TRANSNATIONAL LITERACIES AND GLOBAL ENGLISH IMAGINARIES: RETHINKING THE CANADA/BRAZIL RELATION[i]

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1.THE CONTEXT AND THE TASK BEFORE US

As part of my Canada Research Chair program of research investigating national and global imaginaries, I am currently engaged in a collaborative research exchange with many of you here in Brazil working to help our students in English classrooms develop expertise in transnational literacies (Brydon, Monte Mor, de Souza 2010). Transnational literacies comprise a key component of the multiliteracies approach that responds to the rapidly developing new information technologies that are changing the ways we store, access and assess information and create knowledge. Some suggest they are changing how we think. Transnational literacies involve more than the kinds of cross-cultural competencies increasingly prioritized by business and government. The full potential of transnational literacies only begins to be realized when the current knowledge/power structures of educational systems and language and identity practices are studied for the under-examined values they carry and assumptions they perpetuate. When those assumptions are examined in their multiple contexts, historical and spatial, they may need to be contested, revised, or developed to place them more fully in service of the communities involved. The task of revising such assumptions (which drive educational and technological practices alike) cannot be done at a theoretical level alone.

It will involve two more steps: firstly, analysis of the local situation, its history and current needs, its place in the global system, and the hopes of its constituents for the future; and secondly, experimentation in developing new literacies more appropriate to the current situation. These literacies will be performative and developed within the interactions enabled by particular classroom spaces and their IT capacities. The Brazilian National Project and the Canada/Brazil partnership now developing in parallel with it, are working to advance this agenda. Some of you will know that Walkyria

Monte Mor and Lynn Mario Menezes T. de Souza created a new national English teaching curriculum, inspired by a critical literacies approach, for the federal system in Brazil in 2006 (Monte Mor & Menezes 2006), and launched a National Project with teacher/researchers across Brazil in 2009 to research how best to implement it (Monte Mor and Menezes 2009). Inspired by this project, I gathered together a group who have applied to our Canadian research granting agency for partnership funds to continue work specifically focussed on transnational literacy.

Given the current importance of English as a global language, these projects recognize that it is useful to develop transnational literacies through analyzing the past and current trajectories of global English and their role in constructing both national imaginaries and the more mobile imaginaries (transnational, global, diasporic, postcolonial) that characterize our global times. In this paper, after defining what I mean by an imaginary, I consider three imaginaries that set some of the contexts through which global English circulates today, before returning to the importance of developing transnational literacies, which can help people shape the changing rules that govern their lives.

2. IMAGINATION AND ITS IMAGINARIES

The concept of an imaginary is not well known beyond the academy, but it is a useful concept for grasping the changing norms of the globalizing present. Within literary and cultural studies, psychoanalytical theory, and sociological theory, the idea of an imaginary is becoming widely used to describe a socially constructivist and agential view of how persons and communities arrange and understand themselves through values, laws, symbols, and institutions. Whereas imaginary as an adjective usually describes something having existence only in the imagination, imaginary as a noun refers to the ways in which the imagination (both collective and singular) may give rise to social and political arrangements in the material world.

The idea of an imaginary began to take hold after Benedict Anderson published *Imagined Communities* in 1983, describing nations as a form of community that had to

be imagined, and which was given shape through print media, newspapers and novels. These enabled people to imagine themselves as belonging to a unit containing people and places they may never have met in person. For Anderson, the national imaginaries of nationalism were made both possible and necessary by the technologies and shifting economic demands of modernity. Canadian philosopher Charles Taylor, in his 2004 book, *Modern Social Imaginaries*, insists that "The social imaginary is not a set of ideas; rather it is what enables, through making sense of, the practices of a society" (2). An imaginary is a meaning-making process through which ordinary people understand their social surroundings. It may be "carried in images, stories, and legends" and will usually be shared "by large groups of people." In Taylor's words, "the social imaginary is that common understanding that makes possible common practices and a widely shared sense of legitimacy" (23).

