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Border Discourses and Identities in Transnational Youth Culture

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Introduction

An authentically migrant perspective would, perhaps, be based on an intuition that the opposition between here and there is itself a cultural construction, a consequence of thinking in terms of fixed entities and defining them oppositionally. It might begin by regarding movement, not as an awkward interval between fixed points of departure and arrival, but as a mode of being in the world. The question would be, then, not how to arrive, but how to move, how to identify convergent and divergent movements; and the challenge would be how to notate such events, how to give them a historical and social value.

Paul Carter (1992: 101)

...[There is a] need to construct a notion of border identity that challenges any essentialized notion of subjectivity while simultaneously demonstrating that the self as a historical and cultural formation is shaped in complex, related, and multiple ways through its interaction with numerous and diverse communities.

Henry Giroux (1994: 38)

This chapter explores the relationship between discourse and identity for Chinese immigrant youth whose cultural identifications are spread over multiple geographical territories. For these immigrant youth, school is often the setting where they are socialized into the dominant discourses of the US society, or excluded from it by various means (Gee, 1996; Lankshear, 1987; Cook-Gumperz, 1986). The latter can be seen in different forms of tracking, and the marginalized status of ESL and bilingual programs in schools, as shown by Olsen (1997), among others, in her ethnographic research of an American high school. Either way, these youth are in the process of being incorporated into certain social categories of the society.

The first set of mechanisms and ideology that surround immigrant students' "incorporation" into the U.S. society can be seen as an assimilationist process, whereby these newcomers are to adopt the values and social practices of "mainstream America." In the educational arena, this assimilationist process is found in the cultural literacy propaganda that aims to deal with difference by eradicating it — all Americans should read from the same largely white, Western canon and adopt a common set of values and linguistic conventions. (Macedo, 1995, provides a critical review) A similar ideology and process is also found in the second language acquisition research and teaching profession, where the model of the "native speaker" and the norm of standardized usage of a language

are hailed as the target and epitome of second language learning. (see, e.g., Kramsch, 1997, for a critique of the "myth of the native speaker") In the educational discourse of bilingualism, Rampton (1995: 338) notes that there is an institutionalization of "a fictional norm of perfect monolingual competence against which the abilities of bilinguals are measured." The creative potentials and strategic deployment of linguistic abilities of bilinguals as historically situated persons are overlooked in favor of how "balanced" they are, or how fully they attain the linguistic profile of each of the monolingual halves of them.

The fear and stigmatization of "un-Americaness" that is part and parcel of this assimilationist discourse also find their expression in the process of subordination of immigrant students in American schools. This second set of mechanisms for "incorporating" immigrant students can be seen in how they are disproportionately labeled and tracked in remedial and special education classes. (Nieto, 2000; Skutnabb-Kangas & Cummins, 1988) It can also be seen in the movement from nationality to "race" in the U.S. school system — immigrants gradually move from a strong identification to their national origins to becoming absorbed into particular racial categories in the U.S. society. (Olsen, 1997) Through this segregationist and classificatory process, immigrant students are "safely incorporated" into certain social classes and racial groups, and, hence, pose no danger to the status quo of "mainstream America."

Although both of these two containment processes aim to place immigrant students into existing social categories within the national borders of the U.S. society, there is reason to believe, based on recent studies in postcolonial theory and transnationalism, that many immigrant students may also be, to a greater or lesser extent, mobilizing various social, cultural and linguistic resources to forge new grounds for defining themselves and relating to the sociopolitical structures around them. In this chapter, I explore alternative sources of cross-cultural identity formation for immigrant youth in the border zones of cultures. The experiences of a young Hong Kong immigrant in his reading of translated Japanese comics, which he juxtaposes with varieties of US and Hong Kong comics, are examined to build a better understanding of some of the ways in which immigrant youth actively participate in the construction of border discourses and identities that they use to resist subordination and the constraints of the social systems around them.

