Examining the Politics of Representation in Language and Gender Research

Workshop Session 2: 3:15-3:45PM
Facilitator: Lanita Jacobs-Huey
Getting to Know One Another

♦ Who we are?
♦ Where are we from (institution)?
♦ How do our research interests relate to language and gender?
Workshop Agenda/Goals

♦ What does the “politics of representation” entail?
♦ What specific cases – our own or others – are relevant?
♦ How might these issues inform our individual research and collective scholarship on language and gender?
A Few Givens

♦ As ethnographers/researchers, we have all grappled with these dilemmas in one way or another
♦ We likewise have pertinent insights to share
♦ Understanding some of the political dimensions of representation is KEY to a broader understanding of how language and gender are perceived and realized – in essence, understood – in our interdisciplinary studies
What is meant by the “politics of representation”? 

- Politics of Gendered Identities
  - Language and Gender as Place Markers
- Representational Failures or Mishaps
- Dilemmas of Translation
The Politics of Gendered Identity

- The politics of researcher positionality or how we position ourselves and are positioned by others in the field.
- Positionality is Dynamic and Dialogical
  We strategically position ourselves as researchers, even as we are positioned by others (e.g., research participants) in “the field”; our positioning changes within and across our research engagements
- Research is intersubjective in this way
Language & Gender as Place Markers

- Our own speech varieties can situate or locate us in the field
  - “Skinfolk not Kinfolk” (Williams)

- Similarly, our gender can situate us into particular roles
  - Dutiful and Prodigal Daughters (Abu-Lughod, Kondo)
  - Honored Guest (Ochs – personal communication)

- Language and gender can constitute, constrain, abet, or otherwise impact the kinds of research engagements and insights afforded to us and our research participants
Representational Failures or Mishaps

♦ Linda Williamson Nelson (Hands in the Chit'lin's: Notes on Native Anthropological Research Among African American Women)
  - Nelson: It’s nice back here.
  - Mrs. Jones: What do you *mean* by `back here`?

♦ Nelson is demoted from “friend” to “teacher friend” in Mrs. Jones’ future introductions

♦ Nelson risks being associated with the cultural category of “educated fool”
Dilemmas of Translation

♦ Ruth Behar
   – *Crossing the Border with Esperanza's Story*
   – *Writing in My Father's Name: A Diary of Translated Woman's First Year*

♦ An unenthusiastic reception by valuable informants expose the power differentials that exist between the researcher and the researched
From the Kitchen to the Parlor

♦ Six-year, multi-sited study
♦ Explored women’s talk in beauty salons, hair seminars, cosmetology schools, bible study meetings, and other hair locales
♦ Issues of representation often at heart of my observations and discoveries
Representing Black Women’s Language, Hair, and Identity

- Negotiating Legitimacy as a “Native” Scholar
- The Politics of Questions/Refusals to Speak
- Dilemmas of translation
Representing Black Women’s Language, Hair, and Identity

- **Negotiating Legitimacy as a “Native” Scholar**
- The Politics of Questions/Refusals to Speak
- Dilemmas of translation
My status as an “insider” was seldom, if ever, a given (Jacobs-Huey 2002)

Ongoing negotiation of identity and racial “authenticity”
- Cultural discourse styles (e.g., indirectness, signifying)
- Research participants act as “mediators” (e.g., “She’s not from here”)

Resisting particular positionings, while embracing others
- “Did your daddy buy that camera for you?”
- “My mom is a hairstylist.”
Representing Black Women’s Language, Hair, and Identity

♦ Negotiating Legitimacy as a “Native” Scholar
♦ The Politics of Questions/Refusals to Speak
♦ Dilemmas of translation
Hair/Identity Wars in Cyberspace

- Language constructs ethnic identity and hair care knowledge in spite of cyberspace curtain
- Black hair terms and (reported) lived experiences legitimate speakers’ “right to speak”
- Those lacking cultural and linguistic hair knowledge and experience are eventually silenced
  - White women, Black men (see Transcript 1 and 2)
Hair/Identity Wars in Cyberspace

♦ Origins of the hair debate?
♦ “BTW, how do you wear your hair?”
♦ Njeri’s question exploits indirectness as a means of assessing my racial identity and presumed racial authenticity vis-à-vis my hairstyle
Hair/Identity Wars in Cyberspace
Representing Black Women’s Language, Hair, and Identity

- Negotiating Legitimacy as a “Native” Scholar
- The Politics of Questions/Refusals to Speak
- Dilemmas of translation (in the field)
Representational Mishaps: Linguistic Breaches in the Field

♦ Lanita: Excuse me Ms. Smith, how much is a wash and set?

