Education as a Journey
Exploring the Third Space of Hongyu Wang's
The Call from the Stranger on a Journey Home

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What does the self mean and what does it mean to a curriculum conceived as a journey?
–Wang, 2004, p. 122

The Journey

AT THE BEGINNING of his book *Troubadour of Knowledge,* Michel Serres (1997/1991) relates a story from his childhood. Born left-handed in a culture dominated by right-handed people, he was pressured from early on to use his right hand. Reflecting back to those times, he comes to understand that rather than feeling upset at the imposition, he feels a sense of gratitude for his "completed half" (p. 3). He realizes that the experience allowed him to break from the binary into a new space, a third space. Rather than being fixed on one side—something Serres says leads to hemiplegia—dwelling in a third space breaks through the paralysis and opens up a new place from which to work: one pregnant with possibilities.

Hongyu Wang (2004) has been influenced by Serres' notion of third space as she has attempted to come to a deeper understanding of her own complex situation. As a Chinese woman who did all of her pre-doctoral studies in China, earned a Ph.D. in the Deep South of the United States, and is currently teaching at a university in the American Midwest, she often confronts difficulties working between and among cultures and ways of thinking. She writes,

> The contradictory nature of differences between Chinese and Western cultures constantly challenges me to reconcile these differences into a creative site where new subjectivities can emerge. Embracing both cultures through a third space of mutual transformation enables me to approach the issues of self, relationships, and differences in a new way. (p. 16)

In her book *The Call from the Stranger on a Journey Home: Curriculum in a Third Space*, Wang (2004) approaches the third space autobiographically, illustrating many related struggles, frustrations, and forms of self-questioning. Wang draws on the work of numerous thinkers on topics ranging from psychoanalysis and philosophy to literature in order to articulate her understanding of the third space. She has been particularly influenced by the writings of Michel Foucault, Confucius, and Julia Kristeva. Without trying to unify the theoretic threads of the three, she weaves them into her story, and they speak to her as she travels on her personal journey.

There are three things I would like to do in this essay. First, I will briefly examine the central tenets of Wang's book. Next, I will situate Wang's work within the larger picture of theory and philosophy and explore how other authors have described third space both in and outside of educational discourses. Lastly, I will point to what I see as the possibilities and challenges of dwelling in a third space and its implications for education.

Foucault, Confucius, and Kristeva—(Re)Imagining Self/Other

On her journey, Wang (2004) first turns to Foucault and his conception of identity and self-creation. Traditional Western thought embodies a search for stability and certainty that has led to essentialization, classification, and a fixed sense of self. Wang demonstrates, however, that Foucault "is interested in opening up critical and creative spaces of subjectivity which cannot be limited by any preestablished essential self" (p. 25). Through historiographical analysis, Foucault charts the discursive and non-discursive limitations imposed on individuals, while he remains committed to the possibility that through an active, creative process, constantly pushing against the boundaries, one can move beyond them. Wang elaborates his thoughts:

> For Foucault, transformation stays at superficial levels if it merely adjusts the same modes of thought. Deep transformation must break away from the same thought by means of an open and turbulent critique, bringing forth new modes of thought. Creativity is possible only at the limit and cannot remain within any 'sameness,' even an innovative one. (p. 27)

Wang draws on Foucault's interpretation of the Greco-Roman notion of the care of self, which "emphasizes self-reliance, self-regulation, and personal choice" (p. 34) and whose goals emerge from activity rather than being externally imposed. It is here, Wang explains, that Foucault "suggests that one has to give up oneself in order to *become*" (Wang, 2004, p. 35; Foucault, 1985, 1986); the self can be created again, a concept closely related to an aesthetic of existence.

Although influenced by Foucault's teachings, Wang (2004) problematizes several of his tenets. As she writes, one must "*transform*" Foucault's ethics "not merely *extend*" them (p. 45; original emphasis). It is in her search for transformative ways that lead her to the thoughts of Confucius and Julia Kristeva. Wang has found Western philosophy and psychoanalysis integral to developing an understanding of her situation; however, their Western underpinnings seem to be missing something. For this she turns to her roots, Eastern thinking—especially Confucian thought—to provide elements she finds lacking.

