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Third Space: A Keyword Essay

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We were newly appointed graduate WPAs at Ohio State. Both of us were interested in connecting Ohio State's First-Year Writing Program to the surrounding Columbus community, but neither of us were sure how to go about it—how to navigate the various institutional, social, and ethical issues involved in university-community engagement. We carried many of those uncertainties into a meeting with the Columbus Metropolitan Library's community engagement representative. During our first meeting, we learned that, for many students, the library serves as a 'third space' or a space where students spend the greatest amount of time between school and home. We didn't know it then, but this use of third space dovetails nicely with an academic theory of third space that has helped us work through the institutional, social, and ethical issues we have grappled with during our university-community collaboration.

This keyword essay maps the theoretical and disciplinary uses of the term 'third space,' seeking to identify where particular uses of the term intersect with and depart from one another. In doing so, we articulate a theory of third space that 1) accounts for the multiple factors contributing to teacher-learner identity formation and meaning-making in community literacy spaces; 2) recognizes and thinks strategically about differential power dynamics in complex and ever-changing teaching-learning ecologies; and 3) imagines itself as always already a theory in practice, or a "lived theory" (Licona 3). Our understanding of third space encourages us to explore what it means to bring the full potential of ourselves into a space and be met with the full potential of others. Third space also reminds us that engaging potentialities is never power-neutral, that facilitators and students are always negotiating different histories, literacies, epistemologies, and subject positions, and that such negotiations must be done with care, agility, and reflection.

With this care in mind, this essay moves between three sections. Section one explores high theory, tracing the dominant characteristics of third space as defined by postcolonial scholar Homi Bhabha and theorists who explicitly cite his theory of third space. Section two considers "lived theory"—work written by scholars who apply third space theory to pedagogical sites, particularly Adela Licona, Kris Gutiérrez, and Elizabeth Moje et al. Finally, and in an attempt to perform Licona's call to imagine third space as we live it in practice, we focus our final section on a collaborative project we helped launch between Ohio State's First-Year Writing Program and the Columbus Metropolitan Library, specifically CML's Karl Road branch (hereafter CML-Karl Rd). Although we have sectioned our essay for clarity, we acknowledge the

artificiality of these section breaks, how high theory, lived theory, and praxis work simultaneously and constitute each other.

High Theory

Third space is a descriptive materialist construct which begins by recognizing the specific cultural position of the individual subject (the teacher, the learner, etc.). Our use of ‘materialist’ here seeks to gesture at that brand of analysis that centralizes corporeal beings moving through space and time. This materialism is sometimes offered as corrective to overly linguistic-discursive formulations of identity development, the lifeblood of poststructuralism. Our use of third space also seeks to complicate the materialist and post-structuralism binary. Like the increasingly popular materialist and literacy term ‘ecology,’ third space acknowledges that the individual subject is only one agent in complex social assemblages, both informing and informed by, or intra-acting with, other human and nonhuman agents in addition to dominant discourses (Barad 139, 197).

Third space recognizes that identity is not easily legible apart from or prior to cultural-contextual factors. And yet, as a materialist construct, third space also refuses to ignore the dynamic interplay between corporeal bodies and the social-historical spaces through which they move to produce multiple identities. While various identities may appear fixed or stable, third space’s central premise is that is that they are not. Instead, third space insists that identity develops pursuant to a wide range of corporeal-cultural intra-actions (Gries 130, 221, 278). In fact, we owe much of our thinking about identity’s intra-active emergence to Laurie Gries, whose book *Still Life with Rhetoric: A New Materialist Approach for Visual Rhetorics* discusses how visual rhetorics accrue meaning in concert with their swift, sometimes viral, movement through social spaces. Gries helpfully uses the word ‘becoming’ to describe such visual-rhetorical emergence. Although Gries doesn’t directly take up embodied becoming, the emergence of embodied identity, we nevertheless have found her work useful to our thinking about third space and identities therein. We also find Gries’ theory of becoming to be a useful compliment to Laur M. Jackson’s treatment of memes and Blackness, which we discuss below.

