
**AT THE BORDERS OF OTHERNESS -
A DECOLONISING
TRANSLOCATIONAL
POSITIONALITY APPROACH TO
DIFFERENCE: RELEASING KUWAITI
ONLINE VOICES**



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Introduction

A universal vision of difference and otherness rests on a binary logic which plays down the complexity and dynamics of differentiation. It posits difference in opposition to sameness in a hierarchical relationship where difference is excluded. To ‘contain’ difference in a binary structure is to prevent other forms of understandings to emerge. Hence, difference is seen to lag behind a norm (Burman, 2004). This binary structure evades the complexity of real-life situations and experiences, and also collapses all forms of difference reaffirming sameness. Online environments, for example, are invaded by claims such as “There is no race. There are no genders.

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There is no age. There are no infirmities”, positing difference as a ‘bad’ thing while creating a ‘free floating disengaged identity’ (Gunkel, 1998, p. 111). The popularised ‘electronic global village’ also rests on a narrative that presents “cyberculture as culturally neutral and equally approachable by all peoples” (Zembylas & Vrasidas, 2005, p. 66). Such claims erase differences and are seen as forms of colonialism, therefore the notion that the internet is neutral is challenged (Ess, 2002; Martinez, Marlow, & Martin, 2017; Sumner, 2000). Online or offline, difference seems to be the unwanted ‘other’.

Although difference is central for feminism and critical work, it remains one of the most complex and unresolved issues (Flintoff, Fitzgerald & Scraton 2008). Such is the case within education, educational practice and institutions where debates around difference are equally complex and lacking. These debates aim to focus on how to best theorise difference, and what implications emerge for better practice on an institutional and classroom level (Grande, 2003). They also aim to “destabilize the dominating, exclusionary, ethnocentric, elitist, and power-laden discourses and practices” related to difference (O’Reilly, 2012, p. 3). Thus, this paper is meant to contribute to ongoing debates around difference and power. It also attempts to extend the discussion beyond Western borders to a Kuwaiti context

where such discussions are absent. This is particularly important for (Kuwaiti) people, especially women, of different/mixed cultural background and ethnicity, because how difference is understood plays an important role, for example in experiences of inclusion and exclusion (being part of the social fabric), allocation of resources, personal advancement and rights (Fathi, 2017; & Saucedo, 2014). It is also important in the field of Educational technology in general and instructional design in particular. This study helps instructional designers think of designing better virtual environments and find means of supporting individuals interacting virtually.

Well established as “a study of multiple, co-constituted differences”, I take intersectionality as my main approach to explore the notion of difference and processes of differentiation in an online Kuwaiti context (Dhamoon, 2011, p. 230). Intending to analyse difference and the complex dynamics of power, I ask this question: How can we understand online difference and the specificities of experience without reducing them? I posit these sub-questions to guide my study: how does power operate in the online context? What effects does it have on the dynamics of the online interaction? How do the interactive processes of power and power-relation affect difference and subject formation?

Following this introduction, I briefly present the feminist argument surrounding difference. I then discuss Anthias' intersectionality, which she refers to as 'translocational positionality' (TP), as an approach to explore difference. In this paper these two terms are used interchangeably. Subsequently, I present Braidotti's (2010) 'reactive repetitions' to make sense of the Kuwaiti online text, followed by Dhamoon's (2011) 'matrix of meaning-making' which enlightens the analysis of the online experience. I end the paper with a brief conclusion.

Locating difference: in search of identity – a struggle

Struggles concerning social justice, equality and recognition have been at the forefront of the feminist project. In their quest to voice women's oppression, many feminists perceive gender as the primary cause for women's devaluation and exploitation. For them gender is a necessary polarity between women and men. Some contemporary (and early feminist writing) accentuates gender difference, in order to understand the nature of men and women undermining more pressing social and economic issues affecting women's lives. Women (unlike men) are presented as naturally caring

and maternal (Humm, 2003), hence reflecting “a neutral asymmetry” and obscuring domination (Gordon, 1988, p. 26).

Mainstream feminist scholarship also emphasises equal rights and equal access to male privilege, but at the same time celebrates women’s uniqueness and superior qualities. The significance attributed to gender difference is that it groups women in one undifferentiated mass, and gender difference becomes the primary factor for women’s subordination and struggle. And ‘sameness’ becomes the uniting element. Women’s group is seen as opposite to men’s group. (Other) Women’s (and by implication other men’s) lives and struggles are therefore simplified and thus a Universal women’s experience/image is created (Mohanty, 1988 & 2003).

