
Language, Culture, and Identity in Online Fanfiction

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ABSTRACT This article draws on constructs in second-language acquisition, literacy, cultural, and media studies as theoretical bases for examining how networked technologies and fan culture provide a young English language learner (ELL) with a site for developing her English language and writing skills. During this process, she also develops an online identity as a popular, multiliterate writer. To understand how this happens, the notion of identity is explored as a fluid construct that shifts over time with this ELL's long-term participation in a fan community. Popular and fan culture are also examined as points of affiliation and as dialogic resources that she appropriates, both in her writing and in her interactions with other fans. In so doing, the article demonstrates how popular culture and technology converge to provide a context in which this adolescent ELL is able to develop a powerful, transcultural identity, discursively constructed through the different cultural perspectives and literacies that she and other fans from across the globe bring to this space.

Introduction

Observers of the twentieth and the onset of the twenty-first century will note how these times are distinguished by a peculiar passion for identity: identities made around nation, community, ethnicity, race, religion, gender, sexuality, and age; identities premised on popular culture and its shifting sets of representational practices; identities attached to fashion and new imagined lifestyles, to leisure and work, and to the mundane and the exotic; identities made in relation to place and displacement, to community and to a sense of dispersal, to 'roots' as well as 'routes.' (Yon, 2000, p. 1)

Much current research on second-language (L2) and literacy acquisition has centered on the contextual nature of language development and has highlighted the role of identity in English language learners' literacy practices. Additionally, as new information and communication technologies (ICTs) facilitate the formation of 'virtual spaces' that cross traditional cultural, linguistic, and geographic borders, scholarship in teaching English to speakers of other languages (TESOL) has turned its attention to such online spaces as new, transnational contexts for identity development and language socialization (Cope & Kalantzis, 2000; Warschauer & Kern, 2000).

Save for a few studies (Lam, 2000, 2004, 2005; Yi, 2005), there has been little inquiry into the roles of popular and fan culture in the online literacy and social practices of English language learning youth. Moreover, with the fast-paced propagation of new media and technologies, novel fan practices and 'virtual' communities based around popular culture seem to spring up on a daily basis. The popularity of such communities generates many questions related to how youth from across the globe are affiliating around popular culture in online spaces. How do adolescents with limited English proficiency construct identities in online English and text-dominated spaces? How do these identities change and develop over time? What resources do these adolescents draw on for their interactions and presentations of self in online spaces? What role does popular culture play in their identity development and literate and social practices?

In this article, I draw on constructs in second-language acquisition (SLA), literacy, cultural, and media studies as theoretical bases for examining how networked ICTs and fan culture provide a young English language learner (ELL) with a site for developing her English language and writing skills. During this process, she also develops an online identity as a popular, multiliterate writer. To understand how this happens, I explore the notion of identity as a fluid construct that shifts over time with this ELL's long-term participation in a fan community. I also explore popular culture as a point of affiliation and as a dialogic resource that she appropriates, both in her writing and in her interactions with other fans. In so doing, I show how popular culture and technology converge to provide a context in which this adolescent ELL is able to develop a powerful, transcultural identity, discursively constructed through the different cultural perspectives and literacies that she and other fans from across the globe bring to this space.

Identity and Discourse

Research on second-language acquisition (SLA) has often focused on individual learners' psycholinguistic processes as they learn to read, write, and speak in the target language. Some of this work conceives of identity, if it addresses it at all, as a stable construct that exists outside of and/or that can be set in opposition to social context (see Harklau, forthcoming, for a review of research on L2 writing and identity). For example, many theories of acculturation posit standard stages that learners go through as they come into contact with and assimilate, or resist, the host culture (Atkinson et al, 1983; Gay, 1995). In recent years, the research perspective has expanded to consider the development of ethnic identity as a fluid, dynamic, and often recursive process (Jeffres, 1983; Phinney, 1990) that is closely tied to learners' interactions in various social contexts. This focus on the social is mirrored by work being done within sociocultural or new literacy studies (New London Group, 1996), which conceives of literacy and language development as socially situated practices (Street, 1984) that are intimately tied to cultural, historical, and institutional contexts as well as to identity (Gee, 1996; Lankshear & Knobel, 2003).

Gee's (1999) notion of 'little-d/big-D' Discourse bridges literacy, identity, and context, in that it conceives of discourse (with a lower-case d) as language in use, and Discourse (with a capital D) as a compilation of semiotic, material, and expressive resources which act as an 'identity kit' of sorts. Thus, big-D Discourse encompasses the wide range of representational resources, such as clothing, text, language, and gesture, that individuals use to 'pull off' certain socially situated identities and to be recognized as certain kinds of people within a given context. Such a construct is useful in looking at interaction in online spaces, for several reasons.

First, this construct recognizes the different semiotic and material resources, including but also exceeding traditional print-based language, such as images, avatars, icons, shape, sound, and space that individuals use to convey meaning via computers. Big-D Discourse also highlights the ways in which individuals use language and text to index certain facets of their identities in online spaces where many traditional markers of identity are unavailable. Thus, from this perspective, ELLs may have multiple, fluid identities that are connected, not to some fixed stage of acculturation or some internal state of being, but rather to more flexible patterns of participation and representation in social events that change over time and according to context and activity (Gee, 2001).