Nevertheless, third space departs from many materialist constructs in that one of its defining characteristics is an emphasis on—an attunement to—power, especially power in language. Resisting the easy allure of a flat ontology, third space recognizes that identities and the spaces in which they form are always already structured by discourses that value some epistemologies, and some bodies, more than others (Bhabha 55, Licona 2). We understand flat ontologies to under-emphasize the role language plays in shaping epistemologies and subject formation. Accordingly, third space inaugurates evolving and reflexive pedagogies that strategically bring together “official” and “unofficial” discourse communities (Gutiérrez 152).

The goal here is to empower teachers and students alike to develop historically situated and therefore more critical perspectives on teaching and learning.

Bhabha's articulation of third space begins with the strategic doubling, or splitting, of the subject. This doubling renders all identity multiple, the product of difference, which challenges the traditional liberal celebration of the autonomous individual subject, liberalism's holy "me, myself, and I." This challenge to liberal conceptions of identity is classic structuralism, where identity arises against its other—colonizer vs. colonized, whiteness vs. Blackness, etc. But Bhabha's notion of third space disrupts the familiar structuralist story by recognizing an in-between space where historically marginalized bodies and communities can articulate resistant politics through "the secret art of Invisible-Ness," a phrase Bhabha borrows from poet Meiling Jin. Jin is a descendent of slaves and Bhabha relies heavily on her poem to elucidate core concepts of his theory of third space, using it to connect his theory to the lived experiences of marginalized communities. Jin's poem discusses the experience and aftermath of slavery this way:

*We arrived in the Northern Hemisphere
when summer was set in its way
running from the flames that lit the sky
over the Plantation.
We were a straggle bunch of immigrants
in a lily white landscape.*

...

*One day I learnt
A secret art,
Invisible-Ness, it was called.
I think it worked
as even now you look
but never see me . . .
Only my eyes will remain to watch and to haunt,
and to turn your dreams
To chaos.*

Bhabha finds in this poem an "anti-dialectical movement of the subaltern" that "subverts any binary" to discover transformatory or sublatory potential (55). He writes that although Jin's "evil eye" emerges through colonial constructions of the subaltern subject—that is, as whiteness's Other, a differential identity—this "eye" nevertheless eludes dominant colonial epistemologies and challenges the unity and recognizability of the liberal subject. In failing to fully recognize the subaltern subject beyond stale western conceptions, whiteness unexpectedly endows it with an elusive quality, the great power of invisibility—the ability to "circulate, *without being seen*" (Bhabha 55). Power cannot easily regulate what it does not fully recognize. Bhabha finds in the violence of colonial construction of Other an oversight, a space for strategic resistance; the object of the white, western gaze is deferred—"as even now you look/but never see me"—making room for "a strategic motion" in identity formation (55). This strategic motion and this space sustain third space.

We recognize in Bhabha a familiar postcolonial thread—the significance of acting strategically. Not unlike Gayatri Spivak’s call for strategic essentialism—where oppressed groups temporarily “essentialize” themselves to achieve recognition—Bhabha argues that the evil eye should use its discursive latitude strategically to articulate decolonial identities. That is, there can exist a “newness” in the third space of invisibility—the ability to select identities, politics, and pedagogies attuned to local, always shifting community needs, without having to fear the regulatory regimes that structure formal educational spaces.

Adela Licona’s theory of third space intentionally takes advantage of newness through invisibility. Theorizing the subversive pedagogical possibility of the zine, invisible to formal pedagogical regimes, Licona cites Emma Pérez, who draws explicitly from Bhabha’s “evil eye” in arguing that

the interstitial is an in-between space that reflects the tensions and reproduced silences of multiple conjunctures within the context of the borderlands. It is a space that ‘eludes invasion, a world unseen that cannot, will not, be colonized’ ([Pérez] 115). Following Pérez, the interstitial can be understood as the space of the decolonial imaginary—a third space of newness, rearticulated desire, revised histories, and empowerment; in short, it is a space of the emancipation of third-space consciousness from which histories and even futures, can be reimagined. (Licona 18)

