The simultaneity of experience: cultural identity, magical realism and the artefactual in digital storytelling

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Abstract

This paper explores how students, as multimodal storytellers, can weave powerful narratives blending modes, genres, artefacts and literary conventions to represent the real and imagined in their lives. Part of a larger ethnographic case study of student writing in a middle years class for immigrant students learning English as an additional language, the research featured in this paper is framed by a theory of artefactual literacies, narrative theory – particularly the genre of magical realism – and cultural studies, specifically notions of representation and cultural identity. The theoretical emphases on the artefactual, structural and representational aspects of multimodal narratives informs a multilayered, fine-grained approach to analysing students’ digital narrative poems using the tools of critical discourse analysis, literary analysis and a visual analytic framework developed for analysing student-produced digital photographs. This process is applied to a selected example, Gabriel’s ‘My Name Is’ narrative, a story that plays with elements of magical realism to explore the simultaneity of his experience as an immigrant youth. The illustrative example speaks to the power of the ‘fantastical’ in literacy pedagogies that seek to take seriously students’ cultural identities and their visions for new realities.

Key words: multimodality, artefactual literacies, writing, critical discourse analysis, immigrant students, visual research

Artefactual literacies and multimodality in narrative texts

Literacy, multimodality and material culture are interconnected in the everyday lives of youth, woven together in the ways they interact with others and the spaces they inhabit through play and storytelling, games and media, sports and social activities, even their work and responsibilities. A theory of artefactual literacies (Pahl and Rowsell, 2010) links literacy, multimodality and the material together by recognising the role of artefacts in the narratives of students’ lives and inviting those into the classroom. Artefacts are things or objects that have distinct physical qualities; they are “created, found, carried, put on display, hidden, evoked in language, or worn”; they embody “people, stories, thoughts, communities, identities, and experiences, and [are] valued or made by a meaning maker in a particular context” (Pahl and Rowsell, 2010, p. 2). Artefacts are closely intertwined with identities, for identities “reside on a sea of stuff and of experiences” (Pahl and Rowsell, 2010, p. 8), and when those are infused in an artefactual literacies pedagogy, the boundaries between school and home are made more porous, opening “up worlds for meaning makers…that are frequently, if not always, silent in formal, institutional settings like schooling” (Pahl and Rowsell, 2010, p. 3).

A theory of artefactual literacies privileges children’s narratives and their multimodality. As print-based literacies shift to image and the screen (Kress, 2003), writing is “increasingly brought into new textual relationships with, or even exchanged for, visual and multimodal forms of representation” (Jewitt, 2008, p. 243). For example, the movement of digital storytelling practices from informal learning sites to sanctioned classroom spaces suggests that even amid print-based, levelled, standardised literacy instruction and assessment, there is space for inclusive and culturally responsive pedagogies that invite meanings to be “made (as well as distributed, interpreted, and remade) through many representational and communicational resources, of which language is but one” (Jewitt, 2008, p. 246). Hull and Nelson (2005) have argued that the ‘semiotic power’ of images, words and sound in students’ multimodal texts is more than added effects. They suggest that “a multimodal text can create a different system of signification”, one that affords ‘a new way’ of making meaning that is important for diverse youth if schooling is to be relevant and meaningful (Hull and Nelson, 2005, p. 225). However, while “much is known about the semiotic resources of language,…considerably less is understood about the semiotic potentials of gesture, sound, image, movement, and other forms of representation” (Jewitt, 2008, p. 246).