Secondly, in our modern, information-oriented society using 'our' takes much for granted about the reader, computer-mediated communication (CMC) and the Internet provide new opportunities for using Discourse and text to discursively construct and enact achieved identities in online environments (Gee, 2004; Thomas, 2004). In this spirit, researchers have started to explore how immigrants across the globe are using online spaces to aid in the formulation and/or continuation of their various ethnic identities and affiliations across geographic borders. As an example, Mitra (1997) explores how Indian expatriates use text to construct their identities and signal certain allegiances by selectively inserting themselves into the discourse of an online newsgroup community. Members of the newsgroup live in different parts of the Western hemisphere and would typically be isolated by spatial constraints; however, CMC and the newsgroup provide a common space for this population to gather and discuss 'the identity crisis that the Indians negotiate every day in their everyday life in the new land' (Mitra, 1997, p. 67).

Thus, this online space provides a forum, not only for the sharing of individual experiences, but also for collective debate, commiseration, and reaffirmation of an immigrant Indian identity that takes on many different forms and exists across national borders.

Popular and Fan Culture and L2 Literacy and Identity

Although the role of popular culture in young ELLs' practices of linguistic and cultural identification remains largely unexplored, some recent scholarship has started to address the function of such technology-mediated fan practices in ELLs' literacy and/or identity development. As an example, Lam's (2000) innovative work includes an in-depth case study of a Chinese immigrant who created and maintained a website devoted to a popular Japanese singer. Through authoring the website and interacting with fans who visited his site, this youth was able to develop a 'textual identity' that bolstered his confidence as he learned and practised English with a transnational group of peers. More recently, Lam (2005) explored how a high school senior, who emigrated from China to the USA as a child, created a webpage that enabled him to gain status online as a respected Japanese animation or *anime* fan and webmaster. Moreover, the connections he established via the site also allowed him to develop fluency in multiple social languages, including online and *anime*-related discourses, as well as in the global forms of English spoken by the many ELL *anime* fans he interacted with. Through such studies, Lam's work illustrates how these online, pop cultural spaces provide opportunities for youth to fashion linguistic and cultural identities for themselves; in essence, multiliterate and transcultural identities that extend beyond traditional geographic borders such as the nation-state.

Fanfiction

The focus of my research, Japanese animation or *anime*-based fanfiction, is also an example of the highly participatory, agentive, and global nature of online popular and fan culture. Fanfiction is writing in which fans use media narratives and pop cultural icons as inspiration for creating their own texts. In such texts, fan authors imaginatively extend the original plotline or timeline (such as writing a story about the birth and childhood of Darth Vader), create new characters (such as introducing a villain who turns out to be the love child of Captain Kirk and an alien leader from a fabricated planet), and/or develop new relationships between characters that are already present in the original source (such as crafting a text around a budding romantic relationship between Harry Potter and Hermione Granger). Print fanfiction has existed in various forms for many years (see Jenkins, 1992, for an extensive history); however, new technologies now afford fans the opportunity to 'meet' in online spaces where they can collaboratively write, exchange, critique, and discuss one another's fictions.

On the *anime* fanfiction site presented in this article, the majority of fictions are written in English; however, analysis will demonstrate that many members of the site seem to display a global disposition, in that they value and express interest in learning about the different cultural and linguistic backgrounds of other youth in the space. Hence, the 'unofficial curriculum' of *anime* fanfiction writing does not center on English-only or print-based forms and conventions of writing and North American cultural values. Instead, interactions between writers and readers illustrate a shared appreciation for multiple languages, different cultural perspectives, and alternative forms of text. Texts from the website also illustrate fans' strong allegiance to popular culture and emphasize the value of communication, social interaction, and pluralism in this online space.

In an extensive ethnography of fan culture and practices, Jenkins (1992) challenges prevalent stereotypes of fans as 'passive dupes' who uncritically ingest the messages of mainstream media. He instead argues that fan culture is based on the introduction, discussion, and dissemination of a multiplicity of perspectives.

[Fans'] activities pose important questions about the ability of media producers to constrain the creation and circulation of meanings. Fans construct their cultural and social identity through borrowing and inflecting mass culture images, articulating concerns which often go unvoiced within the dominant media. (Jenkins, 1992, p. 23)

The fanfiction texts presented in this article are a clear illustration of Jenkins' point, as through writing, reading, and peer-reviewing fanfiction, these youth are engaging in a dialogic process (Bakhtin, 1981; Dyson, 1997; Nystrand, 1997) of appropriating Japanese media characters and narratives and making them their own. As such, these youth refashion the pre-existing media tales by infusing them with social and cultural themes, multiple literacies, various forms of expertise, and concerns from their daily lives. Moreover, these mass-produced media become resources for and are integrated into fans' day-to-day interactions, activities, and the cultures of online fandoms. Additionally, through such appropriation, many youth in this space are able to take on identities, not as immigrants, struggling writers or readers of English, or native or non-native speakers of one language or another, but rather as learners and users of multiple social languages and Discourses.

The Study

Context

The case study presented here is part of a continuing ethnographic research project that examines the literacy and social practices of adolescent ELLs writing fanfiction in online spaces. At present, Fanfiction.net is the largest fanfiction archive online. At last count, the site housed over 500,000 fan texts, with fanfictions based on media ranging from videogames to Harry Potter books to professional wrestling. The design of the site is ideal for facilitating maximum social interaction between affiliates and for promoting composition-related communication and collaboration between fans. For example, the site is devoted to practices such as improving individuals' fanfiction writing skills, and to this end, the design provides easy links to and designated spaces for meta-discussion of writing, peer review, and collaborative writing (Black, 2005). The site also has its own 'in-house' instant messaging program to facilitate fanfiction- and composition-related interaction. I have spent three years as a participant observer in this space, writing my own *anime*-based fictions, posting feedback on other writers' texts, and interacting with a diverse group of fans in order to develop a clear sense and a robust description of what it means to participate in this space. During the course of the project, I have collected artifacts such as fan texts, reader reviews, and public interaction from the site, have kept field notes, and have conducted interviews with focal participants.