Wang begins her third chapter by acknowledging prevalent criticisms of Confucian thought, from its classical roots to Neo-Confucianism. She speaks of how Confucius' ideas and their

offspring have often been critiqued as hegemonic and misogynistic. It is in Confucianism, however, that Wang finds an essential piece missing from Foucault's analysis—relationality. She states,

> To become engaged in a dialogue with the West in a creative way, it is necessary to reclaim the Confucian value of relationality while, at the same time, searching for new ways of promoting individuality. Therefore, to negotiate a dialogue between the Foucauldian subject and the Confucian self in a third space of mutuality and transformation, I believe that we need to generate a new sense of relational individuality, situated in dynamic and complex cultural connections, social interactions, and cosmic processes. (Wang, 2004, p. 76)

It is from these complicated interactions, Wang maintains, that novel ways of thinking and new connections can emerge.

Bulgarian-French philosopher and psychoanalyst Julia Kristeva is the third of Wang's triumvirate. Wang turns to her not only for her feminist approach, but also for her careful exploration of issues of self-formation. Kristeva, Wang explains, seeks not to simply reverse patriarchal gendered analyses, but to examine conditions of difference between the self and other in original ways. Kristeva is concerned with the semiotic and symbolic elements of the signifying process of language. Unlike Ferdinand de Saussure's conception of semiotics as symbolic systems, Kristeva appropriates the term semiotic to refer to bodily drives, which she thinks of as "feminine and oriented to mother's body" (Wang, 2004, p. 89; Kristeva, 1974). These drives (such as tones and rhythms) are fluid and prone to change. On the other hand, the symbolic, for Kristeva, "refers to the structure, grammar, or syntax of language. The symbolic function of language points to judgment and communication, which is necessarily social and historical" (Wang, 2004, p. 89; Kristeva, 1974). She correlates the symbolic to the masculine and describes it as structured and unchanging. It is in the dynamic interaction of the two that Kristeva sees creative potential. In Wang's words:

> The semiotic challenges the symbolic, while the symbolic regulates the semiotic. . . . The semiotic is the repressed, unconscious other, which has the potential to transgress the symbolic order. . . . To translate the semiotic into words or signs—as poetic language can accomplish—helps one be in touch with the unconscious so that something innovative can be introduced into the symbolic. (p. 89)

As Wang points out, "the Kristevian self/other relationship is built upon acknowledging and utilizing the stranger within the self" (p. 92). It is in this sense that "Kristeva attempts to search for ways of preserving alterity, differences, and strangeness without breaking away from the necessary boundary of identity. The subject is constantly put on trial, and alterity within the subject mobilizes the self" (p. 92). In this sense the self does not colonize that which it confronts.

Although Kristeva does see the need to distance oneself from the mother/child bond and push toward the symbolic, she always sees the semiotic playing a major role. Kristeva calls it the "loving third," and by that she means a "third beyond—and also embodied in—both the maternal and the paternal" (p. 104). It is in the interaction between and among the differences in which a generative space arises.

Throughout Wang's journey, one of the few things that remained somewhat constant in her life was her scholarly engagements. Not only did she play the role of student in multiple cultures, but also the role of teacher. She has wrestled with theoretic material on her own and with her mentors. Even her students' struggles have influenced her understandings. Playing various roles in very different educational and cultural contexts has allowed her a unique, multi-perspective view on self/other relationships in curriculum. Her experiences have taught her the importance of respecting, and being open to, the alterity of the other and the power of interactions through differences. Although it can be unsettling and distressing, at times, these sites of tension can also be sites of transformation. As Wang writes, "The willingness and capacity of the self for relating to the other—be this a person, text, or a landscape—in such a way that the other's alterity is acknowledged through a loving relationship is necessary for initiating an educative process" (pp. 7-8). Wang thus depicts an educational process in which otherness—thought and experience at the margins—finds a voice through renegotiated self/other relations.

Wang realizes the difficulties associated with combining the Foucauldian "self-in-process," the Confucian "self-in-relation," and the Kristevian "self-in-alterity." Working from a third space, however, Wang accepts the unsettledness of her position and moves fluidly between and among the concepts as she travels on her journey. The triumvirate's ability to be synthesized is not as great as the transformative space that opens up as the boundaries of their differences interact.

