficult, and a focus on success and achievement in high stakes examinations has shaped generations of teachers and learners.

It is clearer looking back that the goals for the Kids Town workshop to evolve with kids' interests without constraints from adults might have been too much for many of the people involved. I too may not have been properly equipped, in both mindset and skill set, to effectively facilitate this workshop in ways that aligned with project goals. The general demographic of our project (i.e., adolescents who were marginalized by the education system) was, in my opinion now, the most likely to benefit from our approach as they were the least conditioned or expected to conform to the structured educational system. However, it seems that we were far from able to foster a learning environment that promoted independent, collaborative, and experiential learning in a less structured context. Even now, from my vantage point as a school-based educational researcher in Singapore, we are learning more from the primary schools where students are now being enculturated from the start into forms of learning we strove for in the project. I had initially looked to the form and the product (story) for signs of learning and my own versions of success, whereas

I now appreciate that the process (including loose ends that were never picked back up) and the messiness of exploring ways to make meaning is a form of learning itself.

Kate (Faculty Member and Project PI)

Experiential Then

While Masturah has lived in Singapore her whole life, and Olivia in the United States, I bridge the physical divide between the gazes on *Fan Ho*. I left the United States for a faculty position in Singapore two years prior to *Fan Ho*'s creation. When we first partnered with Kids Town, I was optimistic about what we hoped to accomplish—that is, provide technological and human resources so the academically marginalized adolescents who attended the center could create, unfettered by school constraints, so we could learn about what they did in such a setting. I was eager to see not only what they were interested in but also to show that they could do much more than often given credit for and to eventually influence school curricula to be more relevant and engaging. My early inspiration to begin this project and compete for funding was to show that academically marginalized adolescents could do much more than existing literacy practices and opportunities afforded, to push the boundaries of what counted as text or participation for curricula and pedagogy locally, and to help inspire participants to feel they had something important to say. Kids Town represented an opportunity to show that once the shackles of school were removed, these adolescents would surprise everyone with what they could do when allowed to pursue their own interests, which might come to change how these mostly lower-tracked students were engaged in language arts at school.

These naïve and somewhat hubristic initial goals changed for a number of reasons, namely logistical pressures related to managing the grant as well as losing energy fighting what felt like an uphill battle against the strictures and inertia of the system and its effects on those involved. What counted for me most at the time was wrapped up in a contradictory mix of meeting project milestones and goals, establishing a culture around multimodal storytelling at Kids Town, hopefully making a difference for participants' experiences, and getting "good" data. The pressures to deliver on the grant and related publications came to outweigh many of the goals and desires that had initially inspired me. In terms of grant pressures, being lead investigator on a three-year funded project meant that I had to report regularly to an advisory board on our progress. Compounding that, the basis of our project was to bridge in- and out-of-school multimodal storytelling practices. More specifically, what participants did in the out-of-school setting was meant to inform how we developed curricular storytelling workshops for a different set of academically marginalized students' English Language Arts classes in school. Thus, a not insignificant amount of pressure was in place for things to work early on so that we could start to make claims about adolescents' interests and practices out of school and to then start designing for ways to make room for that in school. The project was already behind deadline for key milestones when *Fan Ho* was created. We had begun designing and facilitating workshops at our partner school, and ideally a story like *Fan Ho* that hit on so many project aspirations would have occurred before this point. When it did though, it seemed rife for exploration.

Analytic Now

I have spent a good deal of the intervening years since *Fan Ho* was created trying to come to terms with why Kids Town did not turn out to be what we had hoped and why the project seemed to fall short of expectations. In part, coming back to *Fan Ho* was an attempt at redemption. Here was an adolescent-created story that hit on many project goals and a context in which we had truly been immersed. Therefore, we could analyze the story and

what happened surrounding it in a way that might lead to insights, interest a scholarly audience, provide possible next steps for making a practice-based impact, and so on.