Tanaka Nanako

Nanako and her family moved from Shanghai, China to a large Canadian city in the summer of 2000. When they moved, Nanako, a native Mandarin Chinese speaker, was 11 years old and did not speak any English. At school in Canada, Nanako struggled with her courses and found it difficult to make friends. The winter after she moved, however, she was surfing the Web for *anime* and happened upon some personal websites that featured *anime*-based fanfictions. She became an avid fanfiction reader, and because many of the texts were posted in English, her interest in this form of Japanese popular culture also became a conduit for her language learning. Two years later, Nanako joined Fanfiction.net and created a personal page that offered her many different means of forging social connections and also of presenting certain aspects of herself to the online community (Black, 2005). Two months after joining, and only two and a half years after moving to Canada and beginning to learn a new language, Nanako began writing and publicly posting her own fanfictions on the site in English. Over the years, Nanako has been able to achieve the identity of a successful and wildly popular author in this space. Moreover, as this article will demonstrate, the relationships she has built with readers and the dialogic nature of writing and participation have played a large part in her success and popularity on the site.

Data Analysis

Analysis of data was a multilayered process that was grounded in discourse analytic techniques. Initially, I used inductive thematic analysis to identify and characterize patterns in interviews, online interactions, fan texts, and in reader reviews of these texts. In the next stage, I separated the fanfiction author's interactions with readers and the readers' feedback to the author into individual

lines or clauses in which each line must introduce new information (Gee, 1986). Then, I coded the lines as part of a larger typology of individual units of information exchange. The lines were then grouped into topical segments that are similar to ‘stanzas’, or ‘sets of lines about single minimal topics, organized rhythmically and syntactically so as to hang together in a particularly tight way’ (Gee, 1996, p. 94). In the next stage, the data (divided into lines and segments) were compared across reviews in order to identify thematic and structural patterns.

In the analysis for this article, I focused primarily on thematic topics that were related to identity, language, and culture. To this end, I selected texts that were representative of how Nanako actively constructed and enacted an achieved identity in this space (and how this identity changed over time). I also chose salient types of reader reviews or feedback, in which the reader responds or in some way seems to contribute to Nanako’s online presentation of self. I then conducted a closer discourse analytic examination of such texts with the following questions in mind:

- What sort of linguistic ‘work’ are these texts doing?
- How and in what ways are the texts indexing Nanako’s identity as a successful writer?
- How and in what ways are the texts indexing the readers’ identities as knowledgeable participants in this space?
- How and in what ways do the texts reference and/or draw on language, culture, and popular culture?

In answering these questions, I coded data on multiple levels. First, I looked at separate lines to identify the main topic or thematic structure of each clause (Gee, 1999; Halliday & Matthiessen, 2004). Next, I returned and looked at each line in terms of the sort of socially situated identities that were either being enacted or referenced, or were relevant to meaningful participation in the site (Gee, 1999). I then compared, across reviews, Nanako’s interactions with readers and interviews to identify potential thematic and structural patterns in these various texts.

Building an Online Identity

Dialogic Resources

In Bakhtin’s (1981) dialogic conception of language, to become literate in a certain social language entails more than solely learning the discrete linguistic aspects of reading, writing, and speaking. Similar to Gee’s notion of language as part of Discourses or ‘identity kits’ that enable individuals to be recognized as certain kinds of people, Bakhtin conceives of language learning as coming to know, either consciously or implicitly, how to successfully participate in certain social situations and to enact the social values and ideological dispositions of certain cultural, linguistic, or social groups. This ‘heteroglossic’ or multivocal (Bakhtin, 1981) vision of language also encompasses the ways in which individuals appropriate an array of available dialogic resources, such as media, texts, other utterances and social voices, and material objects, to assist them in constructing meaning and in projecting certain identities and social affiliations that may depart from and/or challenge what is standard or established.

In the following analyses, I will discuss how Nanako’s facility with different forms of literacy, popular culture, and the online fanfiction community provided her with many diverse resources that helped her to construct and enact the identity of a successful fanfiction writer in English. However, this identity was negotiated, not only through English, but also through Nanako’s pan-Asian linguistic and cultural knowledge and affiliations. Additionally, for Nanako’s writing on Fanfiction.net she draws on a range of pop cultural resources from different countries, such as Japanese animation, music from the United Kingdom, and novels and motion pictures from the United States, to assist her in composing in English. Additionally, I will discuss how these dialogic resources shifted over time as Nanako’s facility with English as well as her comfort level in the online community increased. To conclude, I posit that Nanako’s participation in this online space helped her to develop confidence and motivation for continued writing and language learning in English; however, it also provided her with a sense of pride and a renewed emphasis on her linguistic background and ethnic identity as an Asian.

Nanako's Early Writing

Nanako's initial fanfictions were based on two *anime* series, Beyblade and Yu-Gi-Oh!, which, like many media 'mixes' (Ito, 2001) or 'franchises' (Lemke, 2005), have corresponding toys, television shows, movies, and *manga* (comic books) and were wildly popular at the time. The plots of both series revolve around competitors battling or dueling using either Beyblades, which are spinning tops, or Duel Monster playing cards in the case of Yu-Gi-Oh!. Although both shows have female characters and competitors, the action centers mainly on male protagonists and their skirmishes. In drawing on these media for her writing, Nanako appropriates only certain aspects of these texts and then uses them to create her own plotlines. For instance, in her first Beyblade fiction, Nanako develops her story around the characters from the White Tigers, a Chinese Beyblade team. In particular, the narrative events focus primarily on a romantic relationship between the characters Ray and Mariah. Thus, her choice of plot provides means for fusing elements of popular culture with the emerging interest in sexuality and/or romance that she and many adolescents on the site share.