Theorizing a Third Space

In this section I would briefly like to examine the concept of third space at the core of Wang's work. As a framework for understanding issues of identity, third space is a term attributed to literary and cultural theorist Homi Bhabha; he is, however, far from the first to explore the conditions theorized under this topic. For example, it is easy to see connections to the multiperspectivism of Friedrich Nietzsche, the pluralism of the American Pragmatists, the boarderlands of Gloria Anzaldúa, and the thoughts of many post-structuralist/post-modernist thinkers such as Jacques Derrida and Gilles Deleuze (Buckreis, 2010). Bhabha's (1994) work is primarily concerned with understanding the nature of cultural difference, the "location of culture" as he calls it (also the title of his 1994 book). He is troubled with the stifling of cultural difference, and he seeks a place where cultural identity can be re-imagined. "A transparent norm is constituted," he writes, "a norm given by the host society or dominant culture, which says that 'these other cultures are fine, but we must be able to locate them within our own grid' " (Bhabha, 1990, p. 208). Thus the dominant culture tries to control and assimilate other cultures on *its* terms. In order to disrupt this hegemonic relationship, Bhabha theorizes a third space, a place of hybridity. "[T]his third space displaces the histories that constitute it, and sets up new structures of authority. . . . The process of cultural hybridity gives rise to something different, something new and unrecognizable, a new area of negotiation of meaning and representation" (p. 211). Unlike homogenization, which seeks to eliminate or reconcile differences, hybridization embraces differences in the creation of something new.

For Bhabha (1990), the third space is related to a sense of resistance, a disruption in the binary antagonism between colonizer and colonized. It is a "productive space of the construction of culture as difference, in the spirit of alterity or otherness" (p. 209). As such it evades

replicating the colonizer/colonized duality. The tension and incomensurability between and among differences plays an important role. He writes,

> The non-synchronous temporality of global and national cultures opens up a cultural space—a third space—where the negotiation of incommensurable differences creates a tension peculiar to borderline existences. . . . Hybrid hyphenisations emphasize the incommensurable elements as the basis of cultural identities. (p. 218)

Thus, for Bhabha, a third space is characterized by translation and the negotiation of contradictory differences.

Across the disciplines drawing on Bhabha's theory, third space has most often been associated with theories of identity (self/other). It has, nonetheless, initiated reconceptualization of a diverse range of topics. For example, in his 1996 book titled *Thirdspace: Journeys to Los Angeles and other Real and Imagined Places*, political geographer and urban planner Edward Soja uses the concept of thirdspace as a way to "think differently about the meanings and significance of space and those related concepts that compose and comprise the inherent *spaciality of human life*: place, location, landscape, environment, home, city, region, territory, and geography" (p. 1, original emphasis). In other words, Soja uses thirdspace as a way to explore the "other" of geographical space and social spatiality. He defines the term thirdspace as "a purposefully tentative and flexible term that attempts to capture what is actually a constantly shifting and changing milieu of ideas, events, appearances, and meanings" (p. 2) Soja draws on Bhabha, but primarily grounds his work in the spatial trialectics of sociologist Henri Lefebvre and the heterotopia of philosopher/historian Michael Foucault.

In the field of education, the concept of third space has become increasingly common in theoretic discourses. Perhaps the first to draw on third space theory was Canadian curriculum theorist Ted Aoki. In fact, Aoki had written on tenets central to the third space concept years before Bhabha's seminal 1990 interview. In his years spent working as a teacher, administrator, and professor, Aoki took up the charge against the dualisms deeply inscribed in education. For example, he often explored the distinction between, what he terms, curriculum-as-planned and curriculum-as-lived experience—a split often manifested as a break between theory and practice. Aoki (1986) writes that a teacher's "pedagogic situation is a living in tensionality—a tensionality that emerges, in part, from the indwelling in a zone between two curriculum worlds: the worlds of curriculum-as-plan and curriculum-as-lived-experiences" (p. 159). With this binary, as in other binaries Aoki describes, one does not seek to extinguish the tensions but to dwell aright in them. "It is the difference that really matters" Aoki writes, "not so much the elimination of the differences, but, more so, the attunement of the quality of the tensionality of differences that makes a difference" (1987, p. 354). In other words, "to be alive is to be appropriately tensioned and . . . to be tensionless, like a limp violin string, is to be dead" (1990, p. 360).