Theorizing Border Discourses and Identities

The term discourse is used here to refer to the ways in which spoken and written language is used by specific groups of people to construct realities for themselves, based on their shared values, beliefs and historical experiences — their shared culture. As James Gee notes, "Discourses are ways of behaving, interacting, valuing, thinking, believing, speaking, and often reading and writing that are accepted as instantiations of particular roles of specific *groups of people* They are always and everywhere *social* ." (1996: xix). Integrating the methods of analysis in language studies and social and political thought, Norman Fairclough (1992) proposes the study of discourse as social practice, and points out both the socially determined and socially transformative properties of discourse. Regarding this view on discourse, he writes, "Firstly, it implies that discourse is a mode of action, one form in which people may act upon the world and especially upon each other, as well as a mode of representation. . . Secondly, it implies that there is a

dialectical relationship between discourse and social structure. . ." (ibid.: 63-4) Hence, if discourses are viewed as forms of social practice which are intimately tied to the cultural affiliations of groups of people, a person's adoption and use of particular discourses would signify his or her alignment with or membership in particular cultural groups.

In a multiethnic society, a person's identity may be seen as the behaviors, beliefs, values, and norms that define the person as a member of a particular ethnic group. However, social categories — such as ethnicity, race, and gender — are not innate characteristics of people, but are socially constructed attributes and boundaries that are often used to differentiate people from one another for economic and political purposes, whereby some groups obtain more privileges than others. (Omi & Winant, 1994; Roediger, 1991) The construction of such social categories, and the idea of nationhood, are accomplished, to a great extent, through discursive means (e.g., see Anderson, 1991, for an illuminating discussion on the discursive construction of the nation). Hence, discourses are group-specific and, in a society where the distribution of privileges is exercised through group differentiation and social hierarchy, the discourse practices of diverse cultural groups often stand in conflict with one another. Thus, as mentioned above, a person's alignment with or opposition to a certain cultural group can be seen in how he or she adopts or resists the discourses of the group.

However, instead of understanding group relations simply through binary oppositions (the dominant vs. the dominated, the oppressor vs. the oppressed), it is also important to note that many people belong to more than one social category or cultural group that may be more or less in conflict with one another, and these people often feel the need to negotiate between various discourse practices. Immigrants, in particular, are constantly negotiating between the dominant discourses of their adopted country and the discourses that signify their ties to their native country and various other communities. Some social scientists have begun to examine immigrants' "transnational connections," i.e., how their social networks and identities transcend the totalizing concept of nationhood.

In the field of anthropology, Basch, Schiller & Blanc (1994) study how immigrant populations from St. Vincent, Grenada, Haiti, and the Philippines construct transnational social fields to counteract the hegemonic forms of political and economic oppression in both their host and home countries. For instance, through channeling economic resources back home and participating in the nation-building projects of their countries overseas, Vincentian and Grenadian immigrants in New York are able to secure a higher social standing in their home countries. With this elevation in social position back home, and the forging of ties with other West Indian minority groups in the U.S., the Vincentian and Grenadian transmigrants are redefining their social and political subordination in the American society.

Similarly, Ong (1993) argues for an understanding of the minority identity formation of overseas Chinese in a confluence of family and economic interests that transcend the ideas of nation and citizenship. For many overseas Chinese, a Confucianist practice of capitalism anchors the family in the center of expanding capitalist interests. Hence, whereas the family is settled in places of greater political stability and educational opportunities, financial and economic resources may be dispersed over several riskier territories. In many cases, these transmigrants use their multiple subject positions situated in various cultural and sociopolitical arenas to subvert the social categories imposed on them by any one system.

In exploring the cultural aspects of transnational connections, Hannerz (1996) proposes for contemporary cultural analysis the adaptation of Bauman's notion of "habitat" in which agency operates. In his opinion, a flexible sense of habitat where the subject/agent utilizes different forms of cultural connections to serve specific needs or purposes may become a new unit of analysis in cultural studies. This sense of a shifting, interstitial and intersecting place or space has been theorized to a certain extent in the developing body of works in postcolonial studies.

In studying the history of the colonial enterprises in Africa and the Caribbean, Pratt (1992) proposes the concept of "contact zone" to capture the creative aspects of colonial cultural encounters. Besides domination and subjugation, the "contact zone" spotted the complexity of new ways of life and cultural categories: an intermingling of lifestyles among settlers and natives, transracial love stories and sexual alliances, and the emergence of the auto-biographical writings of the ex-slaves who inserted themselves into the European print culture with the help of the abolitionist movement in the last decades of the 18th century. These early slave autobiographies marked the beginning of African American literature; instead of constituting an authentic native voice, they were characterized by a transcultural and dialogic mode of expression. As noted by Pratt (1992: 102), "In very elaborate ways, these early texts undertook not to reproduce but to *engage* western discourses of identity, community selfhood, and otherness. Their dynamics are transcultural, and presuppose relations of subordination and resistance."