Representation and cultural identity in students’ narratives

A theory of artefactual literacies conflates notions of representation and cultural identity rooted in cultural
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ful stories, but in the politics of their positioning (Hall, 1997, p. 222). Both a process of ‘becoming’ and ‘being’, cultural identities are continuously transformed, “subject to the continuous ‘play’ of history, culture and power” (Hall, 1990, p. 225). This ‘play’ has a double connotation: the ambiguity and uncertainty of the unknown future in the ongoing play of the historical, cultural and political, as well as a sense of ‘doubleness’ Hall (1990) suggests is experienced most viscerally in the ‘playing’ of the many varieties of Caribbean musics. What can be heard, Hall explains, is a difference within identity that is far too complex to “be represented, cinematically, as a simple binary opposition – ‘past/present’, ‘them/us’… At different places, times, in relation to different questions, the boundaries are resisted” (Hall, 1990, p. 226).

When these notions of cultural identity inform approaches to reading students’ multimodal narratives, it is possible to appreciate how students’ stories “are infused with meanings and carry traces of their history within them” (Pahl and Rowsell, 2010, p. 4), composed as it were, as a line within the larger orchestrations of discourse around them. From a critical stance, it is thus possible to see and hear the ‘doubleness’ playing in students’ narratives, and acknowledge the work of representation as it is “constructed through memory, fantasy, narrative and myth” – not simply as powerful stories, but in the politics of their positioning (Hall, 1990, p. 226).

Narrative theory and magical realism

The notion of doubleness Hall (1990) describes in the playing of Caribbean musics has a parallel in the genre of magical realism. As a literary practice, magical realism has been associated with Latin-American and Caribbean culture (Siemon, 1988), a literary form that “moves back and forth…between the disparate worlds of what we might call the historical and the imaginary” (Zamora and Faris, 1995, p. 1). Through this movement, space is created in magical realist texts ‘for interactions of diversity’ as writers, particularly in colonised locations, draw on the fantastical elements of myths, legends, rituals and the oral and performative community practices of non-Western cultures, for example, to disrupt the ontology and epistemology of realism – and therefore, of the hegemony of its political and cultural structures (Zamora and Faris, 1995, p. 3).

The mode of magical realism allows writers to explore – and transgress – boundaries:

“whether the boundaries are ontological, political, geographical, or generic. Magical realism often facilitates the fusion, or coexistence, of possible worlds, spaces, systems that would be irreconcilable in other modes of fiction. The propensity of magical realist texts to admit a plurality of worlds means that they often situate themselves on liminal territory between or among those worlds” (Zamora and Faris, 1995, pp. 5–6).

As a genre, magical realism expands the range of possible interpretations of students’ narratives and the work of representation within them. For Pahl and Rowsell (2010), artefactual literacies are a site of creativity and improvisation, where young people, within their texts, may “stretch the affordances of what is possible” (p. 10). This may occur when young people move a valued artefact into a classroom space, where it can then spark creative and powerful writing, but this may also be the case when young people, such as post-expressionist painters (Roh, 1995), choose objects to represent the magical or fantastical already existing in their imaginations: “The point is not to discover the spirit beginning with objects but, on the contrary, to discover objects beginning with the spirit” (Roh, 1995, p. 24). In any case, the theoretical framework afforded by layering artefactual literacies, cultural representations and magical realism suggests new ways of understanding the multimodal narratives composed by students, taking seriously the connections between literacies, artefacts and the imagination, as well as the implications of the representational work of multimodal narratives in the politics and positioning of students’ identities.

Design of the study

The narrative featured in this paper is just one piece of student writing collected through a 6-month
Table 1: Analytic framework for students’ digital images

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Frame components</th>
<th>Guiding questions</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Pedagogical context and purpose</td>
<td>What are the relationships between the photographs, the broader pedagogical context and the specific purpose(s) for which they were taken?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Boundaries</td>
<td>What are the boundaries of the photographs in the analysis? What is being included/excluded? What difference does this make?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Concrete/material attributes</td>
<td>What is going on in the photo? Who or what is the subject? Where was the photo taken? How has the photo been composed? What are the effects of the composition on the viewer? What are the literal material, spatial and temporal aspects?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Abstract/symbolic attributes</td>
<td>How do students do the complex work of representing their cultural identities in their artefacts/images? What are the abstract or symbolic attributes of the artefacts/images? How do they bring together different times, people, places, symbols and stories in a photograph or group of photographs?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Values</td>
<td>What do the photographs show about what the photographers value? How?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Subjectivities (identities-in-practice)</td>
<td>What is made visible about students, their everyday worlds and how they understand them?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Relationships to other photographs and practices</td>
<td>What connections and relationships are traceable to other photographs and/or practices related to the work?</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