In recent educational scholarship, third space theory is primarily associated with issues of identity, although the contexts of the studies are quite diverse. For example, Tom Liam Lynch (2009), Claire Lauer (2009), and Sheila Benson (2010) use the concept of third space to theorize identity construction and student resistance in English classrooms. Mika Yoshimoto (2008 & 2011) uses third space theory when examining the connection between second language learning and identity in her study of Japanese women learning English in a Canadian University. Wang (2006) herself uses it as she wrestles with issues of identity pertaining to multicultural education. There is also research in which issues of identity are not the primary topics of investigation. In

my own work (Buckreis, 2010), for example, I use third space theory to examine issues related to the methodization of teaching and to the competing and sometimes incommensurable conceptions of what "good teaching" means.

One concern regarding third space theory arises from its very wording. Often the term third space conjures up images of a fixed point on a line in-between two other points. Indeed, this misconception is amplified because much of the impetus for theorizing a third space is an effort to circumvent dualistic thought. The terms used to describe third spaces, such as in-betweenness and hybridity, commonly imply linearity. Although a hybrid, for example, can result from bringing together more than two elements, it more frequently indicates the combination of two things (such as a hybrid vehicle comprised of an internal combustion engine and an electric motor or the inter-breeding of two different species of plant). This, however, belies the complexity of third spaces. It is far too simplistic to suggest a third space must fall on a one-dimensional line, even when one realizes that a line-segment is composed of an infinite number of points. Third spaces must be looked upon as multi-dimensional, entertaining theories and ideas whose complex intersections and disjunctions cannot be cleanly or clearly defined. Third spaces are contextual, temporal, subjective, fluid, and ever changing.

One concern I have with Homi Bhabha's (1990) theory is the apparent linearity of the hybrid he discusses. "With the nature of cultural difference," he writes, "I try to place myself in that position of linearity, in that productive space of the construction of culture as difference, in the spirit of alterity or otherness" (p. 209). Although again and again he talks about the creation of something new, and the new *can* be created in a space of linearity, I wonder if the space he is discussing is able to transcend "in-betweenness." Returning to my previous example, hybrid vehicles were not simply constructed by putting an electric motor together with an internal combustion engine—it was not simply a matter of "in-between." Without the creation of new technologies the project itself would have been a failure. It necessarily moved beyond linearity. Certainly the third space Wang envisions and describes is not one dimensional, but rather multi-dimensional.

Possibilities and Challenges of Dwelling in a Third Space

Wang's theorizing leads us not only to a deeper concern with issues of identity, but the problematics she poses compel us to undertake our own journeys. Certainly, the questions Wang asks and the experiences she describes will resonate with those who have, or currently, live abroad or have experiences in multiculturally diverse settings. Her story, however, is equally meaningful or approachable by those who have not had those experiences. One must not have lived extreme differences in geography, culture, or language in order to experience the extreme alterity of thought. Wang's work speaks to anyone who wants to explore the otherness of self and identity more deeply. I believe they will find her theoretical ideas immensely fruitful and insightful.

The Call from the Stranger on a Journey Home can be particularly valuable for teacher educators, across content specializations. Although it would be a distinctly challenging text for undergraduates without a theoretic background, the central themes on which Wang expounds—self/other, ambiguity, aporia, relationality, alterity, negotiation, and transformative spaces—are all crucial elements of learning to teach and must *at least* be introductorily discussed and explored by pre-service (as well as in-service) teachers. It is imperative that new teachers come

to understand that doubt, uncertainty, and the potential for making mistakes are all natural parts of education and do not necessarily imply incompetency or "bad" teaching.

In her ethnographic study of learning to teach, Deborah Britzman (2003) writes that three cultural myths are endemic to teaching in the United States: "everything depends upon the teacher, teachers are self made, and teachers are experts" (p. 7). While she does not deny the expert knowledge teachers have, the myth of which she speaks is much more extreme—more a matter of being *the* expert, the one who *knows* the course to run and the one who *always* has the answer. According to Britzman, these myths "situate the teacher's individuality as the problem and proffer a static solution of authority, control, mastery, and certainty as the proper position. They seem to explain competency as the absence of conflict" (p. 7). Although certainly too much conflict in the classroom can be harmful, it *cannot* be erased. Not only would the effort to erase it require draconian measures, leading to conflict itself, but also because without conflict (either cognitive, affective, or existential), learning would be limited.