It is clearer in hindsight that our project did not have the appropriate resources or context to accomplish its goals. In trying to create space for adolescent learners' agency and authorial voice, we instead found a vacuum quickly filled with the very constraints we tried to keep at bay. Our team also lacked a mix of experience, interest, and complementary views, such that our working parts could not accomplish the goals of the whole. When this unfolding reality fell short of expectations, what counted came to be more pragmatic and grounded in deliverables and ways of knowing/seeing/telling that could be translatable to poster presentations, project reports, pedagogical principles, and, of course, exemplar multimodal stories to showcase for various audiences (schools, colleagues, funders, participants, parents). *Fan Ho* seemed a bright spot that touched upon many of these components at just the right time, so it lived in my mind as something important to analyze and tell about. When the opportunity arose to do just that, it seemed that my memory of *Fan Ho* held far more meaning than did *Fan Ho* the story or Kids Town the context. By reifying *Fan Ho* as "the one that worked," I fell prey to the very things I criticized about some multimodality research—the text became all-important. Epistemologically, I was embarking on something that continued the trend of doing what I felt I had to do rather than wanted to do.

Olivia (U.S. Doctoral Student)

Experiential Then

I joined this study as a first-year doctoral student in the United States working with Kate as my advisor, four years after *Fan Ho* was created. Because I was not a part of the research team in Singapore, I have a different experiential *then*, both in time and space, that balances the perspectives of the other authors and their closeness to the project. Prior to my doctoral work, I was a secondary English Language Arts teacher with a master's degree in the United States. Though I had not conducted much research outside of classroom-based observation, my doctoral research agenda was initially focused on classroom motivation and digital technology.

When Kate and I began working together, we decided that to become better acquainted with the data and to get a sense for the ways our research interests overlapped, I watched the multimodal stories from Kids Town (as well as some at other project sites), making preliminary reflective notes based on what I thought was relevant to my interests in motivation and digital technology. I initially noticed that *Fan Ho* stood out from the other multimodal stories created at Kids Town in that the adolescents' use of technologies both to create the final multimodal story and the stop animation that it comprised struck me as evidence of their authentic uptake and creativity with digital tools, especially given that they were not tasked with creating it.

I initially focused on the multimodal story itself with other contextual information purposefully left aside. In some ways, having one less layer of interpretive mediation between the text and me (i.e., working with the multimodal story as data as opposed to including field notes) highlighted many differences between Kate's and my own analytic lenses. Discussing the differences between our gazes (what I could see from the story alone, and how she and Masturah saw it through layers of lived experience) highlighted what my outsider's perspective afforded. Rather than basing my interpretations and analysis on the context of *Fan Ho*'s creation, I had only the text and my own experiences and assumptions to guide and limit my conjectures. Because of my previous research experience where nearly every analysis was based on context, this was a new research approach for me. Often my interpretations, though seemingly grounded in the text, ran counter to Kate's

interpretations based on her firsthand experience of *Fan Ho*'s creation. It was through this juxtaposition that I began to question how it is that we as researchers ever arrive at a place of knowing about adolescent-authored texts.

Analytic Now

Our question of how we come to know through analysis drove me to examine related literature to see how others approached multimodal and ethnographic analysis of multimodal stories and the potential meanings made of them, both participants' and researchers'. I began to question the positions from which researchers described the importance or significance of an artifact and the ways they framed evidence for their claims in either removed or personally attached ways. In other words, I came to be more interested in how researchers framed their claims about authors' intent and interpreted significance of texts and their meaning.

The story that I understood about the ethnographic context surrounding *Fan Ho* was not one that I had lived but rather one that was created for me through others' interpretations of the events (what they found important, relevant, chose to share, and remembered). Therefore, my interpretations hung together with, and were transcribed through, a curated and peripheral gaze that was mediated by the context provided by the other authors, who were part of *Fan Ho*'s creation. My gaze thus stems largely from what I saw as relevant to my developing research interests of learning about methodology, epistemology, and analytic assertions. I found synergy in my research experience with *Fan Ho* and Bakhtin's (2010) notion that an authored text is not something that can be broken down and analyzed neatly but is rather a living artifact where potential meaning(s) can be located at different levels (i.e., in the document, authors, viewer, cultures). My gaze on *Fan Ho* sits within and between each of these levels with their varying affordances and constraints on knowing.