The larger body of students’ writing included the digital narratives that are the focus of this paper. Originally composed as poems, the students added to their written texts images they found on the Internet or took with a digital camera, revising their poems in the iterative process of creating a cohesive visual and written text. To share them with a broader audience, the students decided to use movie-making software to layer each frame of the visual text with a narration of their written texts. The narratives were analysed through an iterative, multi-level process of multimodal discourse analysis. The first level included several ‘readings’ (viewings) of the narrative poems and the writing of an analytic memo for each one (Corbin and Strauss, 2008). It was in this level of analysis that I discovered the prevalence of spatiotemporality (in references to place and time) as a thematic pattern across the poems. In the second level of analysis, I examined the spoken texts (i.e. the students’ narration of their written texts) line by line, generating codes to develop the properties and dimensions of the categories identified in the first level (Corbin and Strauss, 2008). Thus, I compiled an extensive list of ways students were representing and exploring spatiotemporality in their narrative poems. I then examined the visual texts, analysing the degree to which the concepts were represented in the images of the poem: how did the images corroborate the conceptual patterns, complicate/resist them or introduce new ones? This level of analysis was guided by an understanding of visual design and semiotics (Hall, 1997; Janks, 2010; Kress and van Leeuwen, 2006; Spencer, 2011) that in turn informed the development of an analytic framework designed specifically for analysing students’ digital photographs in curricular inquiries (Honeyford and Sanchez, 2012). The framework includes the consideration of several components, facilitated by guiding questions (see Table 1). The framework can be applied to a collection (e.g. produced by a class or student), a group of images (e.g. a subset of images grouped under a category) or a single photo.

Finally, I placed the two texts (‘spoken’ and ‘visual’) side by side to analyse how, specifically in terms of place and time, the student poets were
The simultaneity of experience represented in converging time and space

The images Gabriel took of the figurine (no. 3) and the pool (no. 5) illustrate the convergence of the spatiotemporal in Gabriel’s narrative. Through their inclusion in the digital story, the artefacts move from Gabriel’s out-of-school spaces (e.g. his home and the pool) into the space of the classroom. But they also bring together these real spaces with other imagined and remembered spaces and times, as Gabriel uses these symbols to magically transcend spatial and temporal boundaries. The angelic winged teddy bear figurine (see Figure 1) is an everyday artefact that Gabriel uses to illustrate the ability of angels to fly.

Associating his name with the angel Gabriel or angel food cake does not provide Gabriel with an adequate metaphor of who he is. He explores the inconsistencies – sometimes he is good, and a helper; sometimes he is not, and such comparisons do not ‘tell about me’. He also laments that his name does not translate culturally or linguistically – it is considered feminine and often not pronounced correctly. His response is to imagine that he can temporarily escape the times and spaces that attempt to define him in narrow and dichotomous terms as moral (e.g. good, bad) and gendered (e.g. girl, boy).

Gabriel authors a new dimension of time and space through the ability of angels to fly. In extending the ability to fly to himself, Gabriel imagines transcending time and space temporarily by flying to places ‘that are really pretty’. The image (no. 4) is a picture of a waterfall Gabriel found in a Google search. Though not named, his destination is portrayed in terms similar to those he used to describe Mexico in a poem he wrote after this one (e.g. ‘pretty’, ‘beautiful’, ‘hot’). He imagines being able to fly above the boundaries that limit his experience in this space and time: the cultural boundaries of a name that has not translated well and the geographical borders that prevent undocumented children from travelling easily across them. He imagines going back to where he is from, even if just for a little while. The image Gabriel took of the pool (see Figure 2) is an artefact that functions in a similar way, linking a place, time and set of sensory experiences with which he is very familiar (i.e. swimming underwater at the local pool during practice) to those he imagines in another – swimming underwater in a beautiful ocean in Mexico.

