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## Editorial Correspondence:

The Managing Editor, Journal of Postcolonial Education  
James Nicholas Publishers  
PO Box 244, Albert Park Australia 3206  
e-mail: [editors.jpe@jnponline.com](mailto:editors.jpe@jnponline.com)

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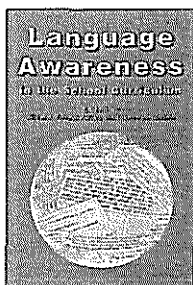
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## Straddling Borders: The Dilemmas of Speaking From, To, For and Of

Josephine Ann Cutajar

*University of Malta*

### Abstract

This article explores the way the 'native' ethnographer's location within the nation, and the nation's location within the global level, affects the production of knowledge. The production of knowledge emanates from the interplay of subjectivities and the author takes this up in this article. Representation is a situated political act which is manifest in the choice of theories, methodologies and linguistic codes made by researchers. Exogenously trained 'indigenous' researchers tend to appropriate and in so doing adapt 'western' enunciative codes to help them in their attempt to define a situated identity. The issue that is raised in this essay is whether this helps transform scientific conceptualizations and/or just helps to consolidate the power of one type knowledge over other forms of knowledge/s.

In this article, I will take the opportunity to trace the "multiple positions and allegiances" (Grewal, 1994: 234) implicated in me as a Third World feminist and find out how these have been influential in the kind of knowledge I consume and produce. For the purposes of this discussion I will depart from the premise that the researcher is a culturally, socially and historically specific subject located within the global configuration of economic and political powers (Wolf, 1996: xi).

As I will try to demonstrate, the dynamics of where we are located as social scientists affects the kind of knowledge/s we help to produce and reproduce. This is because, as Appadurai (Lal, 1996: 187) points out the issue of voice, that is speaking for and to whom, often intersects with the problems of place, namely the issue of speaking from and of.

### Locating the Self

In September 1997 I left the Maltese Islands, my country of origin, to come and study in Canada. As an individual originating from an intermediately developed country, I had always looked to the West as my "primary referent point" (Mohanty, 1997: 258). Like the majority

of the Maltese, I had been constantly exposed to a barrage of First World texts, thanks to efforts of the Maltese educational system and the media. These institutions depend on foreign derived texts to a considerable extent.

As a Maltese academic interested in studying the structures and discourses in which I was implicated, I was also trained to draw upon First World social scientific discourses and epistemologies, tools which I came to depend upon to look at and present my own vision of the world. Maltese scholars look to First World academic institutions and texts when they come to produce knowledge about themselves and their own community.

Going to study in a First World academic setting is the epitome of every Maltese academic. The voyage to these 'seats of knowledge' is akin to a pilgrimage to the oracle of oracles. My own journey West took place at a time in my life when I was searching for a theoretical paradigm which would help me to study how the interlocking oppressions of race, ethnicity, class and gender impact on the daily lives of people within the Maltese context. My interest in this project emanated from the fact that I myself derive from an ethnic minority group in Malta. I needed epistemological tools to enable me to explicate the interlocking and intersecting phenomenon of ethnicization, genderization and class on me and others within the community from which I originate.

### **My Work**

Some weeks after my arrival in Canada, my sister's husband died. As my sister tried to come to terms with her pain and sorrow, the stories she recounted made me aware how our lives are structured by the rhythms of biological regimes. These narratives also made me aware that these transitions force people to reconsider their relationship to and understanding of their assigned place in society (Ginsburg, 1989:65-6). At these junctures in their life, people are forced to appraise and negotiate the inequalities of a gendered, class and ethnicized social life.

Thanks to her, I also became aware that as located and embodied beings, we are inveigled in discourses and practices that provide us with the symbolic and material tools which enable us to make sense of and deal with these transitions in life (Thomas, 1993: 12). At the same time, these discourses, practices and structures serve to situate and locate particular social groups/individuals differently, hence providing them with different resources and strategies with which to deal with these transitions.

In my thesis "The Island Where Time Stood Still: Gender, Ethnicity and Citizenship in Malta" I therefore set out to trace how a sample of recently widowed Gozitan women dealt with the necessary bureaucratic procedures concerned with this transition in their life. I also wanted to find out what resources and discourses they could resort to as gendered, widowed, classed and ethnicized beings in their dealings with bureaucratic structures and practices.

