As an international person, every time I fill out any official form, I am reminded of my status: an alien. Studying and teaching in a foreign country as an alien, I position myself in “a third space” (Wang, 2004) which embraces contradictions, ambiguity, and “aporia” (Derrida, 1993) to address the complicated issue of identity across the conflicting doubles of culture and gender so that new subjectivities can be generated. If cacophony in the curriculum field (Marshall, et al., 2000), I would argue, is not leading to fragmented disarray but moving towards a shifting realm in which imagination and inspiration can be sparked, can we gesture towards conflicting directions to cultivate the birth of new theories and perspectives? Being an alien in terms of curriculum identities and personal identity points me towards a new space beyond unity, dichotomy, or separation. Such a new space, which I would like to term a “third” space, is what I am going to discuss in this essay from the identity of the teacher especially in dealing with diversity issues.

Walking into the university classroom teaching multicultural education, I thought that as a person neither white nor black, not even an American, I might be able to have a third space beyond the dichotomy of black/white to teach critically. My illusion was broken on the very first day of my class. A third space can not be assumed; it must be created. For me as a Chinese woman who teaches in an American educational field, the very status as an alien in multiple senses opens up a complex site on which I must try to dig tunnels in order to come out reaching new grounds. Such is also the challenge to educators who are situated in multiple worlds of both themselves and their students in a general sense. To take this challenge, I am going to elaborate on the possibility of generating a curriculum in a third space which signals mutual transformation and creation.
On the Margin of Two Cultures:
Can I Refuse To Be Americanized?

Were not all hometowns foreign towns at the beginning? Is the so-called hometown actually the last place where our ancestors stopped in their wandering journey? (Ming Yang, quoted in Yu, 1992, p. 4)

I contend that encounters between cultures shape and transform those cultures, that encounters between cultures shape and transform those cultures, not so they all become the same, but such that neither exists as pure and unmediated—outside a conversation. (Susan Edgerton, 1996, pp. 15-16)

The status as an alien indicates not fully belonging to either the old setting or the new setting. Standing on the margins of two worlds, the alien gives up the privileges of both worlds but has a unique opportunity to see two landscapes simultaneously. Such a posture of not confining the self in the boundary of one view carves out the potential of going beyond the limit to reach new shores. Acknowledging the new possibilities an alien can bring, Edward Said (1996) calls for intellectual exile as a necessary ground on which intellectuals constantly unsettle both self and other. Such instability and movement in exile supports critical attitudes towards the taken-for-granted of both old home and new home. According to chaos and complexity theory, the most generative and creative site exists on the edge of chaos and order (Doll, 1998). Situated on the margin of the new and the old, the edge can take one to new levels of order out of chaos. Such is a generative chaos rather than a total disarray.

Discussing the painful process in which Asian Pacific American children become Americans, Russell Young (1998) suggests the need for cultivating bicultural identity which acknowledges these children’s home cultures. I remain doubtful about the co-existence of two different cultures without addressing the conflicts and contradictions of the two in a generative rather than a resolvable way. While the domination of one culture needs to be questioned, how can we simultaneously recognize both cultures when the new overpowers the old? How can we live with paradoxical gestures toward two directions? James Bank (1999) also expresses this hope for having both: “A major goal of multicultural education is to provide all students with the skills, attitudes, and knowledge needed to function within their ethnic culture, the mainstream culture, and within and across other ethnic cultures” (p. 2). Questions remain: Can we have both cultures while leaving both of them intact? Without transforming the mainstream culture, can any marginalized culture exist without being assimilated? Without mutual flux across differences and borders, can any unsettling space open to creativity be generated? The language of both-and and in-between needs to be re-thought. We can’t really have both-and without dealing with what is in between, neither should we be trapped in between (Phillion & He, 2001). Not being trapped in between has become one of my main concerns as (the mainstream) Chinese culture is in such a strong contrast with (the mainstream) U.S. culture. The hope for both-and is unattainable without addressing this contrast.
Situated on the margin of two cultures, going back and forth between different worlds, and struggling with an in-between realm, I am in a constant search for a cross-cultural identity which is neither confined within one space nor trapped between two spaces. The contradictory or even opposite nature of differences between my home culture and the new culture often asks me how to approach both alterity and connections in a creative way. The position of being an alien in the American culture also makes me become a stranger to my own culture in a different sense: Once you leave you cannot really return without new eyes. Such a status of being an alien, though, marks a perpetual movement across the boundary. To work through a conflicting double of culture, I suggest, we need a third space in which mutual transformation of the “both” is necessary to reach a new ground of passages and interactions. It is a transformative space in which the consensus or resolution of the both is not encouraged but different layers of culture and self shift, intersect, and change. The comfort with one space and the struggle with the conflicts of the two are now shifted to a third space in which movement and fluidity rather than fixation is privileged. No longer trapped within, or between, I search for a new realm in which an either-or dichotomy, an in-between clash, and a both-and parallel are challenged to make possible mutual transformation and creation of different cultures.

