

## Constructing ‘Thirdspaces’: Migrant students and the visual arts

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### Abstract

This paper presents the art and visual journals of three senior secondary students who had recently migrated to Australia. Specifically, it explores the ways in which the students engaged with notions of space, and in particular ‘Thirdspaces’ in their art. Through the students’ visual representations, and the discussion around their art, I argue that the art that students create can become the point where space and subjectivity encounter and enfold in potentially transformative ways.

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### Introduction

There have been a number of studies researching migrant students’ experiences within schooling frameworks. Primarily, this research is based upon the acquisition and development of English language (Brunn, 1999; Troig, 2004; Whittaker, Salend, & Gutierrez, 1994) and the creation and implementation of inclusive school curriculum (Perritt, 1997; Singh & Sinclair, 2001). Much of this literature suggests that migrant students in mainstream Western schools are positioned as a disadvantaged group as they face challenges in terms of adaptation to a new education system, different teacher/student relationships, difficulties with learning in English and different educational opportunities (Miller, Mitchell, & Brown, 2005). From a social perspective, it is necessary for students who have recently migrated to a new country to negotiate new social groupings, gender roles and social expectations that may not be familiar (Miller et al.). In other words, within these social, cultural and educational discourses, migrant students are “othered” by being outside dominant culture, seen as different and excluded (Weedon, 1999).

Although these studies provide significant insights, there is limited research that examines migrant students’ experiences in Australian schools through a “space” perspective. To address this issue, I applied the space theory proposed by Soja (1996) and Bhabha (1994) and their notion of Thirdspace to analyse the art work created by migrant students. In this paper, I discuss the art and visual journals of three migrant students, Ethan, Millie and Sonia, who used their art to explore space in potentially transformative ways. In particular, discussion will focus on the ways migrant students created Thirdspaces to construct alternative ways of being (Berquist, 2002). Further, it will consider how these students engage with Thirdspaces to explore their subjectivity – the way in which meaning is applied to self, others and the world (Davies & Banks, 1992, in Jones, 1993, p. 158).

I will begin this discussion by outlining my research spaces and the theoretical notion of Thirdspace. After situating the research and its theoretical framework, the art of each student will be discussed in turn. The purpose of this dialogue is to highlight the ways in which their art adopts Thirdspace characteristics. Ethan's art and visual journal is examined to provide an example of the Thirdspace feature of taking up multiple positions and fluid movement between these positions. Millie's art focuses on the Thirdspace characteristic of being 'in-between', which disrupts the artificial categories and stereotypes she finds restrictive. Finally, the connection between bodies and space within Thirdspaces is explained through Sonia's art which explores the assemblages and interfaces of bodies within space.

The purpose of this study is to demonstrate the transformative potential of art education to provide Thirdspaces for students to resist fixed ideas of identity and explore their multiple positions. Further, I argue that art education can be a productive space for migrant students to narrate their space journeys and feelings of displacement, but also to find new spaces to explore or create Thirdspaces that accommodate their varied lived experiences.

## **My research spaces**

The productiveness of including art in research has been highlighted by a number of researchers in a variety of fields including visual sociology and anthropology (Chaplin, 1994; Emmison & Smith, 2000; Prosser, 1998), art therapy (McNiff, 1998; Wadson, Durkin, & Perach, 1989), and methodologies such as arts-based research (McLaren, 2001; McNiff, 1998; Watrin, 1999). Therefore, as part of this research study, the art and visual journals created by senior students at three secondary schools in Queensland was collected during a one year period. This form of research data was collated as I felt it had the potential to provide a visual construction of the students' lived experiences, identity and social and cultural discourses. This is a view also supported by Albers (1999) who states that: "[t]hrough students' artworks, educators are more able to identify how students see their world" (p. 6).

In addition to students' art, visual journals were collected and analysed. The visual journal has a long tradition in the art context. As noted by Rice and McNeil (1990), the visual journal provides a space to record and "save what is thought, felt, discovered, or learned" and provides a space of "discovery, practice, dreaming [and] venting" (Rice & McNeil, p. 110). For many students in the study, the visual journal was a hypertext of their planning, profiles of artists, examples of art, analysis of art theory, movements and styles, experiments with materials, and notes combined with personal letters, concerns, jokes, questions, personal events and documents. For the purposes of this study, the visual journal provided a way for students to discuss the content of their art pieces, or what they were "about". In addition to providing a context for the students' art, it also reduced my influence in the "retelling" of their art.