In this research project I utilized a plethora of feminist research methods to gather the necessary data for the research project at hand. I depended heavily on ethnography, interviews, institutional ethnography and textual analysis to find out how state discourses and procedures locate widowed, gendered, classed and/or ethnicized groups. I found personal narratives useful when it came to find out how fourteen Gozitan widows perceived themselves as being located as classed/gendered/widowed/ethnicized individuals and how they interacted with, reacted to and resisted the state and cultural discourses with which they dealt on a day to day basis.

For this project I was so concerned with studying the phenomenon under consideration that I did not take any notice of the fact that once again I was appropriating epistemological tools and enunciative codes to make sense of the narrativized experiences of these widows. I was utilizing First World feminist epistemologies and methodology to study a context somewhat far removed from the location in which these discourses were produced. When these epistemologies and methodologies were utilized in an alternative context, they proved to be both enabling and disabling as I will try to demonstrate in the rest of this text.

### **My Location within the National and the Global**

First of all I will have to explain how my diverse locations and positionalities within the local, national and the global are implicated in the knowledge I consume, produce and reproduce.

The country which I consider 'home', the Maltese Islands, lies in the middle of the Mediterranean Sea, situated midway between Sicily and Libya, Gibraltar and Turkey. The Maltese Islands consists of a number of islands, three of which are inhabited. I am from the second largest island, Gozo. In this article I will be continually differentiating between Maltese and Gozitans. This arises from the fact that although both social groups share a somewhat similar political and socio-economic history on the national level, Gozitans are defined and perceive themselves as being different from the Maltese. There are historical, political and economic reasons behind this differentiation

which I am unable to discuss at this time (see (Attard, 1996; Brigulgio, 1993; Falzon, 1999; Galea, 1998).

On a national basis, Malta's location within the global political economy has had an impact on the kind of structures and discourses the Maltese as a nation consume, produce and reproduce. As an intermediately developed country (Brigulgio as cited by Tabone, 1994:171), it often makes more sense for the Maltese academic, political, and business elites to adopt and/or adapt discourses, texts, epistemologies and structures circulating in the First World. Economically this makes more sense than wasting scarce resources to invent structures/discourses in a context where new configurations would entail substantial costs for their creation, implementation, articulation and learning (see Tilly, 1996: 9).

The fact that the Maltese Islands were a British colony for almost two centuries prior to independence in 1964 might perhaps explain why we still look to Western countries, especially English speaking ones, to help us as a nation in our political and cultural self-definition. At the same time, the Maltese Islands' location within the global political economic context as well as its size, make it less feasible to produce and reproduce its own forms of knowledge/s.

The country's location within the world order also affects the cultural currency of the forms of knowledge that the Maltese Islands produce as a nation. With regards to visual and/or audio texts for example, a limited market as well as limited financial and/or technological resources, render Maltese products less competitive on the global market (Cutajar, 1995:333). At the same time, the Maltese lack the marketing and distributive networks necessary to sell these products, structures and skills that are available in larger countries.

One should also add that there is a gender and a class as well as an ethnic disparity when it comes to accessing the limited means of production and reproduction available within the Maltese nation-state. With regards to the informal means of education (television, radio, print, organizations), the majority of these entities are found in Malta, the bigger island, and are financed by the state, the two main Maltese political parties, the Roman Catholic Church and/or private capital.

Since certain social groups within the Maltese Islands are negated access to these entities, the views and/or experiences of marginalized groups are rarely incorporated within texts produced locally (Cutajar, 1998:9). The textual symbolic annihilation of these social groups is

often blamed on their subordinate location within the political and socio-economic context in which they are situated. At the same time, their symbolic annihilation within the means of knowledge production is used to legitimize their unequal access to the material and political resources available within the same context (see for example Jakubowicz, 1994). As Marx and Engels (as cited by Stabile 1997: 399) maintain, the class and/or country with the means of material and mental production at its disposal, subordinates those who lack access to these means of production.