The narrative of the story text itself is written entirely in English, except for one instance where Nanako portrays one of the Chinese characters using a Japanese term as she is thinking to herself. The use of Japanese here, rather than her first language, Chinese, could be attributed to several factors. First, as will be discussed in subsequent analyses, the Japanese language is often viewed as a badge of membership in *anime* fan communities. Also, while Nanako knows a great deal about the Beyblade series, she freely admits that she does not know the details of some of the characters; hence, she may not have realized that this particular character was in fact Chinese.

Nanako's Beyblade fiction, *Complete* [1], is what is known within the fan community as a 'songfiction' or songfic, a 'story based entirely around the lyrics of a song' (Fanfiction Glossary, 2006). This hybrid story structure can be seen in the following excerpt from Chapter 1 of *Complete*.

Chapter 1. The Pain

It was a cozy night, I was lying awake on my bed, I just couldn't help but thinking about Ray. His bedroom was just a few blocks away from mine. I wanted to go and see how he was doing, but I would probably get kicked off the team if Lee or Kevin see me wondering around Ray and his teammates' rooms. *Oh Ray, I wish you could come back to me, then we can be together just like the old times.*

~ Flash back of yesterday ~

*If you see me walking down the street
Staring at the sky and dragging my two feet*

I was walking down the street with my teammates, and then we saw you and your team, the bladebreakers. I was so glad to see you again, you were as handsome as per usual, I wanted ran up to you and gave you a warm hug, but I know Lee won't allow me to so. I really missed you Ray.

The text is dialogic in the sense that she mixes both the Asian elements of Japanese animation with more Western pop cultural elements by using a song from an all-female pop band from the United Kingdom. Moreover, for a writer who is just learning English, the mixture of generic resources from both the song and the narrative story format provides an intertextual framework to scaffold her writing. Specifically, Nanako was able to separate and use each stanza of the popular song, as well as readers' knowledge of the tone of the song, to augment and support the romantic nature of the narrative story she was crafting.

Author's Notes and Self-Identification as an ELL

Nanako introduces the first chapter of *Complete* with what is known in fanfiction circles as an Author's Note (A/N). On Fanfiction.net, A/Ns are a typical way for writers to address readers before, during, or after their stories. However, there is a fair amount of controversy surrounding A/Ns in the broader fanfiction community. The debate hinges on the fact that many 'serious' fan

writers do not approve of such notes, arguing that they are jarring and/or detract from the reader's enjoyment of a text. Nonetheless, as evidenced by the copious amount of A/Ns used, readers' positive responses to such notes, and general support for their continued presence in the community (such as online petitions), A/Ns are an integral, and I would argue, a valuable part of writing and participation in this space. On the Fanfiction Symposium website, Gilliam (2002) writes about this very topic and argues that 'fanfiction.net is less an archive in which finished stories are housed than a community in which the participatory process of constructing the story is as important if not more so than the finished product.' Nanako's extensive use of Author's Notes supports this vision of a social and interactive writing space. She uses them for a variety of purposes: to establish certain aspects of her identity, to introduce and help orient readers to her texts, and also to thank reviewers for their feedback and support of her writing, to name just a few. Moreover, as will be discussed in the next section, Nanako uses her A/Ns to elicit both social and writing-related responses from readers in such a way that the readers and their feedback also become resources that support and inspire her participation on the site.

As an example, the following A/N serves several different functions, which I discuss below.

Segment A

Line 1 A/N: Konnichiwa! Tadaima!

Line 2 This is my first Beyblade song fic,

Line 3 so please go easy on it.

Segment B

Line 4 I just love Ray/Mariah fics,

Line 5 they are so kawaii together! ^_^

Segment C

Line 6 Read and Review!

Line 7 And no flames!

Line 8 Thank you!

Segment D

Line 9 By the way, this is in Mariah's POV

Line 10 on the night when Ray lost his bit beast. (8 September 2002)

First, the note is a way for Nanako to begin establishing her identity as an *anime* fan. Also, it provides a guide to her text for readers to follow. Finally, it serves as a means for Nanako to negotiate her writing space with readers. In Segment A, Nanako begins, not in her native language of Mandarin, but in Japanese. She greets readers ('Konnichiwa') and tells them that '[She's] back' ('Tadaima') from a few weeks of not writing or updating her stories. As mentioned previously, the Japanese terms are a means of indexing her identity and insider status in the realm of *anime* fanfiction, as many fans try to learn and/or integrate Japanese into their *anime*-based texts.

In Segment B, Nanako is indexing another aspect of her identity, while at the same time eliciting a different sort of interaction from readers. Specifically, in Line 4 she identifies the couple who will be paired romantically in the story, and then in Line 5, in Japanese, says what a *kawaii* or 'cute' couple she thinks they are. In this way, Nanako is establishing herself as a supporter of the romantic pairing of a certain *anime* couple. Interestingly enough, this is often a huge point of contention, as many fans prefer to read stories that feature pairings that they are interested in and/or approve of. In this sense, Nanako is establishing a point of contact with her readers and is identifying herself as a 'Ray + Mariah' fan. She is also eliciting responses that are not based on her writing as such, but are more related to other fans' interpretations of the *anime* itself, and is in a sense engaging in the debate surrounding which characters make the best romantic fit.