The movement of peoples on a massive scale across territorial boundaries, set forth by the colonial disruption of relatively closed communal living in various parts of the world, has served to problematize the definition of "native" and "authenticity." For instance, Chambers (1994) notes that the uprooted "native" cultures and transient nature of the electronic age have transformed the notion of authenticity to "an authentically migrant perspective," which is open to multiple possibilities and transmutation.

Said (1979) has long argued that the transmutation and hybridization of cultural identity, and the syncretic perspective that arises from it, can constitute a new space for the study of culture. The colonial subjects, having their precolonial nature unsettled by imperialism, developed a "second nature" in the midst of cultural contact and living under domination. However, neither of these identities fully describes the legacy of colonialism; it is necessary "to seek out, to map, to invent, or to discover a *third* nature" wherein resides the potential for better understanding the experiences of postcolonial subjects. (Said, 1993: 226) In the same vein, Bhabha (1994) reacts against the polarization and simplification of culture that recent critical theories dwell on in the binary opposition of self and other, center and periphery, oppressor and oppressed. He uses the metaphor of "a third space" to signify a new frame of reference and process of signification that occurs *in between* cultures as a result of contact and the clash of difference. For Bhabha, there is no simple definition of "nation" in a world where the movement of peoples and cultures has been occurring on a massive scale. Many of us are forever dwelling in the "in-between space" on the margins of nations. For Bhabha, hybridity is never an admixture of established cultures or identities, but the elusive conditions where signs and meanings can be "appropriated, translated, rehistoricized, and read anew." (ibid.: 37)

Bhabha uses the notion of hybridity to examine the space of resistance and re-definition in colonial encounters. As a problematic of colonial representation, hybridity engages with but also displaces colonial authority by introducing other "denied" knowledges into the dominant discourse and estranges the basis of its authority. An

example is the English Bible that was translated into a local language in India in the early 19th century and appropriated by the local group to break down the distinctions of the caste system and the authority of the Brahmins, and to form their own beliefs in the Biblical God in divergence from the Christian Church. (ibid.: 102-122) Objects of knowledge such as the translated book re-signify colonial authority in a way that is “less than one and double.” While on the one hand, some symbol or meaning of authority is maintained (but not totally - less than one), on the other hand, it is re-defined through an alienating strategy of doubling or repetition. Doubling instantiates but also diminishes the presence of authority by articulating it in conjunction with other knowledges and positionalities that both subvert the dominant discourse and produce new forms of knowledge. In this space of dynamic engagement, the identity of the postcolonial subject is situated less in the polarity of the native, minority discourse or the dominant, colonial discourse, but in the “cutting edge of translation and negotiation,” (ibid.: 38) where new subject positions may be formed.

Whereas Bhabha theorizes this interstitial or border zone of enunciation with a focus on texts, Lavie and Swedenburg (1996) calls for its exploration in the practices of everyday life. In their words, “We stake out a terrain old in experience and memory but new in theory, a third timespace, and we call for its ethnographic examination. This is a terrain where opposition is not only responsive, but creative. It is a guerrilla warfare of the interstices, where minorities rupture categories of race, gender, sexuality, class, nation, and empire in the center as well as on the margins.” (ibid.: 165-6) The study of this third timespace is an attempt to displace the notion of the autonomy or boundedness of culture, and to map out some of the everyday practices that create historically-grounded multiple subject positions. It is in this “border culture” that minorities may resist subordination and the terms of their incorporation into the dominant structure; here is also where they may create new alignment and solidarity with one another.

Hence, in creating transnational social ties and cultural identifications, immigrants may engage in discourses that serve to construct an in-between space or trajectory for speaking that they use to subvert the dominant discourses of both their native and adopted countries. It is also in this border zone that they may mobilize their subject positions in different social systems and cultural fields to forge new grounds for defining themselves in relation to both their host and home societies.