Elsewhere I have discussed how students explored their subjectivity in art in transformative ways (Elsden-Clifton, 2005). However, in this article, I have specifically focused on three migrant students from my research cohort; as I wanted to tease out how art and visual journal texts presented an alternative forum or "voice", for students who may have been marginalised due to language difficulties. I also felt this research could provide a visual perspective of migrant students' understandings, histories and experiences in Australia that may have been previously "othered" or misunderstood in the schooling context.

The students involved in the study were in years Eleven and Twelve. Pseudonyms were used in this paper to protect their identities. In the Queensland school system, these students are usually sixteen to seventeen years old. The students in the study were working within the board registered Visual Arts Senior Syllabus (board registered art counts towards an Overall Position – a final school exit score – which has more of a theoretical focus than non-board registered art).

## Thirdspace

To analyse the connection between, space, subjectivities, schooling and students, I looked towards postmodern theories of space; in particular, the theories around the notions of Thirdspace proposed by Soja (1996) and Bhabha (1994). To provide a framework to analyse spatial issues, Soja proposes a triad of: Firstspace, Secondspace and Thirdspace. In this explanation, Firstspace refers to the material spaces whereas Secondspace encompasses mental spaces (Danaher, Danaher, & Moriarty, 2003). Thirdspace, then becomes a space where “*everything comes together*” (Soja, p. 56, original emphasis) by bringing together Firstspace and Secondspace, but also by extending beyond these spaces to intermesh: subjectivity and objectivity; abstract and concrete; real and imagined; knowable and unimaginable; structure and agency; mind and body; and consciousness and unconscious (Soja, pp. 56–57). In other words, Thirdspace provides a framework to transform or open up Firstspace and Secondspace understandings for the purpose of creating, imagining and enacting new social possibilities and alternatives to dominant spaces (Berquist, 2002, n.p.).

Soja’s notion of space is similar to Bhabha’s (1994) theories around space and cultural identity. Within Bhabha’s third space, subjectivities can create, transform or uptake different meanings of cultural symbols and signs. In doing so, there is the potential to resist cultural authority and challenge dominant conceptions of subjectivities as unified and fixed (Birr Moje et al., 2004). Bhabha’s third space becomes a site of the hybrid, translation and negotiations, where “newness enters the world” and has the potential to displace the “histories that constitute it, and sets up new structures of authority, new political initiatives, which are inadequately understood through received wisdom” (Bhabha, 1990, p. 221, cited in Usher, 2002, p. 49). This theoretical premise provided a productive framework for analysing students’ art. For instance, it evoked new kinds of questions: How does migrant students’ art create Thirdspaces that reveal contradictions and conflicts of cultural identity? How does students’ art seek to transgress boundaries and binary notions of identity? How does students’ art resonate with the Thirdspace characteristic of multiplicity? In what ways do migrant students explore spatial issues in their art? How does students’ art take up and play with crossover identities? How does the connection between bodies and space play out in Thirdspaces? What can educators learn from exploring the art of migrant students?

Using this methodology of space theory and the new lines of questioning, the art created by migrant students was analysed. Through the following discussion, I explore the students’ art and its resonance to Thirdspaces, focusing on the key concepts of multiplicity, hybrid identities and the negotiation of space and bodies.

## Ethan: Multiplicity

Ethan, a Pacific Islander, was a student in a Catholic metropolitan school who came to Australia for his high schooling. At his school there was a large population

of Islander students who were in a similar situation. The possibilities of Thirdspace to incorporate symbols that suggest interconnection and shift across cultural boundaries, resonate with Ethan's art (Usher, 2002). This is particularly evident, in Ethan's visual journal which illustrates his ability to shift, negotiate, and to be "in-between" (Brah, 1996, p. 204). For instance, in Ethan's visual journal, he negotiates the competing discourses that shape his subjectivity, including his cultural background, beliefs, emotions, youth culture, friends, family, religion and philosophy. This can be seen in the extracts from his visual journal below.