Discussion

In synthesizing our three reflections and highlighting how these complementary gazes allowed us to explicate reflexivity as a way of knowing that transcends component parts, we hope to achieve some depth of view through disparity. While we all share the view that knowing (e.g., about data, or as findings) is perspectival and partial, we feel the limitations of what we can know with certainty is often downplayed in research in the interests of finding things sooner, having a ready audience, or sounding like we know for certainty what we are talking about. All three of us experienced pressures to perform or deliver, which shifted over time. Likewise we were all bounded by our own experiences as to what we could see in, and know about, *Fan Ho* and its place in the research endeavor.

Kate and Masturah were both at Kids Town and reflected on changes in perspective over time that moved in parallel but opposite trajectories, seeming to run counter to the amount of initial expectations about the context. Masturah's initial feelings of responsibility and accompanying emotional detachment from the participants shifted to emotional attachment and focus on their excitement, sustained interest, and a sense of "us" in their stories. Kate's early eagerness and optimism shifted to a mode of pragmatic self-preservation amid pressures to meet various responsibilities associated with the funded grant and expectations to publish. In this way, Kate and Masturah crossed each other on an emotional trajectory that shaped how each saw herself in light of the project, the kids, and what counted according to both. Olivia, with no firsthand experience in Singapore or Kids Town, provides a powerful contrast to the other gazes, especially regarding the limitations and affordances of what we can know of a text or context from a distanced vantage point. Her reflection's divergence from the other two also brings into high relief the role that emotions and personal involvement can play in what we come to know. For example, Kate

and Masturah expressed much of their experiential *then* through descriptions of emotions, goals, and how these changed over time, while Olivia focused more on research and data.

In terms of the complementarity and disparity across the analytic *now* of our three reflections, systems and enculturation clearly shaped the positions from which we came to know. Masturah discussed her enculturation into a version of the Singaporean education system that privileged structure, resisted flexibility, and ultimately limited her (and others') ability to imagine a different version of the multimodal storytelling workshop initially. Kate was also heavily influenced by prior educational experiences, beliefs, and increasingly what appeared to be a system that could not accommodate the project goals by nature of what counted locally, as seen from her outsider perspective.

With *Fan Ho* as a textual and contextual anchor for organizing our reflections according to a *then* and a *now*, we compound spatial differences and trajectories with temporal ones as well. For Kate, *Fan Ho* offered redemption from seemingly failed goals or missed opportunities onto which only space and time afforded a gaze. For Masturah, it was less spatial movement as a metaphorical movement into the world of educational research. However, by staying in Singapore, Masturah has the added vantage point of how it too is changing and how the opportunities and possible roles for learners and educators are changing at the macro-systemic level. Olivia's place from which to gaze on *Fan Ho* was heavily mediated through artifacts and other researchers, which shapes what is possible to know when removed from the context of creation. For her, *Fan Ho* provided little sense of closure on something experienced and was more part of an emotionally detached process of learning more about research, methodology, and meaning making.

We all cross borders spatially, temporally, developmentally, metaphorically. The juxtapositions between how we saw then and what we know now, as well as between how we each know differently, comprise places from which to gaze and therefore positions from which to claim knowing. It is through the intercontextual affordances of such juxtapositions that we argue we can more honestly describe what *Fan Ho* is because of what it was to each of us. It is a point from which to reflect on past naivety, national changes, and developing research acumen. Intercontext is also a point for momentarily holding still and marking a place and space within which not only contexts can be seen to hang together but also the juxtaposed relationships between researchers' gazes, and the differences between what we knew then and what we see now. None of these gazes is right or final, but once they are explicated they become vantage points for knowing that sit outside the hazy lens of an all-too-neat certainty that glosses over much of the processes of how we got there, as if there is a right kind of nowhere we are in search of in order to truly know.