Licona’s third space mobilizes invisibility strategically. Her pedagogy of the zine allows student zinesters to learn and create in spaces invisible to dominant frameworks of recognition. The zine—neither school nor home but between the two—works subversively by “challenging, reimagining, and replacing exclusionary and oppressive discursive practices” (2). By historicizing and playing with literacies, zines develop new, fuller expressions of subjectivity and “constitute a third space that offers insight into the multiply voiced discourses or borderlands rhetorics that characterize third-space subjectivities, sites, and practices” (2). Said differently, zinesters mobilize “intersection and overlap, ambiguity and contradiction” to levy their artistic critiques against “either/or ways of being and reproducing knowledge” (11).

Lived Theory

Homi Bhabha launches third space as high theory, but Kris Gutiérrez, Elizabeth Birr Moje et al., and Adela Licona mobilize it for education theory that illuminates how space functions in university-community collaborations. Gutiérrez says there are three kinds of space—“official” spaces like school (first space), “unofficial” spaces like home (second space), and spaces that combine the two creatively (third space). Moje et al. formulates first and second spaces differently, but the process by which they create the third space is similar. First spaces comprise home, communities, and peer networks that encompass the quotidian and second spaces comprise “the discourses [students] encounter in more formalized institutions” (Moje et al. 41). Similar to Gutiérrez, Moje et al.’s third space integrates the “knowledges and discourses drawn from [these] different spaces” (41). In our experience at CML-Karl Road, stu-

dents' various literacies, knowledges, and experiences were put in conversation with one another; moreover, our students' improvisations combined first and second spaces (school and home, space and discourse) to sustain a third space. Gutiérrez et al. write: "We have conceptualized these improvisations as Third Spaces and argue that these learning zones are promoted and sustained by hybrid language and schooling practices that bridge home and school" (288). Moreover, Gutiérrez et al. define third space as institutionally hybrid. For example, as we mentioned at the beginning of this essay, the libraries in Columbus are designated as third spaces or spaces where students spend the greatest amount of their time between school and home.

Growing out of the work of geographer and urban theorist Edward Soja, and building on Gutiérrez's institutionalized categorization of third spaces, Moje et al. argues that third space encourages us to look beyond binaries within physical and social spaces. Moje et al. explains that there are three types of space: 1) first spaces include home, communities, and peer networks that encompass everyday life; 2) second spaces are academic or "formalized institutions" such as work, school, and church; and 3) third spaces allow for the "integration of knowledges and Discourses drawn from different spaces" (41–42). However, looking beyond first and second spaces to recognize that these spaces are not fixed and directly work in support of one another, we can strategically and selectively account for third space possibilities.

While Moje et al. argue that third space allows for a strategic and selective integration of spaces, which challenges fixed considerations of space, Soja explains that third space "capture[s] what is actually a constantly shifting and changing milieu of ideas, events, appearances, and meanings" (2). The inherent fluidity of third space not only looks beyond what Moje et al. refers to as official and unofficial spaces (41) or what Gutiérrez refers to as first and official spaces (288); it looks within and beyond space. Soja suggests that third space looks at the intra-activity of the spatial, social, and historical as it relates to the experiences and knowledges of those who populate various spaces (2–3). Another way to describe third space is through the language of hybridity—in fact, third space and hybrid space are sometimes used interchangeably. In third space, Gutiérrez explains that "hybridity and diversity serve as building blocks" and "exist at multiple levels of learning environment[s]" (Gutiérrez 287, 288). Third space is "polycontextual" and it allows us to tap into and negotiate our contributions toward sustaining the space—based on context, historical legacies, social influence, etc. (Gutiérrez 288).