**Figure 1: Ethan: Visual journal**



This collection of images from Ethan's visual journal draws upon symbols from his Islander culture, mixed with his reactions to his world (such as his image of the Bali bombings), as well as exploring relationships with friends and peers, media and religion within which he move, configures and embodies. For instance, reading the images from left to right, top row first, there are images related to the:

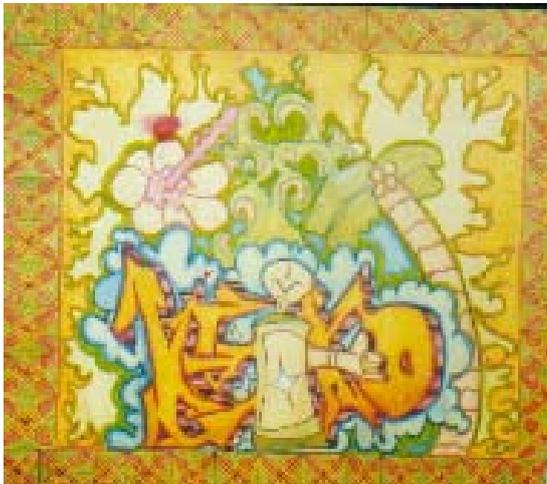
- Bali bombings
- stylised images of his homeland that combine his artistry in graffiti with memories of the island
- sexualised images of women
- youth popular culture such as the slang word "Prime" and famous singers and fashion
- photographs of other people's graffiti
- combinations of religious texts and photographs and;
- class exercises such as the drawing of flowers and vases.

Through this mix of images and texts, Ethan's visual journal becomes a Thirdspace as he moves among a number of symbols or voices.

Another significant feature of Ethan's embodiment of Thirdspaces is his use of graffiti. Best (2003, p. 828) suggests that youth use graffiti to propagate their values, moods, tensions, pleasures, fears and trends as "legitimate responses" to the dominant establishment. The ability to communicate these powerful emotions, pleasures and fears is reflected in Ethan's art. For instance, in the art piece below he uses graffiti to represent his connection with his Islander culture, his respect for his family, as well as his own interests. In this art piece, he explained that he placed

his mother's family name in the middle and surrounded it with Islander symbols including palm trees, hibiscus and his own symbols such as the spray can used in graffiti.

**Figure 2: Ethan: Painting**



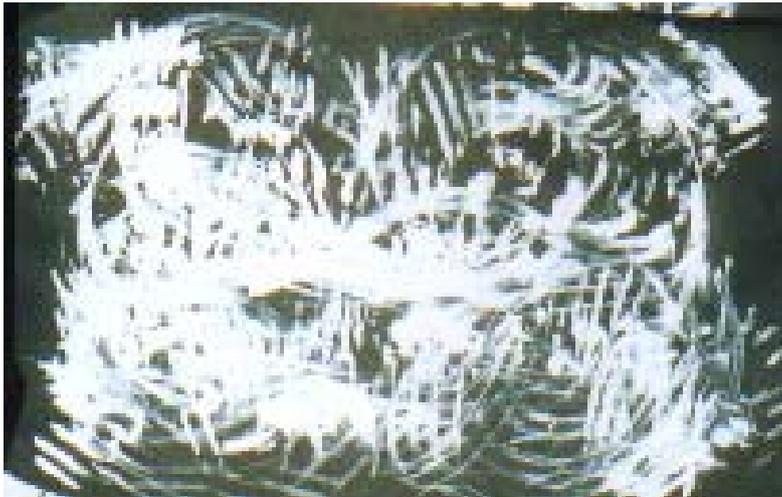
The use of graffiti in his art provides an expressive message or outlet for his adolescent voice, which has traditionally been denied or marginalised. In this Thirdspace there is the potential to “write back” (Best, 2003, p. 835) to society – which is a powerful tool for an immigrant from the Pacific Islands within Australian society.

Ethan's art and visual journal shows the multiple variations of his subjectivities and documents how this is shaped by complex discourses and institutions such as family, religion and culture that at times may be seen as contradictory. However, providing spaces for these internal contradictions, discontinuities, confusions and uncertainties need not be seen as a negativity (Braidotti, 1994). As seen in Ethan's visual journal and art, the advantage of the Thirdspace strategy is the possibility of choice in different situations and among different discourses (Braidotti).