Nanako also uses this A/N to negotiate her writing space with readers in a way that indexes the sort of online writer that she is, specifically, one who appreciates and encourages the participatory and social nature of Fanfiction.net. For example, in Lines 2 and 3, she asks readers to be gentle with their comments, as this is her first attempt at writing a Beyblade songfic. Segment C is a clear example of Nanako's attempts to negotiate with readers, as she elicits feedback by asking for reviews in Line 6; moreover, she specifies the type of feedback she wants in Line 7. In online register, 'flames' are antagonistic, derisive comments. Thus, by writing 'no flames,' Nanako is

asking for gentle, constructive forms of feedback. To conclude, in Segment D, Line 9, she provides further orientation for readers by specifying which character's point of view the story is told from, and in Line 10, establishing a specific timeline for the text.

One month later, when Nanako posted the second chapter of this fiction, she introduced a new element of self-disclosure into the Author's Notes. Specifically, she chose to foreground the fact that she was learning English, and thereafter, this disclosure played a formative role in many readers' responses to her texts:

Line 1 Important note: English is my second language,

Line 2 so please ignore my grammar mistakes and spelling errors.

Line 3 I might have some typo

Line 4 since I wrote this story in a hurry. (28 October 2002)

In self-identifying as an ELL, Nanako is again engaging in a sort of dialogic negotiation with readers. First, she explicitly requests that readers overlook any grammar and spelling errors in her writing, which implicitly directs their focus to other aspects of composition, such as content and meaning value. Also, at this point in time (one month after the initial chapter was posted), many readers were pleading with her to update the story. Thus in Line 4, she is also able to use haste as a disclaimer of sorts to mitigate any potentially negative responses to errors and typos in the text. Additionally, as will be shown in the following examples of reader reviews, this new introduction to her A/Ns generates interest in and questions about Nanako's linguistic and cultural background. As such, she is able to use the A/N in such a way that, notwithstanding errors, it continues helping her to construct her identity as an accomplished fanfiction writer. Moreover, this addition sets the stage for establishing her expert knowledge and insider status as an Asian writing *anime*-based fanfictions.

Card Captor Sakura and Linguistic and Cultural Identity

Three months after posting the Beyblade fiction, Nanako moved on to another *anime* 'canon', or original series that a fanfiction is based on. Card Captor Sakura (CCS) is what is known as a 'magical girl' series, a popular subgenre of *shoujo* or *anime* for young women. In this series, the protagonist is a young Japanese girl named Sakura Kinomoto who uses her magical powers to capture an enchanted deck of cards. While the plot does feature many of Sakura's battles with the magical cards, it differs from the Beyblade and Yu-Gi-Oh! series in that it also places a great deal of emphasis on friendship, family, and implied romantic relationships between characters. Thus, when Nanako began writing CCS fictions that featured relationships between certain popular couples, her stories generated a great deal of interest in the community. One such fiction, her 14-chapter story *Crazy Love Letters*, became wildly popular in the CCS section of the site and received over 1,700 reviews from readers.

As a dialogic resource, CCS provides Nanako with new opportunities for creating texts that were linguistically and culturally hybrid. For example, although the series takes place in Japan, two of the main characters are exchange students from Hong Kong, and one of them, Syaoran Li, becomes Sakura's primary love interest. Nanako uses these Chinese characters as an entrée for bringing her first language of Mandarin into her writing, unlike the Beyblade fiction. In addition, as she begins revealing more about her cultural and linguistic background in her biographical statements, self-identifying as an ELL in all her A/Ns, and using different languages in her fanfiction texts, the multilingual nature of her texts becomes another crux of interaction and dialogic negotiation for her and a transnational group of fans. In the next section, I will focus only peripherally on the text of *Crazy Love Letters* (see Black, 2005, for further discussion of this text). Instead, I highlight how Nanako's selective appropriation of resources, as well as reader reviews of this text, enabled both Nanako and her readers to discursively position themselves within a diverse pop cultural milieu made up of youth from across the globe.

Reader Reviews

According to Bakhtin, dialogism is a mode of meaning-making characterized by the meeting and interaction of diverse and often dissenting social voices and perspectives (1981). Fanfiction.net provides a space for such dialogism in the provisions it makes for reader feedback. Specifically, each chapter of a posted story has an easily accessible link for submitting reviews. This allows readers to respond to each section of a text as they finish reading it. This is significant for Nanako as an ELL and writer because she receives immediate, contextualized feedback on the effects that her rhetorical choices and uses of language have on different readers (Black, 2005). As this dialogism continues through Author's Notes, email, and subsequent texts, Nanako is in turn able to respond to readers' responses. However, as Nystrand (1997) points out, 'discourse is dialogic not because the speakers take turns, but because it is continually structured by tension, even conflict, between the conversants, between self and other, as one voice "refracts" the other' (p. 8). Thus, Nanako is not simply composing her stories for some silent, anonymous audience. Instead, she is learning to write and to make language choices as part of authentic participation in what Nystrand calls a 'dynamic, sociocognitive process' (p. 8) or event.