Gabriel’s narrative examines the notion of the simultaneity of experience through space and time. In Gabriel’s poem, the interplay between the visual and spoken suggests the simultaneity between the global and local (e.g. an image of a figurine angel on a shelf at home used to evoke the transcendence of an angel flying in the heavens; an image taken at the local pool references the ocean). While in many ways Gabriel has collapsed spatiotemporal dimensions, his
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Image</th>
<th>Description of image (visual text)</th>
<th>Accompanying spoken text (read from written text)</th>
<th>Narrative structures/discursive strategies</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1</td>
<td>Found picture of Michelangelo’s Sistine fresco ‘The Creation of Adam’</td>
<td>Messenger Of God Angel like angels in the sky someone that’s good and helps helps god and people sometimes its not me sometimes it is</td>
<td>Definition of name Use of simile: comparison between name and artefact; contextualisation of artefact by location in the heavens Ascription of characteristics: moral, ethical, helper, mediator between two spaces and worlds Identification of inconsistency/contradictions in time</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2</td>
<td>Found image of piece of angel food cake with strawberry topping</td>
<td>Like the name of Angel food cake its good but does not tell about me sometimes goes to a girl more than a boy I don’t like it sometimes people don’t say it right</td>
<td>Contrastive comparison (that he rejects as metaphor for himself) Exploration of implications of the translation of his name into another language and culture Statement of negative response: name does not move well across the cultural boundaries of gender and language</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3</td>
<td>New image Gabriel took at home of a teddy bear figurine with angel wings holding a lantern</td>
<td>Angels they fly sometimes I want to fly go away for a little come back</td>
<td>Use of object to embody his desire to fly Extension of metaphor to explore transcending and transgressing boundaries (geographic, temporal) through magical ability to fly</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4</td>
<td>Found image of waterfall taken from what looks to be the top of a hill/mountain; gives impression of height (can only see top of waterfall, not bottom)</td>
<td>go places that are really pretty</td>
<td>Description of where he would go: exploration of places described as pretty, represented through found images of naturally beautiful locations characterised by height and movement</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5</td>
<td>New image Gabriel took of the bottom of the pool where he swims everyday with the swim team; the light is reflecting off and through the water to illuminate the bottom of the pool</td>
<td>ocean under the water and see circles of sun light on the ground moving like they wood be free and do things that people say not to</td>
<td>Description of embodied experience of seeing light reflected through the water Movement along bottom of the pool represents an imagined experience in another time and place (e.g. swimming underwater in the ocean) Use of metaphor of circles of sunlight to describe the freedom to move – unencumbered by imposed structures and beliefs</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>6</td>
<td>Found image of a sunset over the water</td>
<td>After seeing the beautiful ocean</td>
<td>Allusion to the passing of time – to the sensory experience of not just swimming in the ocean, but seeing it</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>7</td>
<td>Found image of sunset up in the sky over the trees</td>
<td>go really up in the sky and see the big red sun flying and looking at it and thinking what to do next what would an Angel do next</td>
<td>Use of movement as journey through space (to a vantage point above the ocean) and over great distance (close to the sun) Use of movement demonstrates supernatural power to move (to fly), see (to be able to look at the sun) and think (to extend cognitive capacities to reflect that of an angel’s)</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
imagined escape is marked by time (e.g. ‘for a while’), linear chronology (‘after’, ‘what to do next’) and place (e.g. the ocean, sky, ‘places that are pretty’), though these are expanded and experienced in supernatural ways. For example, his narrative play with timescales includes mixing the short term and long term (e.g. his use of the word ‘sometimes’ six times in the poem suggests this sense of both at once) and suggests the possibility of the future blending into the present (e.g. “I want to fly, go places ... come back”). In magical realism, “the traversing of spatio-temporal barriers is possible, and is indeed a feature of postmodern narratives where the reader’s recognition of the transgression is part of the reading experience” (Bridgeman, 2007, para. 2). It is in the movement of Gabriel, particularly, that he realises the simultaneity of space, place and time as he imagines himself freed from the boundaries of the spatiotemporal that locate him as an immigrant, ‘newcomer’ or outsider in this community, without the papers needed to move back and forth.