Context and Methods

The case study presented here forms part of an on-going ethnographic research project that explores the cross-cultural literacy practices of adolescent immigrants in a metropolitan city on the West coast of the US. In the fall of 1996, I began meeting students as a classroom observer in an urban high school where I taught ESL and Chinese bilingual classes a few years prior to the initiation of the study. From the classroom and the school as a starting point, I interviewed the students about what they read and write, and observed in some out-of-school settings where they practice forms of literacy in both their native and non-native languages. The research takes an ethnographic approach to theory construction that is grounded in the everyday life of the people we study, their social activities in specific contexts, and what these activities mean to them. (Glaser & Strauss, 1967; Erickson, 1986; Watson-Gegeo, 1988; Ramanathan & Atkinson, 1999).

As a case study that emerged out of the larger ethnographic project, this investigation aims not to generalize from its findings, but to expand and provide alternative visions of literacy practices. (see, e.g., Dyson 1995) The in-depth study of cases helps to illuminate the situated nature of reading and writing, and the complexity of individual persons and the practices of literacy. It holds the potential to destabilize conceptual boundaries and contribute to new understanding of the concepts under study. (Stake 1995)

My research with Willis (1), the focal student in this case study, was centered around his reading of different national and transnational varieties of comics. Willis introduced me to his collection of comics during my first visit to his home, where I was able to look at the variety of the whole collection and later borrow some for closer reading. I conducted in-depth interviews with Willis, and some group discussions and conversations with Willis and his friends on their practices of reading comics and other aspects of their daily lives, particularly in relation to their immigration experiences.

In the following, I first situate Willis' activities in the larger context of his immigrant experiences and the social practice of comics reading as a form of popular culture. My analysis then turns to how Willis engaged in constructing alternative subject positioning through examining the textual and reader response dimensions of his comics reading. Most of the research was carried out in Cantonese, unless noted otherwise.

The Transnational Discourse of Comics (2)

Willis, a 16-year old high school junior, emigrated from Hong Kong to California with his parents and his older sister before Hong Kong was reverted to Mainland China. After the family had settled down and the father had found work as a Chinese restaurant chef, Willis' mother returned to Hong Kong to continue working in horticulture for the Hong Kong government, which, according to him, secured a better income for the family. The family maintained close ties with one another through regular long-distance calls and written correspondence. When asked about his immigration experience, Willis said that "his family's identity had fallen" after immigration because of their lack of fluency in English: "We don't know how to talk." (3) However, coming to live in the U.S. could provide more political security for his family and educational opportunities for himself. He predicted that Hong Kong would become more like the People's Republic of China (PRC) after the reversion of the British colony to the PRC: "Hong Kong will get worse after the takeover. They [PRC government] say Hong Kong won't change for 50 years, it can change overnight! You really can't trust the Chinese government." In regard to his educational prospects, he thought that the educational diplomas here are widely recognized around the world, and could afford him a more competitive edge even if he was to go back to work in Hong Kong. He had heard from his mother that a son of her friend, who was educated in a lower-track college in the U.S. and returned to Hong Kong to find work, was able to compete with the graduates of the local prestigious universities and obtain a well-paying job.

Willis went back in the summer of 1996 to visit his mother and relatives in Hong Kong and the Guangdong Province of China, during which he also bought a large number of comic books—his favorite pastime. In a conversation with some friends from Hong Kong in a social gathering where I was present, Willis commented on what he saw during his visit home last summer. He made some criticisms about the crowdedness, fast-pace

life, and snobbishness of some people in Hong Kong, and the rush to modernization in China where the infrastructure was still inadequate. Willis recounted his experience witnessing the corruption of the Chinese government: how the police unjustly accused and fined his uncle for a misdemeanor, and pocketed the money themselves.

Willis' schooling experiences were not without obstacles. Like many other immigrant students in the US, he felt marginalized both academically and socially in school. When he entered middle school, he was placed in a "low-level" class after being tested on English and Chinese. Although he did well on the Chinese part, his poor English assessment results led him into a very elementary class with other immigrant students, where, he said, he learned nothing at all for an entire year. After four years of English as a Second Language (ESL) and bilingual programs, Willis transferred to the regular classes. He mentioned that he once "fought" with the school counselor to get into the regular and honors classes; the counselor had originally placed him in some ESL sheltered classes for the convenience of scheduling. He said he was afraid that having too many sheltered classes on his transcript would affect future college admission. He was also taking a number of literature classes because, he said, he had been taunted for being an ESL student by his peers for too long, and he had to "catch up."