Imagining third space as the hybrid, improvisational space between home and school, official and unofficial spaces, institutional space and institutional discourses—this kind of thinking helps support the development of critical double vision, or what Gutiérrez calls a "sociocritical" perspective to learning and literacy. Like Licona, Gutiérrez's third space theory calls for the historicization of identity through a sociocritical and/or sociohistorical perspective. Her third space pedagogy requires students and educators to *know their histories*, especially histories of exclusion and Invisible-Ness, and to develop strategic or critical pedagogies accordingly. "Third Space," she writes, "is mediated by a range of tools, including what I have termed a 'sociocritical literacy'—that is, a historicizing literacy that privileges and is contingent

upon students' sociohistorical lives. . ." (Gutiérrez 149). She writes that effective third spaces must "historicize institutional literacy practices and texts" and must "reframe them as powerful tools oriented toward critical social thought" (149). That is, third space tools support teachers and students to develop analytical frameworks that interrogate the affordances and constraints of first and second space literacies. The sociocritical approach to literacy Gutiérrez describes demands attention to the multiple, sometimes conflicting sites where students and educators make meaning to develop a pedagogical third space, which is a space of *intercutting*. One which must, as Gutiérrez says, "strategically incorporate"—or intercut—"the local knowledge of home and school and, in doing so, reorganize the roles, participation frameworks, and division of labor" that structure dominant white-colonial pedagogy (289). It is important for educators to identify how intercutting first and second spaces, in the third space, challenges understandings of first and second space knowledge productions that fail to recognize spatial interdependence—how first space is always present in second space, and vice versa. Instead of trying to resolve contradiction or erase difference, third space imagines contradiction and difference as educationally productive, even transformative.

Strategies and Tactics: Case Study

Licona's *Zines in Third Space: Radical Cooperation and Borderlands Rhetoric*, which draws from Gloria Anzaldúa's scholarship on borderlands to explain that "borderlands rhetorics are subversive third-space tactics and strategies that can prove discursively disobedient to the confines of phallogocentrism and its neocolonizing effects over time and space" (7). Similarly, Amanda Fields and Melanie Carter's treatment of the selfie, in a 2015 keyword essay for the *Community Literacy Journal*, exemplifies a sociocritical third space pedagogy. They discuss the dominant narratives that circulate about how selfies fail to capture the social and political factors that take place beyond the self in the selfie. However, Fields and Carter challenge the normalization of digital literacy as a skill reserved for youth, and they also reimagine the selfie as a constantly refashioned node within a network of self-presentation. For Fields and Carter, the selfie turns toward social activism and critical awareness by helping teachers and learners recognize how they are "both apart from and a part of a community" (107).

Like Fields and Carter's selfies, Licona's zines act as pedagogical tactics of the third space—that is, expressions of students' sociohistorical lives that contribute to the space's ongoing negotiation. Tactics are local instantiations of strategies. While we have thought about strategies as philosophical dispositions and tactics as localized applications of those strategies, Licona acknowledges that the distinguishing characteristics of these paradigms are not as clearly defined. Strategies and tactics employ a type of blurring that imagines the borderland as continually reconstituted third space, where histories, identities, knowledges, and communities overlap. Licona's ideas of blurring and overlapping help to describe our approach to making and sharing site-specific memes with students at CML-Karl Road.

The Columbus Metropolitan Library and First-Year Writing

After volunteering in the Homework Help Center (HHC) for a couple of months, we established a quiet, yet strategic presence at CML-Karl Rd. We developed an understanding of the students' interests and learned the library's routines and expectations. Our strategic approach of starting in the HHC led us to develop programming that would meet the students where they were, not necessarily where institutional expectations said they should be. It was important for us to recognize how the students at the library brought what at the time seemed to be their full selves into the space. However, despite the practices that the "not-quite-school" and "not-quite-home" library space encouraged, we soon learned that the physical structure of the library could not tap into the potentialities of third space alone. In response, we developed programming that would embody the shifting and transitory nature of our time with the students at the library, but that also embraced their expressed interests in art and design. Additionally, our programming sought to challenge at least some of the pre-suppositions students bring to our workshop regarding what counts as writing.