Questions are raised concerning this universal image. They expose the fixed identity beneath such a monolithic image, and also explore other structural differences, such as race and class, that shape women’s lives. For example, questions such as: ‘whose experience is considered?’, and ‘whose identity is constructed?’ seem to be valid questions aimed to unearth this timeless image. For some feminist critics, identity is not fixed nor static, it is always in process; negotiated and constantly reconstructed leading to a fragmented identity (Weiler, 1991). For Orner (2013) uncertainty of self and

others is hallmark as “we can never really know ourselves or others in any definitive way” (p. 84). In fact, the ‘never certain identity’ prompted strong reactions and was seen as a “serious threat to everything that is connected, that is interactive and whole” (Klein, 1991, p. 83). Drawing attention to the social construction of subjectivity and emphasising the ‘unstable’ nature of the ‘self’ prompted “calls for a recognition of the positionality of each person in any discussion of what can be known from the experience” (Weiler, 1991, p. 467).

Further, gender is seen to be unproblematically applied across cultures and histories (Calas & Smircich, 2003). The slogan ‘the personal is political’, which is at the heart of feminism, and the universality of being a woman, is criticised by Black and Third World feminists (Hooks, 1989). In such writing, third world women were projected as objects of oppression. Attention is drawn to other differences such as race, class, and ethnicity. In fact, Western White feminists are seen to be trapped in a consciousness of ‘specialness’; a fixed identity - unable to question the status quo when faced with women from other cultures and races (Lazreg, 2012). Identity is seen to be located in the material world, and women individuals are seen as subjects of their own complex lives and struggles (Brah, 1991).

Yet debates around models of connecting the different categories of difference seem to be formulated around a reductionist model, where gender and race inequalities were determined by class. Other debates concern an additive mechanistic model where differences are treated as separate but experienced concurrently (Anthias, 2008). This has led some feminists to recognise a multilayered identity that women occupy in other categories of difference and location (Anthias, 2002). But an additive model of difference is a linear model which, some argue, does not reflect the complexity of women's experiences (Braidotti, 2010). Further, underneath all arguments related to difference seems to lie a binary logic of 'self-other' opposition. This oppositional model reduces difference to prohibition while celebrates a "dominant image of thought and representation of the subject" (p. 409) Feminist critics argue against this binary system (Mishra, 2013; Mohanty, 1988). Instead, they assert the importance of situating individuals socially, culturally, geographically, and historically.

Therefore the question remains: how can we understand difference and the specificities of experience without reducing them? I turn to Floya Anthias' work on intersectionality/TP for aid.

Locations and translocations: difference through a TP lens

Floya Anthias presents a theoretical intersectional framing she refers to as ‘translocational positionality/(TP)’. Her discussion on difference draws on the notions of identity and belonging. Seeing identity as a ‘slippery concept’ that is over used, Anthias (2008) is critical of the tendency to treat the concept as a possessive attribute of individuals or groups rather than a process. Considering identity as a social process means that spatial and contextual aspects are recognised (Anthias, 2006). Therefore, Anthias (2008) approaches identity through discussing the symbiotically related term of belonging. While identity involves narratives of self and other, and the related strategies and identifications, belonging is about experiences, emotions, social bonds, and “social places constructed by such identification and memberships” (Anthias, 2006, p. 21). It is also tied to experiences and practices of social inclusion and exclusion through which “a sense of a stake and acceptance in a society is created and maintained” (Anthias, 2011, p. 209). Hence, belonging is found in notions of exclusion, inclusion, access and participation, and ties to a focus on place, context and location (Anthias, 2008).

Furthermore, belonging and identity raise questions about a number of issues related to difference, most importantly the

boundaries of difference and the differences that count (Anthias, 2016). Boundaries are forms of political practice and they are never fixed. The construction of boundaries (for example gender difference) tend to homogenise those within and disregard other differences (such as racial, ethnic, and class). The constructed rather than the fixed nature of boundaries means that different markers may be used to define boundaries at different times and contexts and in terms of, for example, culture, place or religion (Anthias, 2008). Boundaries of identities and exclusion are complex and interweaving; “identities always cross-cut each other, and people simultaneously hold different ones and belong therefore to different categorisations depending on context, situation and meaning” (Anthias, 2006, p. 22). The positions we occupy in a range of those categories of difference such as gender, race and ethnicity, and their intersections is referred to as intersectionality.

Anthias (2006) stresses that intersectionality needs to be seen as a process. Hence, she defines intersectionality as “a social process related to practices and arrangements, leading to particular forms of positionality for social actors” (Anthias, 2006, p. 27). An intersectional approach accentuates how the different social divisions inter-relate, affect people’s lives, and produce social relations.