On several occasions, he expressed anger over how some students laughed at him and other Chinese immigrants for their heavy accents and lack of fluency in English, and tried to imitate their speech disparagingly. In an Ethnic Literature class that I visited, I noticed that Willis was unusually quiet and low in morale, and found out later that it was one of the classes where he and other Chinese students had been taunted by other students for speaking Chinese and for their accents in English. He described the experience of one of his classmates:

Like Feng Jin, he is in 12th grade. He always speaks Chinese, and he speaks English with a heavy accent. He doesn't read very well in English, but it's not really that bad. But then, those people always laugh at him, and imitate his voice, and they imitate in a really disgusting way. He is actually very angry with them, but he always tries hard to keep it down. He has told me, "When it gets to a point I can't stand it any more, I'm gonna knock them over real bad."

In a conversation with Willis and his friends, they told me how the "ABCs" (American Born Chinese) and other "Americanized" immigrant students looked down on people who spoke Chinese and regarded them as "foreigners" and "stupid". About these peers, Wilson and one of his friends said, "They have forgotten their roots, they are also Chinese." They mentioned, as an example, a student from Hong Kong who had been in the U.S. for about 9 months and personally said he had "forgotten" how to speak Chinese. They said he spoke English all the time, but they didn't think his English was good. "He tries to exaggerate the 'r' sound, but it doesn't really sound right," said Willis in a jocular tone.

Willis added that it was because of this discrimination that Chinese didn't "mix well" with their English-speaking American peers. He himself, although he had made great leaps in his academic studies, did not participate much in the social life of the school. He was unable to make friends with students from "other races" in the classrooms or school clubs, only sometimes with other Asians. The only reason he joined two clubs during the past year was that he hoped it would be an advantage to him in applying for college

admission, because he had heard some teachers and school officials say that doing well academically was not enough to get into the more prestigious universities. But he was also trying not to let these social activities take his time away from reading comic books, especially Japanese comics, which was one of his favorite pastimes outside school and could occupy most of his evenings at home and night trips on the city buses.

The Japanese comic books that Willis and some of his Chinese peers read were translated into Chinese and copyrighted in Hong Kong. The trading and circulation of comic books among these teenagers is a frequent practice, although the amount of personal possession of comics varies from person to person. Willis had one of the largest collections of comic books among his peers, and was often sought after for borrowing. In his judgement, both the ideas and artistic quality of the Japanese comics were superior to those in the US and Hong Kong. He had started taking some Japanese language classes offered in his high school in anticipation of reading the comics in their original version.

As an immigrant student in the American school system — and an immigrant minority in the larger society — Willis's subordinate position was constructed in the school discourse on immigrant students, which is connected to the larger societal discourse on immigrants. At the same time, he was in a similarly powerless position in the discourse of Chinese Nationals, where the political system allows little dissension and has compelled his family and many others to emigrate. However, it is important to note that Willis was able in some instances to strategically maneuver himself around these discourses by, on the one hand, using his Chinese sociocultural ties to resist wholesale assimilation into the U.S. society, and, on the other hand, using his sociopolitical status as a legal resident in the U.S. to criticize the social situation and political system in China.

Moreover, in participating in a transnational discourse of Japanese comics, he was also associating himself with a third community of Japanese popular culture that does not necessitate any sociopolitical affiliations. Speaking from this position in Japanese popular culture, Willis was simultaneously connecting himself to the U.S. and Chinese counterparts, and engaging in critique of the two without having to affiliate with either one immediately. In creating a “third space” (Bhabha, 1994) for himself in this transnational discourse of popular youth culture, Willis was able to develop a sense of agency in making flexible cross-cultural identifications and in critiquing the sociocultural practices represented in the different varieties of comics. In the following, I discuss this space of transnational critical discourse by analyzing some of the social, discursive and textual dimensions of Willis' reading practice in comics.

Comics Reading as a Social Practice

As a practice in popular culture, the reading of comics can be seen as a culture of the people. It is an active form of cultural production by common people that demarcates itself from the elite culture. For instance, Willis and a close friend of his, Randy, who read mostly American and Hong Kong comics made the following remarks when I asked them how they thought people who weren't into comics reading might regard them:

Randy: Maybe the more snobbish ones will say “They're so stupid.”

