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Source: *Dialectical Anthropology*, Vol. 34, No. 2 (June 2010), pp. 219-222

Published by: [Springer](#)

Stable URL: <http://www.jstor.org/stable/29790933>

Accessed: 29-04-2015 20:38 UTC

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Teaching reading, writing, speaking and risk: dialoguing with Eades, French and Lecuna

Shonna Trinch

Published online: 11 February 2010
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While speaking is indeed risky for vulnerable subjects, silence will only serve to maintain the status of the powerful to continue in their oppression of the powerless. People like Menchú who have survived genocidal warfare and the women that have suffered the violence of domestic abuse narrate their stories in hopes of changing the cruel world they live in. And we academics, researchers and teachers—committed to social justice—try to do our part, no matter how intractable things may seem, to change the world also. At some level, it seems silly and naïve to write about “changing the world” these days for so many reasons. Yet giving in to this idea that “change” is just “wishful thinking” extinguishes the chance for dialogue and reduces the possibility of a nuanced understanding of difficult subjects that are caught in a complex conversation, often underwritten by ideologies that blame victims rather than perpetrators and that suggest that a complainant is evil if their complaint does not comply with the self-serving (often double) standards of comfortable people whose lives are rarely in danger of physical violence or at risk of genocide.

I came to understand narrative as a fundamentally risky subject from dialogues across the disciplines of linguistics, literature, Latin American studies, anthropology and cultural studies, as I saw it emerging from and reinserted in diverse social, domestic and political contexts (Menchú/Guatemala—domestic violence/US. Latinas/legal systems), and as I studied it being entextualized in distinct genres (stories, reports, *testimonio*, testimony) and decontextualized often in an attempt “to put someone back in his/her place”. I am grateful that my efforts to understand a complicated exchange of ideas have engendered an opportunity to create a dialogue about changing the world, and I have been rewarded with insightful and critical responses from ethnographer and anthropologist, Brigittine French, sociolinguist and legal studies expert, Diana Eades and Latin American literature and cultural

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studies professor, Vicente Lecuna. I thank these three teacher/scholars for the time and energy they spent in engaging with the data that I present and the questions that I hoped to raise. From their respective disciplines, interdisciplinary theoretical positions, advocacy work and geographical situations, their valuable scholarship acts collectively as an agent of “just social transformation” (French 2009). So while “speaking out” may not always or immediately have the power or capacity to produce the desired “just” effect, each of these scholars reminds us that bringing social injustices to light creates possibilities for hope and change. And each of us is trying in our own ways to teach ourselves and our students how to listen better and to understand what is being said.

In her remarks, Diana Eades complements my message by showing other legal arenas where vulnerable peoples’ narratives are altered from one telling to the next as a means to malign, discredit and disempower them. With equally important implications for the concepts of voice and justice, Eades’ investigation into the trial mistreatment of three young aboriginal teenagers in Australia illustrates how widespread the problem of misunderstanding narrative authorship is. The settings are remarkably different—Aboriginals’ complaints against law enforcement officers—and yet the themes are strikingly similar: vulnerable tellers, somehow easily misconstrued as villains, multiple tellings, various institutional interactions, contrasting codes of discourse, double standards of narrative truth and the authoritative over-emphasis of singular meanings for polysemous words. When laypeople’s stories change as they seek justice, the very “justice system” provides the logic of denying the dynamics of the story. Eades’ important research goes beyond the trial to show how the transformation of narratives occurs within the ideological domains of language norms often taken for granted by lay-readers and the consumers of media. By showing how print journalism erases the interactional nature of storytelling and further misrepresents the very words of the complainants while adhering to stylistic conventions that suggest verbatimness, Eades reminds us of the market-place in which language ideologies are reproduced and consumed—with both unfortunate and blatant disregard for the process that is supposed to be involved in justice. Clearly, the headlines following the trial were created by editors eager to “grab” readers in order to grab, metaphorically, of course, revenue.

Such research not only expands upon my main argument regarding the connections and criticisms between testimony and *testimonio*, but it highlights even further the risks inherent in telling one’s story in specific settings. With these courtroom and media data, Eades powerfully makes the case that not all tellers get their feet held to the fire for their factual inconsistencies. If not for Eades herself, for example, who would take Brisbane’s daily newspaper (*The Courier Mail*) to task for the misleading and untruthful headline, “I lied to embarrass police”?