Readers in this space, as avid *anime* fans, feel a sense of ownership over the characters and media that Nanako is representing in her texts. Moreover, as members of this fanfiction site, they also have a proprietary attitude toward the writing environment and feel justified in putting forth their own ideas and perspectives in terms of how it should be shaped (Black, forthcoming). Thus, in terms of content, reader reviews are not only resources for and responses to Nanako's writing, but are also conduits for readers' distinct identities and cultural perspectives, which at times may differ or conflict with each other. As such, Fanfiction.net provides a meeting place for what Newkirk (2002, p. 124) calls 'the dialogic relationship of multiple worlds' stemming from popular culture, school and academic practices, fans' home and friendship groups, online communities, as well as fans' varied ethnic and cultural affiliations, to name just a few.

In the following examples, both of the readers respond to Nanako's fanfiction text as well as to her use of her first language of Mandarin. In addition to providing simple feedback on Nanako's writing, which supports her identity as a fanfiction author, these reviews also enable readers to demonstrate allegiance with Nanako and to index their own identities as Mandarin Chinese speakers. For example, the first reviewer begins by making this association in Segment A, and holds off commenting on the text itself until Segment B.

Segment A

Line 1 so u speak mandarin?

Line 2 cool!!

Line 3 me too ^^ should '^' be '^_'^?

Segment B

Line 4 i luv this story!

Line 5 keep up the good work!! (13 July 2003)

Similarly, in the next example the reviewer begins by complimenting Nanako on her facility with romanized Mandarin, indexing their shared knowledge in this area, and also relegates story commentary to the final segment.

Segment A

Line 1 Congratulations! I deem you another Han Yu Ping Ying champion! :D

Line 2 It's rare to find many people who understand how to use this phonetic spelling of the Chinese language correctly,

Line 3 but you have proven that you can through the Mei- Lin/Syaoran conversation!

Line 4 Great job on that aspect your fic!

Segment B

Line 5 Overall, of course, your fanfic is wonderful!

Line 6 I've been meaning to review but kept forgetting ^^;;

Line 7 Please update soon! :D (16 April 2003) check '^';' – is something missing from this 'crying face' emoticon? What does :D mean here and above?

In deeming Nanako 'another' Hanyu Pinyin champion in Line 1, the second reviewer is implicitly positioning herself as accomplished in this area as well. Moreover, her feedback on this aspect of Nanako's writing sends a clear message that knowledge of and skill with multiple languages, not solely English, is valued in this space. Both the structure and the content of these reviews illustrate the social and participatory nature of writing in this space. Structurally, both readers foreground their shared linguistic background and appreciation for Mandarin, which immediately creates, albeit at the surface level, a social connection with Nanako. Both also end with segments of strong support and enthusiasm for Nanako's general abilities as a writer. In addition, the emoticons (smiling and crying faces made of typographical elements), truncated spelling ('u', 'luv', 'fanfic'), and repeated exclamation points index the readers' knowledge of online social registers and also display their affiliation with the participatory and interactive nature of writing and reading in this space as they show strong support for the author.

Hanyu Pinyin itself is a hybrid form, in that it represents Chinese phonetics with characters from the Roman alphabet. This system of transliteration is particularly useful in CMC because keyboards are not set up to display the many thousands of traditional Chinese logographic characters (Wikipedia, 2005). Moreover, romanized forms of language are increasingly more prevalent as a medium for online communication between youth who are bilingual in English and Chinese. For example, in a recent study Lam (2005) discusses how a 'mixed code' variety of romanized Chinese and English was used by bilingual Cantonese and English speakers in a chatroom.

This language variety served to create a collective ethnic identity for these young people and specifically allowed the two girls in this study to assume a new identity through language. This new identity follows neither the social categories of English-speaking Americans nor those of Cantonese-speaking Chinese. (Lam, 2005, p. 45)

Thus, online spaces are fertile ground for observing the fluid nature of identity and language in use. Lam's study presents one of the many shifts taking place as ELLs adopt and adapt language varieties to communicate in global forms of English in online spaces. Moreover, it highlights how language and new ICTs are playing a new role in the ethnic and social affiliations of immigrant youth across many different parts of the world.

Additionally, Nanako's extensive use of romanized Chinese, and even her minimal use of Japanese, were means for her to position herself both as an insider in the Asian realm of *anime*, and also as an effective user of several different languages. Many of her readers contributed to this discursive construction of self with reviews that expressed enthusiasm and admiration for Nanako's knowledge of different languages, including but not limited to English. For example, in Segment B below, the reviewer claims to be learning Chinese and Japanese from reading Nanako's fanfictions.

Segment B

Line 4 This is really interesting,

Line 5 the plot is thickening every minute!

Line 6 I'm learning so much chinese and japanese every time I read! (11 May 2003)

Moreover, in terms of integrating her first language, in her fictions Nanako writes in a manner that positions her as an expert and makes Mandarin accessible to speakers of other languages. For instance, she provides clear translations of all Chinese text, essentially juxtaposing the English and Mandarin languages. Also, at times she inserts Author's Notes into the fiction to explain different aspects of language, such as explaining that there are many different ways of saying 'I'm sorry' in Mandarin. The next reviewer, a native English speaker, expresses her admiration for Nanako's skill with English, Chinese, and Japanese.

Segment B

Line 3 By the way, you are on my fave authors list!

Line 4 And your english is great!

Line 5 You should hear my japanese... ;^^ check this emoticon please.

Line 6 I don't know any chinese either,

Line 7 so you are very smart to know so much about these languages! ^_^ (8 July 2003) date OK?