Willis: Yeah, yeh.

Randy: They may show off their great big textbooks and say, “Look at my book!”

Willis: “Look at how sophisticated mine is, yours is so stupid.” They’re just ignorant.

Randy: They don’t know how to appreciate the [comic] books.

Willis: Yeah, they don’t know how to appreciate the books, those silly people. The reason they don’t read is because they don’t know, not because the books are low in quality.

Both the visual (perceptual) and verbal (conversational) aspects of comics texts possess the qualities of immediacy and face-to-face interactions which are close to everyday life. The distribution and circulation of these texts among the readers (and, in this case, among teenagers reading and circulating them under their desks, in the hallways, during recess, and before and after school away from the surveillance of teachers and other school authorities) is also a practice of the people that produces solidarity and communal life. It is this embodiment of the textures of everyday life that makes comics a popular vehicle both for the dissemination of certain cultural values and for the opposition to these values.

Although the production of comics is controlled to quite an extent by corporations that have a stake in perpetuating the existing norms of society, it is also a form of popular cultural production that needs to be tailored to the needs of the people and amenable to being appropriated by them. (Fiske, 1989; Willis, 1993) Some manifestations of its oppositional nature can be found in the use of taboo and vernacular language (against the linguistic norms and standards), the celebration of the wits and prowess of the ordinary person (as opposed to the educated elite), and especially in this case among the teenagers, the deconstruction of the image or essence of the poor students, as I discovered from talking with Willis and reading some of his personal library of comic books. For instance, the teenage male protagonist in Willis’s most favorite comics series, who is branded as a poor student in school, is able to demonstrate his intelligence and passion for justice in solving many puzzling criminal cases in the community.

As a form of transnational popular youth culture, the translation of national varieties of comics and their distribution across national boundaries have, on the one hand, generated a high degree of cross-cultural exchange and fusion, and, on the other hand, facilitated a process of sociocultural critique through the comparison and contrast of different national varieties. Willis’s reading of Japanese comics, and the critical discourse that emerged from it, were situated in the larger social practice of comics reading of both the U.S. and Hong Kong varieties among his peers on both sides of the Pacific. Hence, by carving out a discursive practice for himself in the midst of this transnational circulation of comics, he was able to engage in critique of the U.S. and Hong Kong (Chinese) societies. It is this discursive construction of Willis’s reading practice that I turn to next.

Reading Translated Japanese Comics

An analysis of the translated Japanese comic books shows a cross-cultural mixture of signs and images (see Appendix). As a kind of text that originates in the Japanese society, the Japanese comics undoubtedly encode many of the beliefs, values, behaviors, and material conditions of Japanese life. These appear, for example, in the titles of people (part of Japanese honorifics), the terminology for different social institutions (e.g., schools

and government offices), and the untranslated written artifacts in the stories (e.g., receipts and bulletins). However, in their Chinese translation, these inscriptions of Japanese culture are shadowed by the Chinese cultural resonances signified in the Chinese linguistic code. Although much of the translation is in standard written Chinese, it is also interspersed with a considerable amount of Cantonese vernacular language, since the market for such comics is predominantly located in Hong Kong and other related cultural milieus. Moreover, in many of these books, different types of Westernized or Americanized images appear in parts of the texts - in English words in the table of contents, in the sketches of the authors and characters (one picture shows the author with a cup of coffee and a donut in hand), and in the contents and settings of the stories (one story depicts a group of teenagers performing a Western drama in a European-style mansion in Japan). Hence, the translated version of Japanese comics, as a hybrid textual form, facilitated Willis' participation in a transnational popular youth culture.

On several occasions, during both casual conversations and more focussed interviews, Willis contrasted the different varieties of comics on the professional attitude, creativity, artistry, and cultural character of the people who produced them. He mentioned how, compared to the artistic design of the Japanese comics, those in Hong Kong were lower in quality due to their pursuit of quick profits:

The difference between the comics of the Hong Kong people and the Japanese people is in the BACKGROUND. Those [artists] who are well-known in Japan are never so lazy [sloppy]. But those in Hong Kong, because they want to turn things out really fast, so they are more lazy. And I just don't appreciate that type of thing.