Brigitte French’s comments effectively contextualize my research within the theoretical framework of “speaking truth to power”, and she pointedly channels our attention to the possibility that advocates and scholars need to be aware of the ideological weapons already in place to absorb and assimilate subaltern truths so that they do not disrupt, disturb or dismantle the powers that be. French cogently articulates areas where anthropological research should investigate these processes of communication and difference including the contribution that experts in

institutions and beyond make to the “circulation of ...testimony”, and she rightly calls for “empirical demonstrations of the lived consequence of testifying.” These are both very important, and understudied, domains of culture and communication. French’s (2009) work on the Guatemalan Truth Commission is a key step towards describing and understanding the relationship between inequality and voicing in the aftermath of large-scale violence and political change. And while I do not mean to suggest that Latina women are more or less at risk than survivors of Guatemalan genocide when speaking about violence, the unorthodox comparison of US Latinas’ narratives of domestic abuse with Menchú’s story of genocide is meant as a “challenge to linguistic ideologies of transparency in...” narratives of legal testimony. Because she is no ordinary narrator, Menchú has many academic advocates that have adequately questioned transparency in literary *testimonio*. So it is my hope that the Menchú case can help to bring about change and understanding in areas where truth and fact remain unquestioned and unquestionable concepts.

Both Eades and French address the problem of narrative and risk within the empirical sites of culture and conflict, but Vicente Lecuna brings us back to literature and the sphere of *testimonio* as a genre of textual representation. Lecuna also picks up on the link between research and pedagogy, as he notes that in his own institution of higher learning, Menchú is an important component in undergraduate teaching. Menchú’s *testimonio* is now part of the canon, and Lecuna, in recognizing the position of her text, emphatically acknowledges that this inclusion is in fact, revolutionary for the study of literature and for study in general at elite institutions like colleges and universities. *I Rigoberta* is no longer simply the story of an Indian woman in Guatemala as D’Souza (1991) once suggested it might be, but rather, it has become a foundational text in the disciplinary subject of Latin American literature. And while I do not see narrative as an inherently destructive process, I do believe that scholars and educators should teach not only the canonical text and how it was created, but also the ensuing dialogue that reveals how sometimes those in power use subaltern narratives to reproduce the current state of things by reiterating the conventional wisdom that serves to block any such revolutionary reversals.

I am happy that Lecuna picked up on what is perhaps my main criticism of/concern about and hope for the literary scholarship surrounding Menchú—namely Beverley’s (1993, 76) idea that “*testimonio* implies a challenge to the loss of authority of orality in the context of processes of cultural modernization that privileges literacy and literature as a norm of expression.” Lecuna seems to be equally concerned about this, as he also ponders my question about *testimonio*’s power to dismantle the authority of literature and literacy: “Why are such revolutionary reversals not occurring in other institutions?”

Admittedly, it is risky business to be in the very business of teaching students the value of reading and writing while, at the same time, teaching them to be critical of how reading and writing can be used to oppress people. We must, however, make students aware of how reading and writing create certain cognitive modes of authority. In other words, their liberal education should illustrate for them how reading and writing go together to privilege some ways of knowing and then, consequently relegate other ways to marginal positions of powerlessness. And we need to provide our students with evidence of the irony that vulnerable people are often held to much more

rigid standards of truth than are those in power. Though risky, these are our tasks if we are committed to an education that teaches students to be critical thinkers. Maybe by keeping the paradox in mind, by teaching the controversy and by staying away from dangerous and simplistic dichotomies (for example, insisting that Menchú be taught as neither an unmediated truth nor an “okay lie” because she speaks of a bigger ‘truth’, and/or instead of pardoning Menchú because her *testimonio* is not legal testimony, by using her case to point out how legal testimony is a lot like *testimonio*), there might be hope for revolutionary reversals as students graduate from college and embark on careers in other social and political spaces.

In raising the subject of how narrative is taught in colleges and universities, Lecuna reminds us that professors and researchers have a role in making a change in other institutions as well. As we teach that narrative is an important, but not a transparent mechanism for telling and knowing, we need also to teach about language ideologies that are available in culture to detract from, obscure and diminish some narratives and especially those of vulnerable narrators that manage in their telling to challenge the status quo. In Menchú’s now canonical text, in the processes of textual transformation that occur in legal narratives of domestic violence, from Eade’s findings that aboriginal witness statements are manipulated across contexts, and in French’s work on human rights narratives, we have the tools to illuminate fundamental aspects of “critical thinking”. A systematic study of these types of texts offers opportunities (albeit unorthodox) to compare and contrast entextualization processes (or the ways in which texts are created), contextualization issues (or what texts come to mean because of where they are and what they are used for in the world) and decontextualization processes (or the ways that texts or parts of them are taken out of one context and inserted in another for different, but specific purposes). Such investigations should facilitate understandings among our students about message formation, the production of knowledge and the politics of representation of self and others.

I (still) hold out hope for the higher education classroom as a possibly transformative space from which and because of which revolutionary reversals might eventually occur in other social contexts. Classrooms are the sites from which institutional practitioners emerge. General education in liberal arts, integrating and examining not only the knowledge produced in the humanities and the sciences, but also systematically following knowledge produced to see what people in power do with it and with narrative may provide the fulcrum for change. Such change may not be a revolutionary reversal, but it has been and can continue to be a measured and sustained challenge to the norms and practices found in the institutions of power that some of our students will come to inherit.

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