In Line 4, the reviewer explicitly comments on Nanako's status as an ELL. She then goes on to affiliate with Nanako as a fellow language learner by implying in Line 5 that her own Japanese is terrible. In Lines 6 and 7, by conveying her ignorance of Chinese, the reviewer acknowledges not only the breadth of Nanako's linguistic abilities, but also how 'very smart' Nanako must be to use these different languages effectively in her texts. Moreover, the reviewer's point in Line 7 can be contrasted with how language learners are often positioned in the majority of English-speaking contexts, such as schools. In particular, bilingual speakers are often viewed from a deficit perspective, in which their first languages are seen as something detrimental that interferes with the acquisition of English. However, this reviewer positions Nanako as an accomplished user of multiple social languages.

In a different sort of example, the review that follows presents a somewhat dissenting voice, as the reviewer asserts both her knowledge of the CCS series and her identity as a Cantonese speaker. However, it is important to note that even in presenting a critique of Nanako's writing, this reviewer still mitigates her dissent by finding other points of affiliation in Chinese popular culture and in Nanako's story itself. For instance, in Segment A the reviewer begins with a humorous threat that implicitly expresses her appreciation for Nanako's story, as she threatens to strangle her if she does not continue updating it with new chapters. Then, in Segment B, the reviewer makes a further point of affiliating with Nanako over a popular Chinese film that they both like.

Segment A

Line 1 Meiling is so evil! Ha!

Line 2 Don't stop,

Line 3 if you do I'll strangle you!

Line 4 Haha!

Segment B

Line 5 I love Huan Gu Gak Gak as well.

Line 6 It's a great story huh?

Line 7 bu i watch it in Cantonese.

Line 8 My favourite character is Siw Yin Ge,

Line 9 The one Vicki Zhoa Wei plays.

Line 10 it's awesome.

Segment C

Line 11 Let me point out that Li and Leing are from hong Kong, not China

Line 12 and since they're from hong Kong they should be speaking cantonese

Line 13 but nevertheless i love it! (15 May 2003)

It is not until Segment C that the reader points out that, according to regional language differences, the Chinese characters from the CCS *anime* should be speaking Cantonese rather than Mandarin. However, it seems significant that the reader then mitigates this critique in Line 13 by using the coordinating conjunction 'but' and the conjunctive adverb 'nevertheless' successively in a way that essentially renders the critique doubly unimportant. Thus, this is one example of how the site serves as a space where members can negotiate linguistic and cultural difference in a way that emphasizes connection and affiliation across potential barriers. Readers also, for the most part, express social and ideological differences in ways that still provide support and respect for the authors' creativity and artistic license.

Discussion and Shifts in Identity over Time

In an article, Moje posits that one of the many ways identity is implicated in literacy and language learning is in how 'readers and writers can come to understand themselves in particular ways as a result of a literate engagement' (McCarthy & Moje, 2002, p. 229). The shifts in Nanako's writing and participation in the fanfiction site over time reveal how her literate engagement in this space allowed her to draw on an array of dialogic resources to scaffold her writing, and also provided her with a supportive social context for foregrounding and backgrounding different aspects of her

identity according to her comfort level and the situation. During the years when Nanako was writing her first stories, she was just beginning to adjust to life and school in a new country. Her texts represented many different themes and issues from her life as an adolescent. Her early fictions take place in settings such as concerts, sleepovers, parties at houses where the parents are out of town, and also school classrooms. In addition, the texts deal with concerns that would be familiar to many youth, such as popularity, friendship, first love, and the pressure to succeed academically. These early narratives also are filled with what most likely appear to be references to and resources from Nanako's daily life in North America. However, as more time passed and Nanako grew more comfortable in this space, there were some notable shifts, not only in her writing and language use, but also in the narrative resources she drew on and in the themes she worked through in her texts. These changes can be related to Nanako's changing patterns of participation and self-representation over time.

According to Nanako, in her early attempts at writing on the site, she not only wanted to participate in the *anime* and fanfiction culture, she also was hoping to improve her writing ability. Her first fictions were written almost entirely in English, and her Author's Notes at the beginning of each text clearly indexed her identity as a new learner of the language and asked that reviewers overlook her grammar and spelling errors. These A/Ns in turn shaped readers' responses to her texts in many ways. For instance, many readers gave her pointed but gentle feedback on how to improve certain aspects of her writing (Black, 2005, forthcoming). Readers also focused a great deal on the content rather than the conventions of her stories. In this way, Fanfiction.net provided a safe space where Nanako as a learner could experiment and practice with different genres and forms of writing in English. At the same time, she was able to use her developing language skills to participate in a social environment that was meaningful for her and her fellow *anime* fans as they affiliated around different elements of adolescent pop culture. Moreover, she was able to develop both skill and confidence in her identity as a writer and to make lasting social connections with youth from many different countries.

Over time, the aspects of self that Nanako foregrounded through both her texts and Author's Notes began to shift. For instance, it was not until she had been writing on the site for about seven months and had received hundreds of encouraging reviews from readers that she began incorporating her first language of Mandarin and a small amount of Japanese into her narrative texts. Then, as readers began responding positively to this integration of multiple languages, such as the readers who affiliated with Nanako as fellow Chinese speakers and the many readers from other countries who expressed interest in learning about Asian languages and cultures, she began to present more of this aspect of herself to readers. For instance, her use of both Japanese and Chinese became more or less standard in her texts. Also, her Author's Notes and her biographical statements on the site began to foreground a continued affiliation with her Asian heritage, as she devoted space to lists of new Chinese movies that she was watching or discussions of popular Chinese actors, in addition to listing her favorite *anime* and *manga* series. Moreover, Nanako's fanfiction texts themselves began to turn toward themes and topics that she viewed as more closely related to aspects of her identity as an Asian female.