As for the American comics, Willis criticized them for their extreme self-glorification and lack of creativity:

I really don't appreciate those, because ... their heroes seem like they will never, never be defeated, even if they are beaten up like CRAZY [original Cantonese idiomatic phrase has the meaning of "handicap"] ...in the end they are bound to win again... Even if they have *tragedy ending*, they will still make themselves ... very ARROGANT. Like "*X-man*", "*Swamps*", "*Spiderman*", "*Batman*", I almost can't bear to read them...What the Americans come up with are only...if it is not about the hero saving the pretty girl, then it is about ... victory and glory. And no matter what, they are fighting all over the place and beating up one another...And they make THEMSELVES, THEMSELVES... usually they themselves are the heroes. For example, the United States has also produced a version of the "*Streetfighter*" [comic and video game, original version from Japan]. The main character in the "*Streetfighter*" isn't *Gaile* - seems like it should be *Waile*, a Japanese fellow. They [Americans] make *Gaile* the main character, the strongest one in the whole *story*, and how he is *hero*, things like that. I mean, they sort of make themselves, themselves the greatest, the United States, long live the United States!

By contrast, in talking about Japanese comics, Willis mentioned a list of distinguishing characteristics - creativity, variety, educational quality, poignancy - that he could identify with and quite strongly desired.

After reading them, you want to follow them. You also want to have that sort of thing. For example, like when I saw "Ding Dong" [Japanese comic book]... if I had this Ding Dong (chuckles), I could even control the world. What I'm saying is you fantasize together with the book...there are things you can think about. And sometimes there are books which contain some lessons in them, some educational stuff... Those books sometimes teach you perhaps not to be greedy, or, uh, uh, to be more kind to others, not to be arrogant, stuff like that. Sometimes they would... like "Kam Tin Yat"* ... after reading it, you will feel that you can think more. Those books would sometimes talk about some FACTS. I mean, like those things you don't usually learn at school, you can sometimes learn from reading those books... Those that fantasize oneself as the hero, although I haven't really done so myself. But, but those can be, uh, pretty *attractive* too...And their stories are a lot more attractive. They have some that are really intriguing. And some are ... as you read it, you feel a little sad, and things like that. How will you ever feel sad when you read "*X-men*?" One falls dead and another rushes up, one falls dead and another rushes up. That's the difference.

(* Kam Tin Yat is the teenage male protagonist in one of Willis' favorite Japanese comic series, who is branded as a poor student in school, but is able to demonstrate his intelligence and passion for justice in solving many puzzling criminal cases in the community.)

A closer look at Willis' discourse on comics shows us how each text positions Willis differently as a reader and offers him a different sociocultural identity. His use of personal pronouns is one way in which he indexes his relationship to American and Hong Kong cultures. The use of third-person collective pronominal forms - "they" and "those people" to designate the people in Hong Kong, "they" and "themselves" to designate the Americans - set both up as distinct objects of criticism. The repeated and emphatic stress on the reflexive pronoun "themselves" serves to accentuate the self-centeredness and self-aggrandizement of the American psyche. While Willis is distancing himself from these two groups through third person pronouns, he identifies himself with other readers of Japanese comics through the use of 2nd and 1st person pronouns. These pronouns express a distinct personal relationship to the Japanese experience as illustrated in the Japanese comics.

The different social realities depicted in these comics are revealed through Willis' use of modality. The hype of American rhetoric resonates through his use in Cantonese of emphatic modifiers such as "a lot", "very", "incredibly", "never", and the superlatives "strongest", "greatest". Such modifiers give a factual and categorical quality to his statements. The automaticity, almost robot-like behavior of American characters is also emphasized through the repetition of words and phrases, such as "beaten up like crazy", and "one falls dead and another rushes up". In contrast to these, Willis' description of Japanese comics is much more nuanced. Here, modal auxiliaries and adverbs "could", "would", "sometimes", "perhaps", and the conditional "if" ("if I had this Ding Dong"), serve to create a relativized world of possibility and human contingency; the verb "want" ("you want to follow them") expresses Willis' desire to make this possibility a reality.