Intersectionality is not an additive model, it views each division as constituted through an intersection with others, thus stressing the complexity of subject-identity and the related issues of the social context (Anthias, 2016).

Anthias (2011) raises concerns in terms of the range of situational elements that could be encapsulated by social divisions and their intersections. She emphasises that complex social relations cannot be reduced to the working of intersections. Ethnicity, gender, race and class, for example, involve processes and practices of domination and subordination, political strategies, hierarchical relations, power-relations and struggles. These are experienced in “contextual and combinatory ways” (Anthias, 2011, p. 213). In accordance, Anthias (2011) introduces TP concept “which tries to integrate notions of social structure and the formation of identities and collectives” (p. 213). Her argument revolves around replacing the focus on identity for understanding difference and social divisions with a focus on processes of social location and positionality (Anthias, 2002). In other words, where individuals are placed, how they position themselves in time and space, and in relation to those places of social hierarchy, becomes significant.

Recognizing the different boundaries of location situates the individual in the translocational sphere. Location and translocation accentuate the importance of context, the situated nature of attributions and the complex and shifting settings (Anthias, 2002). Positionality combines a reference to social positions as a set of social effects and outcomes, and social positioning as a set of practices and as a process, i.e., the space at the intersection of structure and agency (Anthias, 2008). Therefore, difference, identity and belonging are seen as processes and not fixed possessive features and essentialised categorisation. In addition, identities are thought of as relational to locations both situationally and in terms of intersections of gender, class, ethnicity and other boundaries of difference (Anthias, 2006).

In short, Anthias' TP problematises claims of fixed identity, belonging and difference, stressing the complexity of forms of otherness. Hence, processes of identification are complex and dynamic. There are differences of location and positionality based on gender, class, ethnicity and other attributions that are context-related and intersect in ways that are not fixed. At the core of Anthias' argument is a shift from an identity focus, to looking at processes of social location and positionality in order to understand issues of difference and divisions.

In the light of intersectionality, the question is: how can we understand online difference and the specificities of the Kuwaiti online experience without reducing them?

Moving forward: researching online voices of otherness

Based on the argument above, there are a number of points to consider when approaching the Kuwaiti online context. First, TP research serves to capture different levels of differentiation such as experiential and organisational (Anthias, 2011). An analysis of these different levels reflects the complexity of subject formation and power, and accentuates that interactions occur in different ways and sites (Dhamoon, 2011). Second, divisions are emergent and not imposed, thus, it is important to find what is operational within the context we are looking at (Cheney, Montás & Lincoln, 2016). Third and most important, we all live our lives intersectionally and operate in terms of hierarchies and boundaries. Hence, we are all involved in the making of social locations and difference, and the effects they produce (Dhamoon, 2011). With these in mind I approach my Kuwaiti story.

On April 23rd, 2015, the local Kuwaiti newspapers publicised news concerning the Public Authority of Applied Education and Training (PAAET). One popular newspaper headline read: ‘PAAET

General Director (GD) imposes firm sanctions to restore hope' (Alwatan, 2015). The article explained GD's decision to rearrange his five deputy directors among their different posts. Many perceived this as a message to demote Deputy Directors (DD) and force them to leave, (Ajial, 2015). The online forum of this particular newspaper sparked a heated online reaction from people who identified themselves as PAAET personnel and staff members, men and women, of the different colleges and institutions. Therefore, this online communication is one-sided. For the purpose of this paper, the online text related to the Applied Education sector (where my college and four other colleges belong) was selected, translated to English and used in this story. I present this narrative from my own perspective, using participants' words, hence the analysis is limited to the online text.

To make sense of the Kuwaiti online textual interaction, I implemented Braidotti's (2010) 'reactive repetitions', which she explains as a "retelling, reconfiguring and revisiting the concept, phenomenon, event or location from different angles" (p. 412). This means abandoning linearity and implementing a process-oriented approach to text; an active process of becoming, as she claims. It is also a "creative mimesis, not static repetition" (p. 412). The intention

is to render the more striking forces of any given text “so as to account for what a text can do, what it has done, how it has impacted upon one” (p. 415). Accordingly, the textual online pieces were seen as building blocks that required creative interconnections by a ‘mix and match’ tactic, which Braidotti (2010) refers to as “nomadic transpositions” achieved through “selection, combination and recomposition” (p. 415). At first glance, the shared online textual units appear fragmented and random, but when interconnected, they seem to construct an image of an important/powerful individual in the organisation, the Deputy Director of Applied Education and Research (DDAER), I call her ‘Aisha’, the name is pseudonym.