Critical work in digital, informational, and multimodal literacies, often simply called the new literacies, is now beginning to question the ways in which imagined communities of belonging, including those disciplinary literacies associated with research communities, which were once shaped by print media, are now being reshaped by innovations in technology and social media. A key premise of our project is the necessity for those working with critical transnational literacies to take part in ensuring that these new media reflect and can convey the values and insights intrinsic to our work as scholars and teachers. We know that "Reading and thinking are being transformed by the digitization of communications, education, and the public sphere" (Brown 2011: 210). As Susan Brown argues, it is time to consider seriously the claim that 'scholarly argument is...fundamentally rooted in print' (Ingraham)" (Brown 212) and to see in such an inquiry not just a challenge but also an opportunity. I am convinced by her argument that because we use new technologies, we must also learn how to "shape them to our purposes" (Brown 213).

Imagined communities may cross previously established geographical and political borders but many of the enabling technological infrastructures, access controls, and governance mechanisms still remain located in specific places. In this context, region, nation, and transnation are simultaneously in play. At the same time, as the Building Global Democracy program recognizes, many emergent processes escape such

governance and exist outside democratic control. Our research group employs the term "transnational literacies" to designate the necessity of attending to the importance of these various material realities while working with all these new literacies in a coordinated fashion. Transnational literacy in the singular, then, refers to the emergent imaginary that we are constructing to make sense of our world.

3. GLOBAL ENGLISH AND ITS IMAGINARIES

What are the imaginaries that drive current debates about the role of English as a global language? What role does English language and literature play within competing global imaginaries even when they are not explicitly mentioned as factors? How should English departments be rethinking their mandates in light of global changes? (Fee 2009).

a. THE "FLAT EARTH" IMAGINARY

Much current work on globalization, transnationalism and English studies still assumes an unacknowledged North American or Eurocentric context for analysis and the dominance of English as a global language. Often this work sees the United States as the source for the changes that are transforming our world and assesses these changes from the perspective of what they might mean for the United States. Yet globalization is pushing all of us toward a more multipolar world. While it is increasingly recognized that the global financial system is interdependent, the identification of English with the United Kingdom and the United States can sometimes obscure the fact that English is now rooted and growing in many parts of the world.

The views from Brazil and Canada enable a valuable shift in perspective. Our dialogue can now take place without being mediated through older cultural centres. At the same time, within our respective countries, the views from Aracaju and Winnipeg provide further evidence for dissent from still dominant but outmoded assumptions that

a national culture is or must be unitary as well as from newer, but dubious claims that "the world is flat." A careful reading of Thomas Friedman's influential 2005 book, *The World is Flat,* reveals the inappropriateness of the title metaphor for the emergent twenty-first century he describes and for capturing the value of the work we do as educators. Friedman's is a changed world of more intensified competition and previously unanticipated divisions between new sets of winners and losers. From the US point of view in which he is located, the American advantage is disappearing but that does not mean that the world, seen from other locations, both physical, cultural and ideological, is flat.

Friedman is correct, however, in noting that older notions of the social contract are dissolving, thereby creating a regulation gap, and, I would add, a democratic deficit at the global level. He quotes a consultant who notes that globalization "is not simply about how governments, business, and people communicate, not just about how organizations interact, but is about the emergence of completely new social, political, and business models" (45). The models governing education are also part of this paradigm shift. Given the tensions between state or provincial, national, and international jurisdictions that currently characterize our educational systems in Brazil and Canada, it seems unhelpful, looking up from within these systems, to describe these tensions as simply part of a flattening world. Education remains a profoundly uneven sphere of engagement.

The flattening pressures come, however, from a neoliberal global imaginary that shifts education out of the public into the private sphere. If education is seen as just another commodity, then business models prevail. If it is no longer seen as a public good, then it becomes vulnerable to the kind of homogenizing agenda Friedman associates with a flat earth. The social contract that once governed education, however imperfectly and unevenly, is being flattened by a globally shared profit motive even as the global education system becomes more hierarchically-oriented than ever.

For Friedman, the flat world means that "We Americans will have to work harder, run faster, and become smarter to makes sure we get our share" (469). He continues on, however, to see education and knowledge production offering the best hope for US national survival. He writes that Americans should not underestimate "the

innovations that could explode from the flat world when we really do connect all of the knowledge centres. On such a flat earth, the most important attribute you can have is creative imagination—the ability to be the first on your block to figure out how all these enabling tools can be put together in new and exciting ways to create products, communities, opportunities, and profits. That has always been America's strength, because America was, and for now still is, the world's greatest dream machine" (469). From Friedman's point of view, then, the flat earth model challenges US supremacy but not US exceptionalism-- and "imagination," facilitated by knowledge, will enable the US to remain at the top of the heap in an otherwise flattened world.