To talk about Chinese culture and U.S. culture as if each has a seamless whole is problematic, as I often experience a certain resonance with U.S. subcultures such as Native-American culture or African-American culture in terms of having a more relational sense of the self. Interestingly, with an international twist, the challenges I have faced are not dramatically different from those people in minority groups face. Yet the distinctive qualities of being a good Chinese do not serve well for my purpose of teaching in a multicultural classroom, facing challenges not only from the mainstream students but sometimes also from minority students. My Chinese modesty, reservation, and tacit expression are not taken by students as a way of engagement. I constantly feel pushed to be more explicit, self-assertive, and aggressive. Although I resist this push, my own sense of social sympathy and social justice in a multicultural education classroom is constantly disrupted by those students who are unwilling to travel into what they don’t want to know. Multiplicity of race, gender, class, sexuality is either denied or silenced in the rhetoric of “repressive pluralism” (Edgerton, 1996) or “benevolent” tolerance. The arguments for “teaching all children as individuals” (Cochran-Smith, 1995, p. 559) are indeed utilized by students to resist thinking about the complexity of diversity issues. My own sense of an individual person embedded in social and cultural networks as a Chinese and the push of the U.S. intellectual field that has already begun to acknowledge the socially constructive nature of an individual is very difficult to get through. The power relation implicated in the traditional notion of individualism is often denied in students’ defensive color/gender/class-blind approaches. The implicit mutual resistance between teacher and student not only questions my pedagogical practices but also hits hard upon my own refusal to be Americanized.
I have to ask myself: To teach American students as a Chinese, is it possible not to be Americanized? If reaching out for American students implies a certain entrance into their culture(s), how can I make such an entry without submitting to the gazes of the other? How can I contribute to the class in promoting the interplay between relationality and individuality across different cultures? Can the transformative cross-cultural space which embraces the relational individuality—an intercultural layer of the self which embodies and goes beyond both cultures (Wang, 1999)—in the classroom be created through a communal inquiry?

Regarding teacher-student relationships, few studies focus upon how students influence or even socialize the teacher. In the traditional classroom, in which the teacher always holds the power, the influence of students on the teacher is limited but still substantially exists. In a classroom organized to be more open to students, power circulates not just from top to bottom, but also from bottom to top (Foucault, 1979). By choosing to be engaged with students not only as learners but also as persons, teachers allow themselves to be questioned. Especially in the classroom in which diversity issues are to be discussed, it is difficult for the teacher not to be socialized into certain roles by students in order to teach more successfully. As long as I am open to being influenced by students in the USA, a certain degree of being willing to be “Americanized” is necessary. Yet such willingness is coupled with a strong sense of being an alien who refuses to fully enter “into” the other. Not wanting to become an American, I am in the search of the “practical wisdom” (Garrison, 1997) for mutual transformation of cultural differences in the classroom. There is a middle ground on which contradictory or different cultural layers of the self within, between, and among the teacher and students interact to make the classroom itself a place for multicultural education in which mutual resistance can be transformed into mutual challenge. I am simultaneously socialized into the U.S. culture and resistant to this very process of socialization. This contradiction takes me to an impossible meeting between conflicting cultures.

Silence, in Chinese culture, is not necessarily negative. It can symbolize wisdom, modesty, or an interconnected sense between humanity and nature. In an expressive culture like the mainstream U.S. culture, though, silence is usually avoided. Voice as a way of expressing a minority’s perspective becomes a metaphor for empowerment. I would argue that in order to break silence, silence needs to be nurtured in the classroom for teacher and student to cultivate a sense of critical reflection and contemplation. This ability of looking within, as JoAnn Phillion (2001) learned from Native American culture(s) as “connected silence,” (p. 6), encourages us to become “wide-eyed, wide-eared, wide-awake” (p. 7). To travel into “difficult knowledge” (Britzman, 1998) such as diversity issues, the ability to critically contemplate within but at the same time feel connected to the outside world becomes a significant step in encountering otherness. While different cultural, racial, and gendered layers of the self are interrelated (Pinar, 1993, 2001), the capacity and willingness to listen to inner voices of self can lead to acknowledgement of the interconnections between self, other, and world.
Nurturing through silence in the classroom in order to achieve transformative understanding or dwell in an existential condition of meditation about life has become a theme that American curriculum scholars pay attention to. Its significance can be shown in a special issue of the *Journal of Curriculum Theorizing* (1999, No. 3) devoted to the theme of understanding curriculum as silence and solitude. The moments of silence and solitude can lead one to remember, to reflect, to make sense of random thoughts, and to be fully immersed with oneself and simultaneously fully aware of the world. Although bringing discomfort and disruption, silence can stimulate deep reflection and independent thinking. A Chinese-American scholar, Tuan Yi-Fu (Monaghan, 2001, A16), does not hesitate to remain silent for a while before he offers his answer to students’ questions in the classroom. He also argues for the necessity of encouraging students to close their minds so that they are not carried away by casual, lazy, and taken-for-granted ideas. Close one’s eyes; what can one see? Encouraged to probe deeply inside, when one opens one’s eyes again, the familiar world might become different and new ideas might flow out.