A story with multiple faces

This story is about Aisha, a female academic professor, who previously headed her department for four years and was appointed the dean of her college for another four years, before taking the position of DDAER. There are almost 3600 doctorate staff members at PAAET (PAAET, 2018), with less than a third being female staff members. Aisha represents highly educated, hardworking Kuwaiti women academics in the applied education sector of PAAET. As DDAER, Aisha was at the top of the pyramid and had control over all matters and decisions concerning applied education and the research

division within PAAET. Her online image was assembled by seemingly ‘oppressed’ voices. Aisha was described as a ‘dictator’ and a ‘tyrant’; a person who had ‘suffocated the entire educational and research divisions’, ‘preventing autonomy’ and ‘enforcing her own views’. A ‘controlling’ DD who ‘disapproved nominated representatives of the colleges’, ‘meddled with colleges’ affairs’, ‘postponed their programmes’, and ‘obstructed deans’ selection processes’. Aisha oppressed both men and women beneath her; she ‘refused to meet teaching staff members with grievances or would give appointments months away’.

‘Secluded in her ivory tower’, Aisha seemed disengaged from her responsibilities as DDAER: ‘colleges and departments with temporary deans and head departments’, ‘admissions of large numbers of students, overcrowded classrooms, dearth of facilities and manpower to accommodate the surge of the intake’ and those ‘facilities that existed were in atrocious conditions’, ‘tight grip on budget’, ‘incidents of research plagiarism among staff members’, are but examples of a ‘corrupt system with no hope for advancement’. Such issues rose as a result of ‘a governance that implemented its rules and sanctions unfairly and inconsistently’ and ‘was surrounded by entourage and spies’.

The existing system embodied by Aisha and her supporters seem to stand firm against those with dissenting voices. Therefore, ‘demotion to restore hope meant replacing one loyal individual with another’. At the same time, Aisha ‘remained DD in the new post she was relocated to’, in a vicious cycle of ‘repetitiveness’. ‘Standards such as hard work and sincerity are not applied’. ‘People who fearlessly expressed their opinions faced repercussions’. And ‘at present whoever differs is punished and silenced’. The silencing of others was applied in different forms: they were ‘robbed of their rightful earnings’, ‘denied allocated resources’, ‘prohibited from chances of advancement’, and ‘subjected to false and coerced investigative and disciplinary committees’. Aisha ‘prevailed in her oppressiveness because GD obviously and blindly signed-off authorisation after authorisation - a partner in her tyranny’. In effect, ‘firm sanctions, are a joke and an orchestrated move, to keep the system fixed and unchanged’.

A matrix of meaning-making

Within systems of power such as colonialism and patriarchy, certain divisions/categories are privileged and some are marginalised (Fathi, 2017). These historically constituted systems of domination are based on a binary logic which excludes difference and at the same

time postulates sameness (Braidotti, 2018). To understand what is operating within the Kuwaiti context, I implement the ‘matrix of meaning-making’ view to the online narrative (Dhamoon, 2011). In this approach: “The focus of analysis is...the very interactive processes and structures in which meanings of privilege and penalty are produced, reproduced, and resisted in contingent and relational ways” (Dhamoon, 2011, p. 238). The matrix reflects the shifting fusions of multilayered and relational differences where the boundaries between differences and divisions are not clearly defined. In my opinion, it exemplifies Anthias’ argument of TP and how social divisions are constituted through an intersection with each other; “classes are always gendered and racialized and gender is always classed and racialized and so on” (Anthias, 2008, p. 13).

Kuwaiti educational organisations are colonial and patriarchal systems. PAAET, a government higher educational organisation, is hierarchical and senior posts are male dominated (PAAET, 2018). In fact, Aisha is the first female academic to elevate to DDAER in spite of the norm. In this unique online narrative, participants use the online text to construct (and attack) Aisha’s dominant image, a dictator and a tyrant, as they experienced events in their daily lives. They use the online text to their advantage revealing *selected* pieces (of

information) which represent ‘Other’ as a dominant oppressor. By the same token, these pieces of online text seem to reassert their subordination as ‘other’. Although their view might be premised on a binary logic of oppressed-oppressor, a TP lens reveals a different reading of power dynamics and relations.