Politically, culturally and economically, both Maltese and Gozitans can be said to be "subordinate to an authority based elsewhere" (Said, 1994: 223). As marginalized subjects within the national and/or the global context, both Gozitans and Maltese social scientists tend to depend heavily on epistemologies and research methods deriving from First World contexts to make sense of who they are within the local, national and global contexts.

### **Studying within a First World Academic Setting**

As a Maltese student studying within a North American academic institution, I therefore find myself placed at an "intersection of a system of differences" (Abu-Lughod 1991: 140). As a student studying in a First World location and as a Gozitan-Maltese, cross-class, female researcher, I feel impelled to explore and address a number of these subjectivities in my own work.

bell hooks maintains that the dialectical space emanating from the inherent contradictions within enunciative positionalities can be utilized to explore the interplay of repression and resistance (as cited by Kaplan, 1994:143). Resistance, according to Pratt (1992: 7), takes place when idioms appropriated from the colonizer are utilized to make sense of the colonized. The appropriated icons, objects and symbols are according to Hueng (1995: 86), transformed in the process and consequently infused with different meanings, meanings that result in semantic reversals.

Greenman (1996: 50) maintains that when the Otherized researchers use Western textualized norms and concepts to encode the narrativized experiences of Third World women, the re/presentations that ensue help to deconstruct Eurocentric perceptions of the Otherized women. This is because such texts help to distill the still prevalent image that non-Western women are passive, subservient or lacking in creativity.

The stories I collected in Gozo, for example, helped to challenge



Western interpretations of individual resistance and agency. The widowed individuals who participated in this research managed to deal with state discourses and structures thanks to the means available to them at their location in time and space. The interesting thing was that when I analyzed the narratives, I realized that the individuals concerned often resorted to collectively available resources when they wanted to resist bureaucratic discourses/practices. The informants tended to depend on the human and non-human resources their social support network, mainly their extended family, provided them with. For these women, their family proved to be crucial when it came to resist and undermine oppressive discourses and practices. When deciphered in a location where individualistic attempts at agency and resistance are seen as being more laudable, these actions might not be seen as empowering, as they were for the women involved.

### **Speaking From and Of**

I chose my location within a Western academic institution, to write about and give voice to an ethnicized minority at 'home'. I chose to focus on a certain section of the Gozitan community making use of a qualitative methodology. I was aware that such a research topic and feminist methodology would not have been as acceptable within a Maltese academic setting. At the Ontario Institute of Education, an institution which gives great importance to equity issues and qualitative research, this research could have proven to be "an intellectually viable research project" (Lal 1996: 189) if it had been carried out on a minority group in Canada.

I, however, opted to focus on the community from which I derive. Messerschmidt (as cited by Williamson Nelson, 1996:188) maintains that exogenously trained endogenous researchers are motivated to address social issues which are deemed critical to the community from which they derive. In a sense, this research topic might have also been motivated by the fact that the majority of the texts I consume as an academic as well as the discourses in which I am implicated as a scholar, rarely speak to me as a subject. My focus on ethnicized women within the Maltese context emanates from my need to negotiate and define a situated identity which embraces the social, spatial and cultural geographies in which these women and I are implicated, and hence contest historically, homogenous constructions of national and cultural identity (Alvarez 1996: 87). This research is in a way "an act of self-constitution and exorcism", an "act of ethnographic comprehension" (Hastrup 1992: 124) conducted in a haven where I would not have to face the political backlash it would have inspired back 'home'.

At the same time I know that if I manage to defend my Ph.D. thesis successfully, this would enable me to devote more attention to equity issues at home. In a country that holds First World academic institutions in such high esteem, knowledge that is produced and reproduced at these sites has more credibility and legitimacy than that produced within a Maltese academic setting. In a way I hope that I could use the academic credibility I attain within a First World setting to establish myself within a Maltese academic context. I hope that by gaining credibility and legitimacy at this level, I might gain the political clout back 'home' to agitate for the civic rights of the ethnic community I derive from.

At the same time I have to admit that this credibility will have been attained through the help of individuals who agreed to participate in this research project. In a way I am caught between my own needs for personal advancement within the academy and the perceived needs of the community from which I derive.