By projecting himself into the textual community of the Japanese comics, Willis, a non-native reader, has discovered a new self aligned with what he perceived as the

Japanese "hero", distanced from both the American and the Hong Kong "heroes." Comparing the construction of heroes in the different societies, he said:

The US [hero] is the most...upright and courageous one. There are the good guys and the bad guys, and nothing else. The ones in Hong Kong, there is this group and that group, the good guys and bad guys, and some sort of in-between. Most of them just follow what's in the games and movies, usually they just follow what's trendy...As for the Japanese characters, they won't be drawn...all handsome and stuff. They have some who are ugly, silly, and tall, and short. The American ones are like: if you are not smart enough you are ruled out of the game, that's what is in the story...The Japanese hero... like "Kam Tin Yat", you can hardly call him a hero, but I guess you can still call him a hero. He sometimes act like an idiot, and does some stupid things, like he would trip over while walking along the street (laughs)...I can't imagine the US will produce a character like that, almost impossible.

It is clear that Willis found the Japanese notion of "hero" in the texts he read more appealing than in either the US or the Hong Kong counterparts. He even had difficulty equating the Japanese male protagonist he described as a "hero" the way that the Americans or Hong Kong people see it. Here, whereas the nature of the Hong Kong "hero" is nondescript (possibly reflecting the lack of clear status and autonomy of Hong Kong society), and the American "hero" is the quintessential good guy with a standard form and character (suggesting perhaps the monolithic construction of a US national culture that marginalizes what it views as "other"), Willis sees the Japanese "hero" as the common folk, the less than perfect people, who live through predicaments in life with thoughtfulness and a sense of humor. Willis' place is indeed an in-between place. Between the impossibility of identifying with the native Hong Kong person he used to be, and his refusal to identify with the standardized American person whose English he now speaks, Willis appropriated a textual identity from the Japanese comics, and used it as a third place from which to reflect in an official interview with the researcher on the cultural practices of both the US and Hong Kong societies. By creating this position for himself, Willis was able to verbalize the arbitrary nature of the linguistic and cultural norms of the two societies.

Conclusion

The discourse of comics practiced by Willis can be seen as a localized space that is created out of a transnational flow of cultural and material production and his own migrant experience and perspective. The cross-cultural characteristics of the transaction of comics in today's world make possible both the contact of different cultural forms and the creation of a transcultural world of readers. In creating his own third space in a transnational culture, Willis is drawing on the discourses from his home and host countries, and the discourse that is derived from the textual world of Japanese comics. And it is in this border culture that he exercises agency in defining his subject positions and reflecting on the different social systems and ways of life around him.

This case study attempts to show that while many immigrant youth are subject to discrimination in the US school system and society, there are still sources of potential empowerment for them through their engagement in practices that develop their intercultural voices and perspectives. Listening to and observing Willis talk about his experiences and participation in the popular culture of comics, I was able to witness how the special place of immigrant youth could be valued and promoted. This is a place where there are multiple linguistic and cultural affiliations, where the formation of identity reaches beyond the national borders, where people actively mobilize their diverse sources of identifications to resist subordination, and where new subject positions emerge out of cross-cultural exchange and the negotiation of difference.

The experiences of Willis help us to see the limitations of a popular formulation of "multiculturalism", which allows for a certain degree of diversity by treating minority cultures as the inherent and discrete attributes of groups of people, often aestheticized as ethnic food, commodities and festivals, that continue to exist on the fringes of the U.S. society. Instead, we need to understand multiculturalism as extending beyond the national borders and constituting the experiences of more and more people in this age of increasing globalization. (Appadurai, 1996; Hannerz, 1996; Grossberg, 2000) It is a form of multiculturalism that converges in the individual, and gets expressed in various ways as the individual enters into different social contexts and relationships. (Johnston & Bean, 1997; Rampton, 1995) In this reconception of multiculturalism, the immigrant students are perceived not through the lens of the "national culture" and found lacking, but are valued for their unique cross-cultural perspectives, and their potential for bringing cultures together for mutual critique and enrichment.

Notes

1. The names of the informant and other students are changed for confidentiality.
2. The data presented here are discussed in Kramsch & Lam (1999).
3. All quotations of Willis' words are excerpts from recorded conversations and interviews conducted with the author originally in Cantonese. Italicized words are code-switches to English by Willis himself; CAPS indicate emphatic stress.

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