At their specific intersection, online participants (men and women) seem to occupy contradictory positions of marginalisation and dominance at the same time and within the same place and location. And at that precise intersection, where participants assert their subordination, they also reveal their dominant positioning. Participants engage in a process of selecting specific textual pieces to share. This selection does not involve spontaneity “but rather a careful dosage of forces” (Braidotti, 2010, p. 415). The online textual pieces are purposefully used, therefore the practice is political and engraved in power-relations (Mohanty, 1988). As such, participants are dominant and have control over the online narrative. The textual selection is also an affirmation of participants’ voice; publicised and made known. Although Aisha might be silent by choice or silenced by participants’ voice, she is invisible and disadvantaged. As a result, Aisha who is seen as a dominant ‘tyrant’ is concurrently marginalised. In reasserting their voice, participants implicate themselves in the

conditions that unevenly structure the lives of others - in this case Aisha (Dhamoon, 2011). They also participate in the production and organisation of unequal power-relations. As such, participants' translocational positionalities reveal the complexity of the system of power and the multiplicity of boundaries. Domination and subordination positionings alternate, they are not hierarchically structured with respect to each other, rather they appear to be dynamically fused taking place within the same time and same place. Subsequently, both Aisha and the online participants are not fixed in one subject position nor form.

Similarly, viewing the shared online text through a TP lens reveals how participants construct power-relation at 'privileged' positions as well. While Aisha appears dominant to her superior GD who 'obliviously and blindly' concurred her decisions, these decisions were ineffective without his authorisation. At her specific intersection, as a highly educated experienced academic woman and DD, Aisha alternates positions of dominance and subordination at the same time and within the same place and location. Equally, although the GD was able to remove Aisha from her post, he was unable to force her to leave and she remained DD, albeit in a different division. At his specific intersection, within his specific boundaries of education,

gender, post and so on, GD also alternates positions of dominance and subordination concurrently. Therefore, privileged and penalizing subject positions seem to exist simultaneously (at privileged locations) adding more complexity to power dynamics and relations and subject formation. ‘Privileged’ subjects alternate dominant and subordinate positions; they do not seem to be fixed in one position or form.

Moreover, the Kuwaiti online participants seem to be aware of the politics of the system they are embedded in. They appear conscious of the processes and politics of inclusion and exclusion, and accordingly of penalty and privilege. They do not submit and appear to resist. For example, in this virtual environment, participants use the online text to their gain and to expose malpractice of the privileged, their circle of entitlements, and who is included/excluded in/from that circle. In essence, the online text appears to be tactically used as a resistance tool, and the online environment appears not to be neutral but a terrain of struggle.

Finally, participants seem to use certain descriptions throughout the online text that portray Aisha’s identity as ‘dominant’ out of context and time; she is no longer seen as a real material subject, and consequently other faces of her identity such as ‘woman’, ‘academic’, highly educated and ‘professor’ are erased. At the same

time, participants seem to present themselves as marginalised, penalised, and ‘other’, reasserting one side of their identity, which obliterates other facets; they are no longer men and women, academics and employees, and so on. In ‘the race to innocence’, participants use the online text to emphasise their own marginality and fail to question their complicity in practicing ‘otherness’ (Fellows & Razack, 1998). The intersectionality approach used in this study reveals that participants seem to be active and involved in the “making of difference”, though in different degrees (Dhamoon, 2011, p. 235).

Conclusion

The aim of this study is to explore another understanding of difference; a liberating and decolonising understanding that defies the norm of a hierarchical binary structure. Thus, an intersectional approach to research is adopted in search for an answer to this question: How can we understand online difference and the specificities of experience without reducing them? This investigation is carried out in a Kuwaiti online context in order to understand the dynamics of difference and the process of differentiation. I analysed the textual narrative concentrating on processes and systems of power and power-relations. Kuwaiti subjects of the online story are all involved in the production of subjectivities in differing degrees and in

a dynamic complex interaction. They appear to occupy multiple locations and are positioned in multiple and contradictory ways where penalty and privilege intersect.

To understand difference with a TP/intersectionality lens is liberating and powerful. It dismantles the reductive universal vision of difference and provides an understanding of a complex, dynamic and multiple difference, power, and subject formation. One of the most important impressions I take from this study is that everybody seems to be in movement, not in fixity, and we all seem to live in fluidity and fusion. This understanding is vital as it creates the conditions for new possibilities and new change for people, especially of different/mixed cultures and ethnicity. Most importantly it challenges current practices of inclusion and exclusion, allocation of resources, people's advancement and rights and so on. To view learners, tutors and senior educators in movement is challenging and worth investigating further.

Last, this research is based on my interpretation, and thus carries with it my partial view; but it can be enriched by incorporating interviews to include participants' experiences and their interpretations of those experiences. It can also be improved by interviewing people at senior positions such as GD and his DD. Further in-depth studies are needed in this area to open up debates

around difference in the educational setting on an organisational level as well as an individual experiential level.

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