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Book Review

Moving Beyond Dichotomies to Outline Discourse Strategies in a Transnational Community

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JUAN C. GUERRA. (1998).

Close to Home: Oral and Literate Practices in a Transnational Mexican Community. New York: Teachers College Press (191 pp.), ISBN 0-8077-3772-0.

Intended both for ethnographers and for scholars of literacy and rhetorical studies, Juan C. Guerra's *Close to Home: Oral and Literate Practices in a Transnational Mexican Community* is at once groundbreaking and important, though because of the sophistication and detail of its reasoning, it may not be accessible to a broad audience. The book—the fortieth title in the Teachers College Press Language and Literacy Series—is pioneering in a number of ways. Most notable is Guerra's refusal to fit the group he is focusing on—the multigenerational social network of an extended Mexican-origin family—into a single geographic frame of reference. Guerra explains that both rural Mexico and urban Chicago inform the way members of this social network read, understand, and interact with the world. He documents their overlapping uses of bilingual orality and literacy within three main “home fronts”—two *ranchos* in Mexico and a neighborhood in Chicago—and also in the “contact zones”—those places and formats in which members of the social network encounter the society outside of their network (e.g., at school, in the newspaper, and on television).

Sometimes building directly from this case study, often relying on his detailed knowledge of a broad range of research, and also inserting autobiographical details, Guerra asserts that the literacy and orality skills of members of transnational communities need to be considered in relation to the contexts they have emerged in and should be evaluated according to their utility in those contexts. Looking at forty-four letters that were sent back and forth between network members in Chicago and Mexico, examining the solicited autobiographical writing of three young

women in the social network, and reviewing extensive samples of oral discourse, Guerra argues that the sophisticated rhetorical strategies employed by Mexican-origin trans-nationals merit respect and consideration rather than the dismissal that is often their lot in U.S. social and educational arenas. Guerra emphasizes that many of the adult informants involved in this study, informants who would be labeled as semiliterate according to U.S. mainstream standards, in fact are quite adept at presenting and defending propositional discourse statements, a talent much celebrated within the academy but often overlooked in the appraisal of immigrants (p. 88).

Guerra is careful to clarify in detail his own understanding of "literacy" and his related sense of his research task as a scholar of literacy and rhetoric. His definition is expansive, plural, and compelling (p. 58):

Under these circumstances, it is clear that an individual's literacies vary according to the personal and social circumstances of his or her life, so everyone is considered literate in certain situations and not in others. The goal, from this perspective, is not to master a particular form of literacy, but to develop one's ability to engage in a variety of social practices that require us to operate in a plethora of settings and genres and to fulfill different needs and goals. In academic terms, it means that identifying and understanding a set of assumed universal standards is not only no longer possible, but no longer meaningful.

The book mostly focuses on the literacy and orality habits of Jaime and Rocío Durán's family and social network. The data Guerra collects from his interaction with the Durans' social network serve as the foundation and main topic for three of the five middle chapters of the book. The credibility of Guerra within the network he was studying seems high, and thus the quality of the data he collects is high. First gaining access to the social network in 1988 while serving as an adult education tutor at a Latino community organization, Guerra, with his wife Diane and various other colleagues, studied the network over a period of nine years, carrying out research in both Chicago and Mexico. Guerra's bilingualism, his experience as a Latino newcomer who relied on family connections to first come to Chicago (he was born and raised in South Texas), and his family's often frustrating experience with U.S. schools, all facilitated his building of rapport with the various members of the Durans' social network.

Guerra strengthens his conclusions by using multiple and intertwined research methods, mixing interviews with observations, the analysis of transcribed conversations, and document review. He knows the network members in enough different settings and capacities to be able to point out that the ways they described themselves in casual conversation versus in formal interviews differed and that neither of these self-descriptions matched how they represented themselves when engaged in the purposeful use of oral or written language (p. 32). He collects an impressive sample of letters sent back and forth between network members in Mexico and Chicago, although he confesses that the sample was likely skewed

toward females due to his reliance on a forty-year-old woman as a key intermediary (she helped him acquire the letters) (p. 103). He notes, however, that because of the “feminization of literacy” in this community—where women and girls do the bulk of spontaneous writing (p. 104)—the “skew” may correlate more with actual practice than would first appear to be so. He also acquires another textual database by building sufficient rapport (over a period of years) with three young women, such that they produced and shared with him several pieces of autobiographical writing. The book is at its best when Guerra outlines and explains these rich data.