### **Re/presentation**

My location as a student within a First World academic necessitated that I translate the narratives for the benefit of an audience that was not familiar with the Maltese culture. I chose to utilize English, incorporating Maltese phrases here and there in the quotes. As Green, Franquiz and Dixon (1997:172) point out, both transcription and translation are situated political acts. By not including the original transcription, I was denying the social person of the participants from emerging (Roberts, 1997:170) while making ideological statements about the power of English to represent everyone and everything.

The theories that had been utilized to collect and analyze the data as well as my own conceptualization of the phenomenon under study also had an impact on the way the stories and accounts were to be interpreted and represented in the final product. When the researcher relies on her own understanding of the respondents' meanings and represents their words in forms that fit into sociological texts (DeVault, 1990: 107), the onus is not on the participants' voices any more, but on that of the 'author'. As DeVault (1990: 110) maintains, writing is not a transparent medium with which researchers simply convey 'truths' discovered in the field: writing in itself helps to construct and controls meaning and interpretation.

Thomas (1993: 45) maintains that at the representational stage, the researcher has the power to define and transmit reality. Interpretation and analysis entails the revision of what we, as researchers, have seen in the field and translate it into something

new. The final text involves a dual translation process for Thomas (1993: 66). The 'author' has to translate the cultural codes of the informant into a symbolic form understood by her, and then translate this translation into a form understood by the audience in question. The researcher has to be fluent in three languages in the end: that of the informants, the scientific code and the linguistic code with which the target audience is familiar. The end product is an amalgamation of how we, as researchers, hear how the data speaks to us at a particular time through a particular set of filters, and we then translate what we have heard into a set of messages comprehensible for a stipulated audience. As Thomas (1993: 45) points out, the results are never final, but are only partial and subject to re-thinking.

I also had to decide whether to present the findings through extended personal narratives or through a sociologist-author's discussion (DeVault, 1990: 106). Both approaches were utilized in my work. DeVault (1990: 107) maintains that the role of the omniscient author gives the writer the authority as translator and mouthpiece. This approach gives the 'author' the legitimacy to condense and eliminate some of the data collected, in order to bring out the meaning and sociological relevance of a particular story. I am aware that as a consequence, this process distorts the informants' words. At the same time, my primary focus was on the content of the narratives/accounts and not on the process through which the information was relayed to me as a researcher.

Mauthner and Doucet (1998: 135) maintain that researchers should attempt to give people voice by giving themselves a voice in their work. I utilized the voice of the omniscient narrator because I had to place the participants' accounts within a broader social, political, cultural and structural context. I realize that I had to spend more time on locating myself and the people I was speaking about in my work, since the text was to be consumed in a context where the audience was not familiar with the location of and from which I was speaking.

At the same time I went into lengthy explanations of the narratives incorporated within the text. Narrative interpretation might, according to Green, Franquiz and Dixon (1997: 174), be essential when the writer has access to contextual information that is not represented within or without the transcript. This is true in those instances when the audience is not familiar with the context. I found that I spent a lot of effort contextualizing this information, with the consequent effect that I could not incorporate as many issues as I wanted in my text. In my research, for example, I found that widowhood had a negative impact on the role of mothering in a context where this role is ideal-

ized. Unfortunately for me I could not explore this theme in my work since contextualizing took so much space.

Behar (1996: 9) and DeVault (1990: 102) maintain that feminist researchers lack the language to articulate what takes place within the field. Feminist researchers such as DeVault (1990: 102) regard language, concepts and theories as a masculine construct, effective only when it comes to describing masculine experiences. As a Third World student located within a First World academic institution, I sometimes found it hard to communicate the distance between what I saw and heard in the field utilizing a linguistic code, concepts and theories that were 'foreign' to both the participants and I. These codes were foreign to me because they were patriarchal and colonizing constructs. Due to the incongruity between the enunciative codes at my disposal and my Maltese experience, I was forced to utilize processes of translation. Since the tools at my disposal rendered representation problematic, I devoted my energy to producing an ethnographic text that "evokes" rather than "represents" (Roberts, 1997: 169).