**The simultaneity of experience represented in weaving multiple ways of knowing**

Having made the connection between his name and the angel Gabriel, who is known both as a messenger of God and an archangel of death, Gabriel explores the tensions of a name that links heaven (angels in the sky) and earth and is associated with moral and ethical goodness: Gabriel is a mediator and helper of ‘god
and people’. He decides these attributes are only inconsistently true: “sometimes its not me/sometimes it is”. These lines of spoken text are illustrated by a found image of Michelangelo’s Sistine fresco ‘The Creation of Adam’ that Gabriel cropped to show only God’s grey-haired, bearded face looking down. Throughout the narrative, the notion of perspective is significant. The verb ‘see’ is included in the poem four times, as well as a reference to ‘looking’. However, there is doubleness here as well: to see is also to know, an epistemological insight that taps memory, ritual and myth.

In just his written/spoken text, Gabriel vividly captures the images he sees and the sensations he feels. He draws on his experience as a swimmer (see Table 1, row 5), having described to the teacher and me how he loved to swim under the water with his eyes open and watch the light come through the water and move along the bottom, making circles on the tiled floor of the pool. He talked about the sense of peace that gave him, how time seemed to stand still and he could imagine himself somewhere else. “How do I explain that?” he asked, in the midst of writing his poem. “You just did”, we told him. He asked if he could take the digital camera with him to swim practice, and returned the next day with the image, pleased because it captured the picture in his mind in a way that his verbal description could not. Beginning with the ‘spirit’ (Roh, 1995) of his experience, Gabriel was able to create an artefact to represent it. Through his embodied understanding of peace, culled from the daily ritual of swimming, Gabriel was able to imagine knowing an even greater sense of peace and freedom from seeing the same circles of light – this time from the sun – as he swims underwater in the ocean. It is in their movement “moving like they wood be free and do things that people say not to” that Gabriel poetically weaves an epistemological doubleness – the suggestion that freedom is experienced in the movement not just from the real (the pool) to the imagined (the ocean), but in the ability to live beyond the constraints others impose. That he represents this freedom through the movement of light might suggest his desire to know the freedom that exists beyond the constraints of a life lived ‘in the shadows’. His other writing frequently addressed his dreams for a legal path to citizenship and for the contributions and rights of immigrants to be recognised – by the law, but also by others in the school and community.

From the vantage point of the angel, he sees circles of sunlight, the beautiful ocean, the big red sun and people. This ability to see is supernatural: it reaches to the ocean floor, is able to withstand looking at the sun, and is able to comprehend the future. Ultimately, that is the magic he summons. He, unlike the mythical Icarus, is able to fly close to the sun and survive. He is able to see the past, present and future (“to see people what they do and what happens”) and to “talk to them when they are dead”. The visual text (image no. 8) includes a found cartoon image in grey scale. In the foreground is a cloaked, hooded calavera (skull) holding a scythe such as a flag, standing beside a headstone inscribed, “I see dead people”. This representation of death combines the symbolic rituals and celebrations of dia de los muertos (Day of the Dead) with pop culture in America through a tagline made famous by M. Night Shyamalan’s movie The Sixth Sense (1999), the story of an alienated boy who is able to see and talk to the dead. Gabriel references ‘people’ four times in the poem (see rows 1, 2, 5 and 8): his first reference is from the perspective of the angel Gabriel, a mediator between God and people, a collective and
inclusive group. His second reference positions people in relationship to how they pronounce his name ("people don’t say it right"), a reference to non-Spanish speakers. The third is to those who impose constraints ("do things that people say not to"), a reference that could include those trying to protect him from actions that would endanger his or his family’s life in the United States (this had become a topic of conversation in the classroom during discussions of The House on Mango Street). The fourth reference to people ("like someone that can see people, what they do and what happens and talk to them when they are dead") is also slightly ambiguous, but given the context, would suggest a reference to his larger family members (still in Mexico), including those who would be celebrated during día de los muertos. If so, Gabriel suggests a way of knowing that is linked to his family and culture, made possible again through the symbolic power of his name. For it is in asking “what would an Angel do next” that Gabriel imagines the fantastical power to speak to the dead. "In magical realist fiction, individuals, times, places, have a tendency to transform magically into other (or all) individuals, times, places. This slippage from the individual to the collective to the cosmic is often signalled by spectral presences" (Zamora, 1995, p. 501).