For instance, in an interview, Nanako explained that after attending school in Canada for several years, she began to realize that her schoolmates were largely unaware of either Chinese or Japanese history. Thus, she assumed that many fanfiction readers might also be unaware in this regard and decided to write stories that were grounded in the rich histories of these two countries. Specifically, she is referring to two recent fictions. In one, the popular novel and motion picture *Memoirs of a Geisha* (Golden, 1997) serves as a dialogic resource for another crossover fiction, in which she presents the *anime* character Sakura as a geisha. The other, set in 1910 in Kyoto, Japan, centers on Sakura's struggles with an arranged marriage. In addition, Nanako has plans to compose a historical fiction based on the second Sino-Japanese war, the war fought between China and Japan from 1937 to 1945.

In reference to these shifts, Nanako points out that her writing has changed 'dramatically' as she has matured, moving from the 'utterly unrealistic high school happy, fluffy fanfics to something with more meanings' (28 January 2006). She goes on to explain that her 'Asian pride' is in part the impetus for writing more stories about China and Japan, as she wants to be able to share the 'rich history and culture' with her readers (28 January 2006). However, she explains that her process of writing such texts is also an opportunity for her to 'learn more about [her] own culture and history'

because she often must do research to effectively represent the social and historical details in her fictions (28 January 2006).

Conclusion

Gee (2001) posits that in many institutions, for example schools, those in power often draw on rules, laws, and traditions in order to authorize certain social roles in ways that also 'author' or ascribe a certain kind of identity to the occupants of these roles. Such authorized or ascribed social positions are clearly present in classrooms where teachers are placed in the role of expert, and students are often assigned roles as certain kinds of learners. Moreover, many students such as ELLs are often ascribed roles based on deficit models of cultural and linguistic difference. These roles, in turn, connote certain types of identities and set up certain expectations of students' ability and behavior, without sufficient attention to the part that school, classroom, curricular, and societal contexts play in our assessments of and ways of categorizing students. Ascribed social positions can be contrasted with the notion of achieved identities, which are identities that individuals actively construct and negotiate in their moment-to-moment interactions with others. From this perspective, individuals may be positioned in certain ways by categories that have been authored for them; however, they also may engage in dialogic negotiation with these ascribed roles, as they choose to discursively represent and situate themselves in ways that may challenge or subvert standard expectations.

Unfortunately, in many North American educational settings, ELLs are viewed from a deficit perspective, and abilities in their first language are viewed as a hindrance to learning English and not taken into serious consideration as an additive element for participation and meaning-making in classroom activities. Additionally, in many schools, youth are cordoned off into spaces delineated by official and unofficial lines based on race, ethnicity, social class, gender, and ability. These lines can be quite pronounced for ELL youth, who are isolated by linguistic and cultural barriers and/or completely relegated to classrooms that are separate from the mainstream school population. Conversely, the online environment of Fanfiction.net provides multiple routes for traversing some of these real and imagined barriers.

On the fanfiction site, Nanako's writing was not constrained by an ascribed ELL role or specific expectations and requirements for her texts. She was not expected to adhere to the identity of an immigrant, a Canadian, or a native Mandarin Chinese speaker, nor was she forced to choose between the languages in her linguistic repertoire. Instead, Nanako's process of fanfiction writing enabled her to perform different aspects of her identity in different ways over the years. Moreover, who, what, and how she chose to represent was in many ways contingent on the feedback and positive interactions she had with readers. Through her self-identification as an ELL, she was able to garner language-related as well as social support from readers, which in turn provided her with the impetus to continue learning and writing in English. Additionally, by drawing from a range of dialogic resources that were pertinent to her life at the time, she was able to establish her membership in a realm of adolescent popular culture. Gradually, as she grew more comfortable and received more supportive feedback from readers, Nanako was able to use her writing to demonstrate and also to explore aspects of her Asian heritage, as she moved into developing texts that centered on the role of women in Chinese and Japanese society, and began thinking about creating texts based on the tumultuous history of relations between China and Japan. Rather than being constrained by the expectations of a monolingual, uniform group of readers, Nanako's process of self-representation and meaning-making was instead supported by a linguistically and culturally diverse group of youth from across the globe.

As broad shifts along the lines of globalization, CMC, and 'virtual' spaces compel us to reconsider the notions of culture and community (Jones, 1997; Yon, 2000), it also becomes necessary to consider differences between how ELLs, and adolescents more broadly, are positioned in schools versus how they choose to position themselves in out-of-school spaces. Perhaps there are lessons to be learned from sites such as Fanfiction.net, where the absence of imposed or ascribed social roles enables adolescents from a range of different backgrounds to act both as teachers and as learners. Through their online interactions, both native and non-native English speakers alike are learning to use multiple languages, social Discourses, and school-based forms of writing, as well as

knowledge of popular culture, in socially and linguistically appropriate ways. Also, they are able to discursively position and represent themselves as conversant members in a pluralistic space that fosters a positive sense of self. Moreover, the site also provides a safe, supportive, and meaningful venue, not only for language learning and literacy development, but also for affiliating and commiserating with other youth around social and cultural issues that are central to their lives. Finally, in this site, language learning and identity development are not characterized as movement toward some fixed, monocultural standard. Instead, literate and social engagement in this space involves a great deal of communication and a fluid process of meaning-making and identity negotiation that traverses national, linguistic, and cultural borders, and that is and will continue to be ongoing.

Note

[1] All names, screen names, and titles are pseudonyms.

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