Guerra also devotes a substantial portion of his text responding to various dilemmas from the research literature. These include the complicated tasks of describing and qualifying his conceptualization of how social networks are defined, produced, reproduced, bounded, and yet still changeable and porous. Guerra wants neither to reify the flawed idea of a bounded speech community nor to throw up his hands saying that because a community/social network is porous and penetrated by the larger society that it does not have any internal integrity (pp. 4-5). He argues against Pratt’s (1991) charge that research should focus only on “contact zones,” but he agrees that studying contact zones is crucial. Citing Street (1993), Guerra notes that utterances (be they oral or written) have immediate *and* broader social and conceptual frameworks that give the utterance meaning (p. 11). Because these utterances and the meanings ascribed to them by readers and listeners reflect both “home front” and contact zone experiences of discourse participants, he attends to both of these circumstances in his study.

Guerra is convincing in his several attempts to find a synthesizing middle ground to a number of important but polarized academic debates. Explaining his orientation in the first chapter (p. 2):

[B]ecause we almost always find ourselves attracted to one set of diametrically opposed interpretations of the world—that is, that it is either a static reality where everything and everyone follows order and convention or a fluid one where everything and everyone is changing constantly—we end up missing the vast middle ground where the tension between the two plays itself out.

The book’s conceptual arguments all resist such dichotomization.

Guerra successfully synthesizes the normally opposed ideas of home fronts and contact zones and he provides detailed discussion of metaphors for literacy and the mechanics of rhetorical strategies. However, in proving his competence with these nuanced theoretical issues, he largely fails at the task (presented on the back book cover) of helping teachers and policymakers gain familiarity with the cultural inclinations and assets that Mexicano children and adults bring with them into formal classroom settings. He fails not because such details are not within the text, but because they are widely separated by extended theoretical analyses that stray from the “experience near.”

Given the politicized, shrill nature of contemporary U.S. discourse about Mexican immigration and the apparent shrillness of academics asserting the applicability and/or flaws of one research strategy or another, Guerra's measured, reasonable tone is refreshing as he makes his case to academics. One does not credibly disagree with Bourdieu, for example, without carefully demonstrating one's theoretical competence. But this theoretical orientation has its price. His third chapter is an elegant purposeful discussion of the multiple metaphors employed to discuss literacy and orality. But while I found the chapter abstract, challenging, and ultimately interesting for my own theorizing, the chapter did not seem to tell me much about the habits of transnational community members. To some audiences I suspect such a chapter would be a crucial reason to take Guerra seriously as he proves his exhaustive familiarity with the research literature. To other audiences, however, such excursions seem tangential and difficult; they seem to stray from practitioners' ever important question, "how can this inform what I do?"

Because of the extended theory-oriented passages in this text, I question how welcome this text would be among the practitioners I have known in Georgia TESOL or among those from Latino community organizations that I used to train with as part of the National Council of La Raza's Project EXCEL partnership in the early 1990s. I think they would find much of it frustrating or not clearly relevant.

Despite this, I strongly recommend this book, but only to audiences of scholars. Guerra is credible and sophisticated. The description and analysis he offers of Mexican-origin members of a transnational community is important and insightful and his measured refusal to use the aggressive, dismissive terminology of much academic posturing is highly welcome. However, I think he should have written two books, this one and one with fewer theoretical excursions for an audience that needs to see how to tie the revelations of this book to their policy planning and educational practice. For practitioner audiences I would select only certain segments of this text to share, for example the latter half of chapter 6 (pp. 126–150), which focuses on the autobiographical writing samples. I might even wait to see if his forthcoming text is more accessible. The "About the Author" segment at the end of the book (p. 191) notes that his latest project, entitled *Bridges and Barriers: A Binational Study of Schooling and the Mexican Immigrant Family*, intends to investigate the personal, familial, and educational ramifications of U.S. schooling practices on the adults and children who continually move back and forth between Mexico and the United States. I look forward to the publication of that text.

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