### **Translation and the Conditions of Power**

The Otherized researcher who seeks to be heard by an academic audience, has to interpret the worlds and understandings of the Other into a discourse or knowledge form that can be understood and accepted within the dominant Western frameworks of knowledge and culture. (Edwards and Ribbens, 1998: 3).

In this section I want to demonstrate how "the process of cultural translation is enmeshed in conditions of power" (Behar, 1993: 229).

Edwards and Ribbens (1998: 3) maintain that researchers who are exploring lives within non-First World countries, take the cultures and discourses which are seen as peripheral to predominant Western knowledge forms and translate them into a discourse recognizable to Western public audiences. The appropriated codes and discourses have enabled me as a subaltern to speak for myself without the help of an interpreter. Thanks to the Western enunciative codes and modalities, I am able, to a certain extent, to represent these women on my own terms.

Mohanty (as cited by Edwards and Ribbens, 1998: 3) insists that the hegemonic hold of Western produced and distributed academic discourse, pushes Third World scholars in becoming proficient in First World enunciative modalities. In our case, this is necessary if we want to make our voices heard on an international basis and in so doing make public the oppressive discourses and practices in which 'ethnized' and/or 'racialized' women are implicated in non-First World con-

texts. While making these oppressive discourses and practices public, we are as a consequence giving credit to the resistance that is taking place at the local level. Our act stems from our need to show the particular nature of gendered and ethnicized oppression and discrimination, that is taking place in different contexts and the different ways in which these interlocking oppressions are resisted at different sites. Although women experience patriarchal oppression differently, survival at different locations should be used as the basis of coalition building between different groups of women. Stories of survival help other women cope in different locations.

John (1989: 72) maintains that those of us who make use of First World academic discourses and practices to write these stories, we are helping to replicate and consolidate the hegemony of English and the depth of intellectual development within it. By utilizing these tools, we are helping in consolidating the colonizing hold these discourses have over us. We could appropriate and adapt First World produced and/or distributed epistemological and methodological tools and utilize these within our own languages. In this way, we could produce texts that are more accessible to the community under study. At the same time, these stories of oppression and resistance should not be limited to one particular context. These stories of survival should be shared among all women since they could enlighten different women in different locations.

Western academic discourse has given me the authority to write and the competency to analyze discriminatory and oppressive practices and discourses back 'home'. In doing this, I have succeeded in exposing certain negative characteristics about the community and the nation-state under study. The information contained can therefore be used against the community and/or nation-state in question. By exposing our difficulties and problems, I have made the community and/or nation-state under study even more susceptible to the scrutinizing gaze of those in power. Research projects such as this can be a double-edged sword since they can be used to bring about change at a number of levels. At the same time, the same data can be used to justify and legitimate the oppression and exploitation of the group in question.

Said (1994: 245) maintains that when intellectuals from ex-colonized countries speak about their community of derivation, they are as a consequence helping in the colonization of the people they are speaking from and for. As Fusco (1994: 143) points out, when an act of self-definition is performed within a 'racialized' context, it might only serve to titillate the curiosity of a 'white' audience. Edwards and

Ribbens (1998: 13) maintain that when non-Western researchers choose to explore privately based knowledges and personal understandings through publicly based disciplinary knowledges across the border, they may be extending the dominance of publicly based knowledge and expertise within new private spheres.

As neo-colonial intellectuals we might be competent in First World enunciative codes. This competency, however, does not give us the same power to speak about ourselves and/or our communities of origin as the 'master'.

### Conclusion

Those whose nationality, racial, ethnic or class position make them uneasy insiders in the academic world often feel as if they are donning and removing masks in trying to form a bridge between the homes they have left and the new locations of privileged class identity they now occupy (Behar, 1993: 338).

Texts are about location and positionality and the interaction and intersection of the national with the global at the local level. At the same time, texts are a blend of writing about the self, the group studied and the methods by which the group was studied (Reinharz, 1992: 74).

The subaltern who undertakes to speak on behalf of a subjugated group helps to reproduce a system of domination while challenging it at the same time. As an 'Otherized' researcher, I am struggling to find empowering methodologies which would enable me to give voice to the dispossessed. At the same time, I am trying to use these discourses to empower myself in institutions and locations that attempt to render me powerless and invisible.

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