We turn to one of our early programming activities at CML-Karl Road, meme-making, to better understand what employing tactics in a third space looks like. Due to our limited access to technology and our desire not to impose university resources on the library, we imagined an approach wherein students could create analog versions of memes. While the meme's traditional born-digital identity offered inroads to students possessing normative digital literacies, our analog approach, writing on and illustrating paper, avoided alienating students who had never heard of a meme. We printed several examples and helped students analyze the rhetorical affordances of widely circulated memes like "Grumpy Cat," a white cat with brownish coloring and an apathetic or angry facial expression that injects a sense of grumpiness to the meme's text, or "Be Like Bill," a stick figure image of a person who makes socially-conscious decisions and encourages the meme viewer to do the same. Students focused on commonalities in sentence construction, repetition of words, the tone of images and text, and how the sample memes made them feel before creating their own.

Third space understands the process of students learning about memes, recalling their own encounters with memes, and how they will develop their own interventions into the meme-making process. But it also accounts for how Black and Brown subjectivities recognize the potential for community, reclamation, and resistance in the memes themselves. Laur M. Jackson's "The Blackness of Meme Movement" demonstrates how meme-making intercuts various aspects of Black identity into a literacy of knowledge-making and -circulation. As Jackson explains, memes cannot be boiled down to the face value of images and text, or a combination of the two. Instead, memes operate within a network of Black cultural codes and systems that fosters what Beverly J. Moss refers to as "shared knowledge"—an epistemological stance within Black sub-communities that "spans cultural and community boundaries, global and local contexts, secular and sacred traditions" (81). Aware of the expansiveness of Black knowledge production, Jackson argues the following:

Memes not only contain components of Black language, gravitate towards a Black way of speaking, *but in their survival* latch onto Black cultural modes of improvisation to move through space and subsist in an ultra-competitive visual environment. Simply said: the way memes change, adapt, fold into themselves, make old like new. . . their movement looks very very Black.

Jackson's focus on the cultural speed of memes, their ability to move quickly and amorphously through multiple spaces, their tendency to perform critique through juxtaposition or intercutting, and how these characteristics may be especially familiar to Black and Brown families in Columbus—all of these rendered meme-making an ideal third space project for CML-Karl Rd. We hope to demonstrate the effectiveness of third-space meme-making by considering a composition produced by one of our participants at CML-Karl Rd. The ways that the students' individual subjectivities interplayed with the meme discourse led to a type of social commentary that we did not anticipate.

Consider the grumpy cat meme created by one of the students that levies critique against the police *as an institution* (rather than “bad apple” cops). The meme asks “why are you here police?” and demands that police “go away.” (“you stink!” this student aptly wrote).



We offer that this Grumpy Cat meme instantiates Bhabha's intercutting by bringing together knowledges from first and second space sites in order to create a new, sociocritical literacy—a third space literacy.

First space knowledges could be said to manifest here through our attempts to “smuggle in” an English lesson on image-text juxtaposition. We began this activity by

asking students to look at sample Grumpy Cat memes and to attempt to trace their formal logic—the nuanced interplay between image and text that animates Grumpy Cat’s grumpiness. This instruction looked very formal—almost a little too “school-y,” perhaps. We distributed example memes and solicited student feedback, which we wrote on a dry erase board and attempted to synthesize. Further, this student’s impulse to frame Grumpy Cat in red and green yarn strikes us as at least *close* to first space literacy—the kind of creative craft project that students in this age group might be asked to perform in elementary school.

Second space knowledges emerge most clearly through the subject matter. In writing that police “stink” and ending with the command “Go away!!!” the student intercuts knowledges developed outside of official first space pedagogical sites, knowledges that might even be considered *inappropriate* within—or even hostile to—the institutional discourses that maintain first space (Licona 7). After this activity, we kept asking ourselves the same question: what has to have happened at home—what kind of police violence must have occurred in this elementary schooler’s life—that she can so confidently and definitively indict the police *institutionally*, rather than bad apple cops, exhibiting a brand of critical thinking that we sometimes struggle to teach our college students in our university-level classes? A second space history of racial violence lurks here, and, once intercut with first space cultural production, produces something entirely new, a hybrid of home literacy and school literary—a library literacy, a literacy developed literally between home and school.