There are, however, many challenges to the flat earth model he presents. In this paper, I will discuss only two: firstly, a challenge that begins with a different set of premises entirely, that of minor transnationalisms (which I choose for the ways it draws on postcolonial insights into cultural relations); and secondly, a challenge that is emerging from within the flat earth paradigm itself, pushing it to its logical conclusion, "flattening" and thus destroying the exception Friedman seeks to make for the role of the imagination in knowledge production. I see the first as an opportunity and the second as a threat that will be more difficult to convert into forging alternative imaginaries.

b. MINOR TRANSNATIONALISMS

The first challenge comes from versions of transnationalism that complicate rather than simplify engagements across borders, seeing a multipolar world emerging rather than a flattened earth. Francoise Lionnet and Shu-mei Shih (2005), define minor transnationalism as a reading strategy that "makes visible the multiple relations between the national and the transnational" (8). Such a project is not postnational, because it recognizes that nation-states still matter, but it is transnational in that it recognizes "an originary multiplicity or creolization" at the base of all cultural experience (9) rather than a unitary purity. Transnationalism does not seek to move beyond the nation but instead it redefines the nation.

Our transnational literacies partnership project shares such an alternative view, which enables a different perspective on what globalization can mean for everyday lives and for how global English figures within them. Insofar as transnational literacies are linked to evolving information technologies, our project is also important for the insights it can offer into the new challenges set for learners and teachers by our increasingly digital environment. There is a danger that celebratory narratives of "the global village," recast as "the world is flat," may ignore the ways in which locality and language still make a difference. To think in terms of transnational literacies, instead of global literacy, is to remember to ask about the ways in which the nation and the region can still matter even as those ways may be changing.

Each of us approaches these questions from our own disciplinary and institutional positions. With my background in Anglophone postcolonial studies and current work in thinking about global democracy, I am wondering how changes in global English complicate understandings of culture and identity and what that might mean for cross-cultural research exchange in the service of people's cultural and political autonomy. My use of "transnational" derives from work in postcolonial studies that focuses on power relations within global circuits of exchange.

c. THE "LEARNING-EARNING EQUATION"

The newly opening spaces for imagining alternative futures often involve narratives that educators have labeled the "learning-earning equation," the notion that increased levels of education will translate into increased earning potential (Brown, Lauder & Ashton 2011; Robertson, Wess & Rizvi 2011). We saw that Friedman concludes his book with an implicit endorsement of this equation: the belief that knowledge work, at its highest level, might remain exempt from the outsourcing now prevalent in other forms of work. Yet several of the narratives Friedman recounts in his book implicitly undermine this faith, and he published the book, even opportunities which were formerly secure for professionals within the United States are now being eroded by lower-waged professionals situated abroad. Technological advancements

mean it is no longer necessary for such workers to relocate, since they can be paid less where they are. English, however, at least for the moment, remains an implicit requirement for such work.

Learning English is often a major element of the "learning-earning equation." Much postcolonial literature reinforces this belief and the careers of many postcolonial artists and intellectuals seem to support it. However, neither English nor education are immune from these globalizing trends. While states such as Brazil are scrambling to improve their educational systems and increase access, other countries such as Canada, the United States, and Britain are experiencing disillusionment about the failure of the "learning-earning" narrative to deliver on its promise as our graduates face increasing competition for employment from other parts of the world, and as the university is being transformed in response to those flattening pressures identified by Friedman.

A 2011 "Review Symposium" on Philip Brown, Hugh Lauder and David Ashton's book, *The global auction: the broken promises of education, jobs and incomes* (2011) rehearses their argument that the social contract rewarding middle class investments in learning with secure future earnings is now broken (293-311) but none figure the role of English is this equation. Susan Robertson explains: "This global auction for jobs is open to competition across borders. The person who wins is the person willing to take the lowest wages" (294). Not asked is the question of what language competencies such a person may need to have. Important as this question is, her concluding point is even more important to the agenda of transnational literacies: "We need a different debate on the value of education—one that de-links learning from earning, on the one hand, and insists that learning is a societal good, on the other" (296). Why is it, however, that so few people currently see that need? Fazal Rizvi sees part of the answer to this question in the status of the "learning-earning equation" as a neo-liberal imaginary tied to the political myths that drive the American dream (310-11). We saw this belief reaffirmed in Friedman's book. But investigation of this question needs to be pushed further. Why are arguments for education's role in educating citizens for democracy, national and global, falling on deaf ears, at least in North America?