## **Millie: “To dance on paper”**

Another student attending the same school as Ethan was Millie who had also migrated from the Pacific Islands. Millie's art provides insights into the processes involved in negotiating the differences and tensions of being between two cultures. A productive way of framing this discussion is through Bhabha's (1994) theory of space and the hybrid. Within Bhabha's explanation, he describes third spaces as hybrid spaces as they are “in-between”. For Bhabha, being “in-between” allows subjectivities to draw upon multiple discourses from their social and cultural worlds (p. 1). This is similar to Sakamoto's (1996) understanding of the hybrid, which is seen as having “a sense of difference and tension between two cultures, but without assuming hierarchy” (pp. 115–116). In other words, taking up hybrid/third spaces allows identities to be in-between, co-existing and constructing alternative identities. These qualities can be illustrated through an art piece created by Millie.

**Figure 3: Millie: Painting**



Millie explains the premise behind this art piece:

What inspired me for my final artwork was my love for Polynesian island dancing, and the meaning of it to my culture . . . In this artwork I performed a Samoan dance, called the Mauluulu . . . It involves the seē (sliding of the feet and the dance is mainly focused on the actions of the hands in co-ordination of the body). (Millie, Visual journal)

She also explained the processes she undertook to create this art piece:

In my portrait, I portray only the movement of the hands. This particular dance is performed to portray a story or meaning of the song. The actions of the hands expresses what is being said in the song. The main idea of this artwork was to dance on a piece of paper, standing upright. I started experimenting by using a large piece of white paper. I pinned the piece of paper to the wall just high enough, so my hands could move as if I was really performing . . . You could see actual movements of the hand, not a messy array of lines. Though, the black cardboard used was not big enough. I found that there was not enough room to move. The dance that I was doing needed more movement to be able to portray a story, so I experimented with larger paper. . . By painting the actions that is used in my dance (Mauluulu), I think I have portrayed my love for Polynesian dancing in keeping with my culture. (Millie, Visual journal)

Through this art piece and explanation, Millie uses the movement of her body to tell stories about her subjectivities, ethnicity and culture. Through this process, she creates a self-portrait which draws on the interweaving connections between bodies, movement, lived experiences, cultural meanings and the spaces she occupies. She also negotiates the web that constructs her two worlds; she becomes a hybrid or “cultural go-between” by which she mediates among different cultural expectations (Belsey, 2002, n.p.). This can be seen in the matrix she creates between her body, culture and Islander traditions, which she brings into Western spaces through her art and public performances of the dance such as the Goodwill Games in Brisbane (Millie, Visual journal). As Millie outlines in her visual journal, through her performances she gets: “a really good feeling as I know that they appreciate my talent and they get to experience a bit of my culture” (Millie, Visual journal).

In this art piece Millie creates a hybrid through integrating and combining two cultural perspectives, by bringing elements from her Islander traditions and blending them with Western culture. However, often for the hybrid body there is not “enough room to move” (Millie, Visual journal) within boundaries constructed by these cultural norms. Nevertheless, boundaries are not simply lines on a map or the edge of the paper; rather they can be encroached, and reallocated without leaving differences behind (Mohanram, 1999, p. 139). In creating this third space, Millie is able to present a self-portrait which draws upon her body that swirls around the page to celebrate her love for her traditional dance and her culture. To “dance on paper”, Millie was able to construct a “messy array of lines” (Millie, Visual journal) that highlights a third space which is constructed by a series of flows, energies, movements, and intensities between different spaces linked to her body and subjectivities (Grosz, 1994, p. 167).

## Sonia: Embodied homelands

As Millie’s art highlights, space has an intricate and complex relationship to bodies and subjectivities. This connection between bodies and space has been explored by a number of feminist theorists (Grosz, 1995; Mohanram, 1999). For instance, in *Space, time and perversion*, Elizabeth Grosz explores spatiality and the relationships between architecture and bodies. She argues that bodies are formed by the city spaces they inhabit and that bodies and cities define each other. Grosz’s argument is that the body is not given, fixed and determined but is a terrain where meaning and space are inscribed. This is practically significant for migrant students as the body contains the markers of ethnicity, which position the body’s “sense of personal identity, a sense of belonging to the normative group, or of being the other” (Mohanram, p. 200).