By intercutting first and second space knowledges, the student’s Grumpy Cat meme historicizes knowledge and identity—instantiating Gutiérrez’ claim that third space literacies can lead to sociocritical literacies. As Keeanga-Yamahatta Taylor notes, cultural discussions of police brutality can often elucidate broader racial structures that position Black and Brown people as “second class citizens.” By making “police” the subject of grumpy cat’s anger, the student indicts these systems in the third space, even while she preserves the first space knowledge of meaning-making through juxtaposition that we, as Homework Help Center volunteers, sought to formally “teach.” The reality is that the student taught *us* about the possibilities of dwelling between first and second spaces—the sort of inversion of teacher and learner that Moje and Gutiérrez suggest must occur within the third space.

The student was not alone in producing politically-minded memes. Many students’ memes targeted Donald Trump. Michael had extensive conversations with students (in both our programming and in the HHC) about Trump’s immigration ban and the implications it has on students and their families. While we acknowledge that third space intercutting does not always or necessarily lead to liberatory politics, we recognize a liberatory trend in work informed by multiple spaces. As Sherita noted in an interview with a local newspaper, we didn’t instruct students to be explicitly political while we executed this activity (Parks). The meme-making activity and its implicit insistence on a broad definition of composing commingled with students’ sociohistorical lives and led to a liberatory praxis.

Additionally, consider our WPA office door at the University of Ohio—where we both posted student compositions throughout the semester—their memes, superheroes designs, shoe designs, etc.



Student compositions began to populate our door and hence interactionally constituted a larger, community composition. Our door became a canvas on which multiple actors collaborated to produce a continuously negotiated community meaning. Each week students would ask to see photographs of the door, curious to see whether and how their newest creations were being showcased at Ohio State University. The door even helped grow the program, as GTAs attending our office hours would see the door and ask about it, allowing us an opportunity to pitch the Homework Help Center as one they could join. All of this to say: there is a lot of important rhetorical work happening in the many “third spaces” (whether memes, office door artwork, or CML-Karl Rd.) upon which our community-collaboration project relied.

Our discussion of memes and their home on our shared office door suggests that third space is a space where actors commingle in a way that is always shifting and renegotiating how we define the terms that inform the space. If we centralize socio-historical factors within the third space, we must also consider the varying levels of precarity, risk, investment, and support different social actors have and how those factors might transform the visibility of third spaces. Anzaldúa’s “borderlands,” Licona’s “tactics and strategies,” Gutiérrez’s “hybridity,” Bhabha’s “in-betweenness” or “intercutting” and Moje et al.’s “suspicion of binaries” all point to the blurriness that develops when actors collide, commingle, and evolve. Although we work to highlight the blurriness

of third space and negotiate our varying perspectives, we understand that success in third space results from continuous interrogation of the space's purpose or goal because third space is not power neutral.

Our collaboration with the Columbus Metropolitan Library attempts to offer opportunities for students to engage writing and critical thinking in ways that reflect their interests and willingness to present their whole selves. However, there are times when we struggled. The uncertainty of the writer's workshop location due to the library's scheduling constraints, the reliability of graduate student volunteers, access to technologies, and our ability to develop new content became obstacles we had to negotiate. We also faced instructional struggles while working with students. For example, we struggled to negotiate between our formal instruction about how memes work and how students (re)imagined memes to bridge their first and second space literacies. During formal instruction, we worked with students to identify *particular* juxtapositional logics that students could *precisely* emulate when making their own memes. This did not always happen; students often imagined different kinds of relationships between grumpy cat's image and text—perhaps replacing the meme's grumpiness with different emotional tenors, such as sadness, apathy, anger, and even love! These unexpected new directions required us to improvise, and helped us learn that departures from formal or first space instruction can usefully expand sociocritical awareness, for teacher and student alike.

Third space anticipates and even capitalizes on such struggles and the improvisations they demand. In the points of struggle, there are times when the blurring of space is present in theory but not in practice. Yet, we continue to ground our work in the words of our students so third space does not become “school after school,” as one student said. Instead, we worked for a third space that blurs histories, literacies, epistemologies, and subject positions so that individual contributions, the space, and production within space and time continually shifted.

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