The narrative concludes by circling back to his name—a name he decides he does not want to change. Unlike Esperanza, in The House on Mango Street, who wishes to change her name, “a name more like the real me, the one nobody sees” (Cisneros, 1994, p. 11), Gabriel (narrating a photo of himself smiling in the classroom, looking slightly goofy with two small pigtails that a friend had just put in his hair to tease him) explains that “I really don’t want to change my name sometimes because I feel angel is what makes me and tells about me if you know me”. Here, the sense of knowledge he privileges is an understanding of who he is, a complex representation explored in images, artefacts and word.

Implications for narrative in the classroom

The power of a story exists in its communicative power—for the teller and for the audience. Gabriel’s poem does not easily conform to conventional narrative structures, but more accurately resembles the mode of the Latin-American narrative, described as a “poetic negation of reality” (Chanady, 1995, p. 133). Questions about Gabriel’s intent are, from such a postmodern perspective, not as important as the effect it has on the reader, a narrative process in magical realism referred to as the “‘textualization of the reader’, whereby the assumed boundaries between the fictional world and the reader’s world are magically transgressed” (Zamora and Faris, 1995, p. 8). The semiotic power of the artefactual, visual and aural in this piece invites the reader to see both the real and imagined; for example, we see in the image how Gabriel has captured the light reflecting in the water of the pool and we imagine the same dancing movement of light in the ocean. As readers, we make our own connections between our world and the one Gabriel has created by weaving together the fantastical with the familiar, suggesting that things are not always what they seem, or that what we thought we understood cannot always be known. Instead, we may learn from seeing or coming to understand in a whole new way.

It is important that we encourage such play with narrative modes and genres far beyond the early years, when stories that bend time and space and explore magical ways of knowing are much more readily accepted. It is “in the process of ‘doing’ literacy [that] students learn ‘what counts as literacy’” (Unsworth, 2001, cited in Jewitt, 2008, p. 246), and thus, to include the narratives and identities of more of our students in the classroom, we need to understand, expand and take seriously the modes and genres through which they may choose to make sense of and communicate their experiences, dreams and social critiques.

From a critical perspective, Gabriel’s narrative also reminds us of the ‘doubleness’ in discourses that speak from sites of inequity. Though he created his digital story with the same software and through a similar process of multimodal storytelling as his peers, he drew on discursive strategies that resist a realist construction and understanding of his identity. In magical realism, “the idea of an objective and unchangeable reality that one can supposedly apprehend and represent is replaced by the emphasis on perception as the subjective creation of a new reality of the imagination” (Chanady, 1995, p. 139). Gabriel’s status and social location as an immigrant youth in this context provided a position from which to write within and against reality, pointing to an identity within a new reality that he explores in surprising and breathtaking ways through the perspectives he finds within his name and the artefacts that represent him.

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References


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Gabrielle Cliff Hodges, Alison Binney and Emily Evans

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