This theoretical position is interesting in the light of Sonia’s art and its connection to her Russian heritage. In particular, the ability for ethnicity to be written on and through the body can be seen in her visual journal sketches and art from a unit on wearable art. Sonia explains the ideas behind this art piece: “[t]he intent is to show that my background that will always stay with me even if I move to another country. This is shown by personal symbolism in my painting, for example, Onion dome church” (Sonia, Visual journal).

In her visual journal, Sonia explores her own personal symbolism of Russian structures and architecture to explore her cultural and national identity.

**Figure 4: Sonia: Visual journal**



Inspired by the connection between her identity and these architectural structures, she transforms the shapes and designs, and reforms them into something that could be worn, inscribed or embodied.

**Figure 5: Sonia: Visual journal**



Through her visual journal Sonia highlights how the body is coded not only racially, culturally, sexually and socially but also nationally (Mohanram, 1999). She embodies her national identity through entwining her body with its famous architecture, which carries on, and through, her body. The isomorphism between body and nation becomes an assemblage in which the features and “characteristics of one are also reflected in the other” (Grosz, 1995, p. 105). This can also be read into the reasoning behind her art, as Sonia explains:

... it represents the closest love for my country and culture that hasn't been forgotten. This feeling will always be with me for the rest of my life. (Sonia, Visual journal)

In Merlau-Ponty's system of discourses of nationalism he suggests that feelings of patriotism, fondness for one's country and the love of a familiar landscape (which this student describes above) all go beyond an emotion; they are also utilised and taken up by the body (cited in Mohanram, 1999). Sonia's art resonates with this view as it highlights that bodies and subjects have a close relationship with the landscape and space that surrounds them or gives them meaning – in this case the buildings that symbolise Russia. This connection may be explained by reference to Mohanram, who outlined that a subject's relationship with landscape or architecture “shapes their bodies and their perceptions, forms their knowledge and informs their sense of aesthetics” (p. xii). Such a perspective suggests that spaces and landscapes are not given but play an active part in identity formation (Mohanram, p. xii).

This theoretical premise resonates with Sonia's sketches from her visual journal as the links between bodies, architecture and national identity form an interface, or assemblage in which the body was able to shrink or expand to take on part of the outside world into itself (Schilder, 1978, cited in Grosz, 1994, p. 80). From this understanding, Sonia's visual journal illustrates how the city and the spaces it occupies, (as expressed through its particular geographical and architectural arrangements), is an active force in the construction of body and leaves its traces on the Thirdspaces she creates (Grosz, 1995, p. 110).

## Implications

In this article, I presented the art of three migrant students who used art as a forum to engage with Thirdspaces. For educators, this article demonstrates how students can use art to negotiate their lived experiences and feelings, and to negotiate being connected to, and “in-between” different countries, cultures and spaces. Instead of closing this work with a traditional conclusion that revisits, and suggest specific recommendations or strategies, inspired by Bhabha, I would like to use this concluding space as a place where “newness enters the world” (Bhabha, 1990, p. 221 cited in Usher, 2002, p. 49). Therefore, I would like to end this paper by opening up my own Thirdspace by posing questions, creating new dialogues and challenging what is “known” by this research.

Though adopting space theory and analysing the art of migrant students, this study highlights the possibilities of using art education to learn about students. Further, this study emphasised how art can be an appropriate and empowering space for migrant students to engage with identify formation and related space issues. However, it also leads to the questions: In what other ways can migrant students document their space journeys in schools? And what do we not know (or not ask) about migrant students’ experiences of education?

This research also highlighted the potential of creating opportunities for Thirdspaces in education to transgress underlying biases, values and stereotypes. However, it is also important to support this process by asking: what are some of the risks and benefits for students in engaging with Thirdspaces and breaking barriers? And how can educators scaffold students to take up Thirdspace as a tool of transgression? In a quest to introduce “newness” to my research I feel it is also important to examine what new questions does this research create? In particular: what else can art teach us? Are there alternative ways to engage with a student’s space negotiation? And how can space theory be used to open up other curriculum areas and classroom spaces?

This study, and the questions it evokes, suggests alternative ways in which to research educational spaces, and in doing so, to challenges these spaces. The advantage of this approach can be seen through the art and visual journals of Ethan, Millie and Sonia, who through challenging spaces were able to create Thirdspaces, which transform, value difference, and provide a voice to those who are traditionally “othered”.

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