These myths are particularly insidious because they appear so natural and commonsensical. Teachers, teacher educators, parents, the media, and educational legislation frequently perpetuate them. In my work in teacher preparation, I have heard the deep frustration pre-service teachers experience as the myths and images of teaching they hold dear prove illusory. As much as some might wish it to be true, teaching cannot be reduced to recipes and flowcharts. Those who attempt to reduce teaching to instrumental control ultimately push to the margins the extraordinarily complex relationships that are part of everyday school life and learning. Wang, however, gives voice to these complexities; she often articulates the ambiguity and unsettledness of her position. Wrestling with these issues is a vital part of teaching and learning, Wang (2004) stresses. "If pedagogy genuinely engages a process of leading out," she writes,

> it must have the capacity to endure uncertainty and work with contradictions—not in order to achieve final consensus, but to reach another level of understanding and sympathy—and to reach beyond; not in order to finally settle down, but to nurture the original moments of creativity. (p. 156)

Struggling with ideas, playing with boundaries, openness to the new and other—these are all essential aspects of a third space.

Most engaging about Wang's book is her willingness to share her feelings of ambiguity and depict the challenges she faces in her encounters with otherness. It starkly reveals, however, that a third space can be a difficult, demanding, and uncomfortable dwelling place. While it is relatively easy to talk the talk, it is a formidable undertaking to have one's practice match one's rhetoric. A central principle of third space theory is fluidity, and it is a daunting task to keep our ideas and conceptions from becoming sedimented and set over time. Fear and anxiety understandably accompany situations lacking predictability—lacking a clear "right" and "wrong." As much as teaching and learning can be wondrous, joyous, and exhilarating experiences, they can also be intimidating, threatening, and humbling.

When one subverts the traditional teacher-centered classroom, allowing students to express their ideas and opinions in their particular voices, the possibility arises for the students to question the position of the teacher—to challenge the teacher's knowledge and expertise. Similarly, when discussions involve "difficult knowledge" (Britzman, 1998) such as critically reflecting upon one's beliefs (both the teacher and students'), the classroom atmosphere can become emotionally charged. It is understandable to want to reconcile contradictions, to hope for

consensus, and perhaps, at times, consensus can be reached; however, it is important to realize it may not. It is even more essential to recognize that a lack of consensus may be desirable. Cultivating the ability to hold conflicting, even incompatible ideas at the same time is not an easy task.

It is challenging, and can even be threatening, to imagine that opposing views must be valued and celebrated rather than dismissed or synthesized. Teachers find themselves feeling overexposed and vulnerable, especially if conceptions of competency are grounded in the myths of which Britzman writes. Wang (2004) articulates this unsettledness well, but she takes care to also articulate the educational potential of the difficult state of being. When one encounters the alterity of the other in a loving relationship, "one risks feeling uncomfortable even among the familiar, but it inaugurates the very possibility of education: learning from something different and other than the self" (p. 8). Teachers and students must constantly negotiate spaces that invite them to be open to the tensions while they struggle to not allow that openness to become overwhelming and crippling. While teachers cannot "control" their classrooms (in the strict sense of the word), they can influence their classroom culture in such a way that these interactions are seen as valuable. It is, however, a formidable charge.

Concluding Remarks

What does it mean to think of education as dwelling in tensionality? Certainly, the myths of teaching of which Briztman (2003) writes assume the classroom of a "good" teacher to be tension-free. Moreover, educational institutions often presume that tension necessarily undermines meeting learning objectives. Tension can no doubt be detrimental, even destructive, but one should not reduce the notion to a risk to be avoided. Tension also begets transformation. From tension comes imaginative insight and the impetus to move forward. A third space, nonetheless, requires more than pusillanimous resignation to tensions. One must embrace tensions. Wang, as an autobiographer and curriculum theorist, exemplifies a person embracing tensions and dwelling in a third space.

Wang (2004) has not set forth a recipe to be followed or a prescriptive curriculum. She acknowledges that when she writes:

> this cross-cultural, intercultural, gendered space I have attempted to articulate is not a model; it is not universally applicable. It cannot be confined to any model. As an invitation, it intends only to inform and inspire those who desire to move with the third space. . . . As a call, this book invites all those who are in search of new spaces to join in this journey, a journey essentially educational. (p. 181)

Wang insists that while she deepens her understanding of her own subjective position, her journey is *necessarily* unending. In fact, she writes of her final chapter as "a concluding remark resisting conclusion, inviting readers to start anew" (Wang, 2004, p. 18). Through her intellectual and autobiographical labor, she invites us to take up similar journeys.

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