4. TRANSNATIONAL LITERACIES

Rethinking the purpose of education and its value to individuals and their communities at all scales of human involvement from the local to the global will involve developing more potent social imaginaries than those I have just identified. Transnational literacy involves the capacity to call established imaginaries into question, to reimagine human possibility, and re-energize or found the institutions that might revive the purpose and value of learning.

The concept of literacy has also undergone a significant transformation from earlier usage. Literacy used to indicate a primarily instrumentalist understanding of reading and writing, which was often employed in a biased fashion to distinguish colonizing nations from the peoples they were colonizing. Nowadays, literacy still designates the ability to read, understand, and write a language but it is also understood more broadly as a social and cultural practice of meaning-making, which operates in many spheres.

Our research team borrows the concept of transnational literacy from Gayatri Spivak to adapt it beyond her focus on cross-cultural and deep language learning to include multimodal practices and the multiliteracies they generate.

5. GLOBAL ENGLISH OR TRANSNATIONAL ENGLISH?

I have argued that English has become a form of mobile imaginary that serves multiple functions in different contexts while also serving as a specialized form of new literacy essential for success in many parts of the globalizing world. As higher education globalizes, English publication often determines what counts. Simon Marginson explains: 'In research there is a single mainstream system of English-language publication of research knowledge, which tends to marginalize other work rather than absorb it' (p.303). This is a serious problem for adequate as well as equitable knowledge production. Of Brazil, Ravinder Sidhu (2006) notes: "Like other countries deemed to be outside of the key Euro-American knowledge nodes, the

Brazilian academy faces the dual challenge of doing research deemed credible by international networks and retaining a focus on local problems" (285). The dominance of English as the global language of research that counts, exacerbates this dilemma. Sidhu also notes the ways in which a rhetoric of partnership, when used by the British Council, may "soften" commercial aspirations and a desire to spread the "imperial language" of English (289).

"Global English" merits an entry in Mooney and Evans's *Globalization: the Key Concepts* (2007). The entry raises three questions: what does the rise of English as a global language mean for the English language itself, what does it mean for other languages, and what does it mean for non-native speakers? To these debates, we might add the following: given the changing role of English, how might English best be taught today in the many different contexts in which it is now being seen as a desirable competency?   Can English be used to promote transnational literacy, and if so, how? In their preface to Saxena and Omoniyi's *Contending with Globalization in World Englishes*, Ramanathan, Norton and Pennycook argue the need to move toward transnational frames of analysis, which can complicate both national and global frames while seeking contexts in which broader questions "can be posed in ways that go beyond a simple aggregate of localities" (xvii). Going beyond the simple aggregate of localities is one of the challenges transnational approaches seek to meet. Their function cannot be merely additive; they must become transformational.

6. TRANSNATIONAL RESEARCH PARTNERSHIPS

To address the questions raised in this paper, transnational research partnerships will be necessary. Raewyn Connell suggests that "Methods for cooperative intellectual work across regions are not yet well established" (232). In addressing the particular challenge of South/North partnerships from a feminist point of view, Linda Peake and Karen de Souza argue that "northern-based academic feminists cannot be engaged in transformative politics in the South, unless they are simultaneously committed to challenging academic structures, norms, and practices in their own institutions" (118).

Such reimagined transnational partnerships, in which the co-creation of knowledge through reciprocal processes of interaction is the goal, require thinking more deeply about the research process and its contexts.

That's why transnational literacy requires thinking about the structural changes that are currently reshaping the global higher education system as well as our regional and national positions within it. Transnational research partnerships also require more attention to the language in which we imagine transnational engagement occurring. This is a time of exciting and destabilizing shifts in the world system, a time when knowledge has never been more important but in which knowledge claims are also increasingly contested. English continues to play a key role in these negotiations in ways that sometimes become so naturalized as to seem invisible to those most established within these circuits.

It is too early to say where new Canadian federal initiatives promoting a closer relationship between Canada and Brazil will lead, if anywhere. The current global turn in international relations is not always open to the insights of critical, minor, or postcolonial transnationalisms. The Brazilian National Project, however, in enabling workshops such as this, is well situated to continue to show leadership in developing new ways to link research, teaching and learning in the task of developing transnational literacies.

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