♦ Ms. Smith: Do you mean shampoo? Because you wash dogs not hair.
Insights from the Breach

♦ Language a means of constructing expert identity (Transcript 3)
♦ Professional talk as a means of socializing novices into proper discourse knowledge and roles
Client: Hi, I want to get something for this bad hair day heh heh

Ms. Smith: What do you want?

Client: A perm

Ms. Smith: A relaxer?

Client: A relaxer

Ms. Smith: Okay, that will be $20
Client: Hi, I want to get something for this bad hair day heh heh

Ms. Smith: What do you want?

Client: A perm

Ms. Smith: A relaxer?

Client: A relaxer

Ms. Smith: Okay, that will be $20

Ms. Smith’s rising intonation marks her reply as a question; an explicit repair
Client-Stylist Negotiation at TCI

**Client:** Hi, I want to get something for this bad hair day heh heh

**Ms. Smith:** What do you want?

**Client:** A perm

**Ms. Smith:** A relaxer?

**Client:** A relaxer

**Ms. Smith:** Okay, that will be $20

Ms. Smith’s rising intonation marks reply as question, more poignantly a repair.

Only when client provides “right” answer is her request legitimized before all.
The Work of Correction

♦ Linguistic means of displaying expertise and socializing novices
  – Ms. Smith’s correction establishes her expertise as a stylist/teacher
  – Ms. Smith’s repair also socializes the client to respect her knowledge and use “proper” salon communication when making a hairstyle request

♦ The client’s subsequent visit proves this socialization to be a “success”
Representing Black Women’s Language, Hair, and Identity

♦ Negotiating Legitimacy as a “Native” Scholar
♦ The Politics of Questions/Refusals to Speak
♦ Dilemmas of translation (beyond the field)
Dilemmas of Translation

♦ “Who will see this?”/“What do they say about us?”
  – Airing dirty laundry

♦ “I am NOT a hairdresser!”
  – Calling my mother out of her name (the ultimate breach)

♦ “I wouldn’t call it a performance.”
  – Multiple audiences/Disparate expectations
Dilemmas of Translation

♦ “… like a beautifully wrapped package with nothing inside.”
  – The politics of accountability

♦ “GEECHIE BACK – I sound a mess!”
  – Vulnerable subjects (AAVE Speakers, Women)
How does one reconcile such representational dilemmas and to what end?
Writing *From the Kitchen to the Parlor*

- Like Combing My Hair with a Fine-Toothed Comb
- Representational Dilemmas in the Academy
- Deciding on the story
Towards an Appreciation of Multiple Scenes in L&G Studies

♦ What the workshop’s abstract refers to as “behind the scenes” engagements might best reframed as the “multiple scenes” that constitute our research

♦ Critical reflexivity can be a resource for assessing the intersubjective realities that frame our research from start to finish

♦ A holistic account can expose power differentials and assumptions underlying language and gender research, a field born of and still largely informed by feminist sensibilities
Towards an Appreciation of Multiple Scenes in L&G Studies

- Can help us better distill the essence of how we view and interpret language and gender as concrete/biological terms and fluid/dynamic constructions

- Delineating how language and gender are constituted in our research and the extent to which they impact researcher and/or subject (re)positionings, relationships of power, dilemmas of translation is a valuable theoretical and methodological exercise
Group Discussion
Broad Questions

♦ What do we make of these examples and conclusions?
♦ How do they compare or contrast with your own experiences and perceptions?
♦ What other factors are worth considering?
Specific Discussion Points

♦ Positionality in the Field

– How does our language and/or gender impact our access to research participants, participation in their everyday lives and talk, and broader queries about language and gender?
– How have language and/or gender, in particular, impacted our attempts to negotiate legitimacy in our research?
– How can these reflections inform the way we practice and/or theorize language and gender research?
Specific Discussion Points

♦ **Failures in the Field**
  - To what extent have we experienced “failures” or representational mishaps in our research?
  - How are issues of power, positionality, and accountability implicated in our queries about L&G, as well as our research participants’ responses (or “refusals to speak”)?
  - To what extent do our “ways of asking” and interpreting shape the way we perceive language and gender and the manner in which they are realized in regard to our own or others positioning in the field?
Specific Discussion Points

♦ Dilemmas of Translation

– How do the politics of translation and accountability figure in our attempts to write about language and gender? How do our writings impact the communities we study?

– How might our own confrontations with the politics of translation shed light on how language and gender are perceived and realized in actual scholarly practice and individual and collective lived experience?

– How can we reconcile the intersubjective realities of our research in our scholarship? What might be gained or loss from such an exercise?
Stop for Discussion
Final Remarks

♦ Embracing critical reflexivity in our research can expose the underlying rationales and intersubjective engagements upon which our theories are necessarily based

♦ Promotes a greater awareness of how we come to know and understand language and gender

♦ Promises to yield deeper theoretical and methodological insights into the ways language and gender are perceived and realized in and beyond our respective fields