To approach silence through a cross cultural space, I attempt to turn it into a site on which difficult knowledge may find its way onto the stage. Silence can be a good way for us to get in touch with what we are consciously unaware of. Being saturated with a holistic sense of the self can soften negative emotions and strong resistances. Once in a while, I ask for a collective silence in the classroom to make students feel uncomfortable, feel having to struggle for words after silence so that new awareness can be cultivated. Sometimes I use both music (without words) and silence to invite unusual reflections and help students let their intensified emotions out with the rhythms. My own sensitivity to productive moments of silence is mediated by my promotion of students’ abilities to talk with each other in an engaged way. I try to grasp teachable moments when disagreement happens in order to have an ongoing dialogue: the attempt to arouse disagreement and polyphony (Bakhtin, 1984) is a process in which certain strong hegemonic voices need to be suspended.

The cross-cultural space I attempt to dwell in is a space full of ambiguities and paradoxes, and my efforts in the classroom are uncertain in terms of consequences since I never really know I am doing the “right” thing. For Michel Foucault, the project of freedom in pursuit of social justice as localized and contextualized resistance has uncertain and ambiguous consequences (Miller, 1993). This uncertainty itself, though, encourages us to take the responsibility of constantly starting all over again (Foucault, 1997). In such an ambiguous encounter, my own cultural identities are questioned and transformed as I travel along with the students. The space I intend to create for myself constantly changes as a result of this teacher-student interaction. A third space does not stay with itself.

The impossible meeting between East and West (Derrida, in Bernstein, 1991) in this postmodern world stretches across the border but East and West can never actually reach each other in full embraces. Interaction between Chinese culture(s) and U.S. culture(s) calls upon a new space—a space I prefer to call a “third” space—in
which transformation of both cultures moves towards the “borderland” (Anzaldúa, 1987). On the border, more possibilities can be opened and re-opened and new boundaries can be drawn and re-drawn. In this sense, aporia (Derrida, 1993) is lived with and affirmed rather than finally resolved so that the continuous flux of the alterity of the other can be constantly attended. This resistance towards final closure prevents any collapse into one space and affirms the multiplicity of the self. The cross-cultural self finds the comfort of home in the process of creation and re-creation.

Women as Stranger: An Ambiguous Relational Site

[T]he feminine is an unrepresentable passion, a rebel passion, that it’s something uncanny for men and for women…it is very troubling to be in contact and in sympathy with femininity—for men and women. (Julia Kristeva, 1993, p. 181, Emphasis in original)

To suspend my authority as a Chinese and a woman facing the resistance of especially my American male students is questionable, as it can undermine my ability to address diversity issues in a forceful way. But I refuse to claim the teacher’s institutional authority to overrule students’ biases. As a foreigner, can I claim students’ stereotypes and biases in an unbiased way? Gore (1993) talks about how a feminist pedagogy of “authority-with” replacing “authority-over” ignores the complex power interplays between teacher and student in which the teacher has more power over the student. The issue would be, I believe, how to utilize institutional support to further the project of social justice rather than assuming institutional authority or merging with students’ needs. Reluctant to be confrontational but sometimes frustrated about the class dynamics moving towards a homogeneous viewpoint, I ask myself: Which gendered part of me am I having trouble with? Am I losing control of the directions in which the class is supposed to go or am I failing to help students get in touch with the unspeakable in order to find new words? Wandering in a foreign land as a stranger, I wonder about the gendered layers of cultural differences and my own otherness within.