Conclusions

In summary, all gazes work to construct meaning based on the socially situated positions in time and space from which we make sense in relation to other positions, both embodied by others as well as imagined. Peter Smagorinsky (2001, 137) asserted, "how a sign comes to mean is a function of how a reader is enculturated to read." We always bring our own histories and positions to the process of interpreting research experiences and data—theoretical, personal, aspirational—and thus "read" data differently. Additionally, researchers also rhetorically construe relations between personal histories and research traditions through the voices we enact in our writing, usually of authority and nowhere/no-time. As we illustrated through our intercontextual analysis above, sometimes moving beyond ways of seeing that are most familiar to us is needed to tell a more interesting or useful story. Our ways of coming to know therefore have as little or as much to do with what participants or settings mean emically as our lens and position can accommodate and for which we believe we have an audience. Just as a modal ensemble

and related affordances are lenses by which to know from certain multimodal perspectives, gazes comprise what we have been enculturated and sensitized to see as valuable or real epistemologically and experientially as scholars. It is this explicit acknowledgment of the epistemological and experiential that we argue is both a crucial challenge and largely absent methodological discussion in much empirical social sciences research. We do not claim that this is due to scholars' lack of interest in such positioning work but rather because of the lack of expectation (and training) to do so and the usual space constraints in traditional print outlets.

What we understand as a result of our intercontextual analysis is that *Fan Ho* is nothing without someone to gaze upon it, which we see as far different than simply viewing it. Gaze is to see from a position (a location in time, space, social practice, and sociocultural context) with an explicated, reflexive purpose and role. Gazing implies intent—whether it is to make sense of a past experience, have something to show for that experience, make sense of one's current position, be redeemed, get tenure, prove something. Without explicating intent behind a gaze (i.e., epistemological stance), readers cannot fully appreciate how or what we claim to know. Beyond the sociocultural and sociopolitical landscapes of research sites and publication outlets, our negotiations of our own current positions (physically, emotionally, epistemologically, and pragmatically) shape our gaze, or what we can knowingly see. Thus, our intercontextual approach highlights productive tensions related to all research—that is, there is always an audience as well as multiple (often competing) reasons for grounding our claims the way we do.

We at last return to the multimodal and ethnographic methods that have, at least in part, shaped our accounting of research gazes and ensuing ways of knowing about *Fan Ho*. The ways we first saw to hold still (Kress 2011, 255) experiences and interpretations of *Fan Ho* were largely constrained by what we initially saw as available methodological options given our interests and desire in an economy of article production (which we eventually abandoned). The iterative process of trying to formalize our coming to know about *Fan Ho* began with our attempts to transcribe a multimodal story into a repository of what got learned or what can be designed for. Much funded work falls prey to desires for such efficient transformation of lived experiences to findings, lessons, principles, even statistics, as well as to what is likely seen as legitimate by those funding agencies. Funding is not a mere vehicle by which to do our work; we seek funding to make work possible in the image of some widely agreed upon version of what counts. While not necessarily bad, these pressures change how and what one can see in the research process. In our case, the salience of readily available ways of seeing were epistemologically inconsistent with the kinds of stories we wanted to be able to tell or found exemplary about *Fan Ho*. Acknowledging that, at its heart, the epistemological viewpoints we often construct regarding text, authorship, and meaning largely place the researcher(s) at the center of meaning making about participants and their texts, we thus have offered an explicitly reflexive engagement of how a story came to be more than the sum of its parts.

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Notes

1. We define multimodal stories as comprised of "image, sound, animated movement, and other modes of representation and communication" (Jewitt 2005, 316).

2. The overarching research project was funded by the Singapore National Research Foundation [grant number VRF2008-IDM001-MOE-018]. The research team members involved with *Fan Ho*'s creation included Kate Anderson (first author and principal investigator), who had come from the United States to Singapore 18 months prior, and two Singaporean research assistants who worked full time as employees for the project (including Masturah Aziz [third author]). Olivia Stewart (second author) was not involved in the research project in Singapore, but has contributed to analyzing data and writing since 2013. We received informed consent for all participation and have maintained appropriate confidentiality and anonymity of participants accordingly.

3. All formal education in Singapore is in English from kindergarten onward, which is one of four official languages in Singapore (others being Mandarin, Malay, and Tamil). However, less than 35% of families speak English at home (Stroud and Wee 2012), and many of the adolescent participants in our project spoke other languages (as well as the local variety of English, known as Singlish) at home and with each other.

4. Tim Ingold (2008, 71) similarly noted, "Yet no particular—no thing, or happening—can have value and meaning in itself, cut out from the wider context of its occurrence. Each has rather to be understood by way of its positioning within the totality to which it belongs."

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