For Julia Kristeva (1989, 1996), a French psychoanalyst and linguist, stranger within the self is a universal condition for humanity, but woman’s boundary position at the intersection between culture and nature, language and body, self and other, outside and inside, public and private, and life and death makes her more susceptible to be exiled from both maternal intimacy and paternal law. Building difficult passages between the maternal (semiotic) and the paternal (symbolic), women’s efforts are particularly painful and run the risk of either being assimilated by the symbolic paternal structure or being consumed by semiotic maternal relations, more often than not, unconsciously. Kristeva insists that woman can lose her touch with her own femininity by over investment in symbolic representation excluding semiotic flux. On the other hand, however, woman cannot make her singular contributions to trans-
forming the intellectual realm if she does not re-appropriate language in a poetic way through which her own passions, desires, and instincts can flow. As art is a unique site on which rigid symbolic order can be destabilized, Kristeva (1984) privileges poetic language as a form of negotiating between body and intellect. I am wondering, does this passage, this negotiation signal the move into a third space in which femininity and masculinity can be both embodied and transformed to reach new subjectivities? As an exiled woman who teaches in the U.S.A., how am I going to situate myself in this negotiation? If a third space implies the mutual implication of the semiotic and the symbolic, can my struggles move me into a womanhood yet to come? Is the better question not about either masculinity or femininity but about how the two interplay? Can I manage to bring body, language, and imagination into the classroom, and lead students to an ambiguous realm in which the feminine is incorporated to transform the paternal, despite my vulnerability as a Chinese woman whose feet might still be bound in certain Americans’ fantasy?

The acknowledgement of women’s status as in exile, for Kristeva, by no means leads to any claim upon the women’s way of living, knowing, and thinking. She (1996) resists any efforts to universalize women’s experiences and implies that the very site of the semiotic maternal continent is to challenge the stable symbolic order and make singular creation possible. The imaginative power a woman can have is to re-claim the maternal relations while re-organizing the psychic structure so that “new objects of thought” can be created. Woman as stranger standing at the edge of law and desire, by choosing not to be fully included inside either door, opens an opportunity to live with her own estrangement through embodying both so that a new space can be reached in a unique style she prefers. Such a vision of womanhood leads us to an (unknown) world of plural singularity. Such a third space—as I would like to call it—is one’s own space because it represents the singular effort of claiming oneself, yet through interdependence and connections rather than a purely autonomous thrust into independence through separation and rebellion according to classic psychoanalytic theory. My reading of Kristeva makes me believe that my own singularity as an alien woman is embedded in my capacity to claim this uniqueness based upon cross-cultural gendered interconnections. Such a space provides an ambiguous relational site on which waves of music and rhythms of poetry sweep structures of logic to paint new landscapes of life and call upon the lively spirit of reaching beyond.

Wendy Atwell-Vasey (1998a, 1998b), through a Kristevian analysis, argues for the necessity of bringing back into schools “nourishing words” and the power of the teacher who leads children into the outside world by the “third term” supported by love and desire. When the third party becomes attractive, the child is more willing to step into symbolic representation. Here the traditional picture of the child moving away from the maternal relationships into the paternal order is challenged and the child’s individualization is made possible not by rejecting the maternal but by fulfilling both for the mother who is strongly oriented to the outside world and for the self who develops his or her own needs and interests. A powerful teacher is a
Speaking as an Alien

teacher who is able to accomplish the maternal relations at this new level by interacting with the paternal symbolic structure. Such a depiction of pedagogy is situated in a third space in which both femininity and masculinity are embraced and transcended so that the individualization of each student can be promoted. To loosen up the strong grip of symbolic structure that creates the myth of individualism, I would argue, a powerful teaching of multicultural education would be one which touches upon students’ hearts rather than imposing the logical analysis of racism, sexism, and classism in the classroom. Such a movement out of the limit of the self is simultaneously a process of opening up to the otherness within the self. This ambiguous relationship between self and other is one of the keys to unlocking the door which excludes the stranger.

For women teachers, this project is doubly difficult, as the positioning of women in a hierarchical educational system is highly confined and the power of the semiotic is not recognized at schools. The fantasy about teaching as women’s true profession (Munro, 1998) in terms of nourishment and nurturance add layers of difficulty. However, to make present the invisible femininity and semiotic, we need to re-landscape the gendered reality of schooling and negotiate between the maternal and the paternal so that students are led into their own negotiations. The fluidity of woman’s movement on the border does not intend to replace the central position of man but attempts to destabilize both women and men’s positions. The coming and going of the stranger, moving back and forth across the boundaries and margins, disrupting the center but refusing to stay in the center. A shifting position of the stranger asks the teacher to adopt a double gesture simultaneously toward both loving students and teaching students to reach beyond.

To deal with the control of the paternal law, the role of imagination and aesthetic experiences in the classroom becomes important. Maxine Greene (1995) speaks passionately about how imaginative literature can take both self and community away from “the habitual and the ordinary and consciously undertake a search” (p. 24) for opening new spaces. To feed the souls of students, Mary Doll (2000) teaches fiction to “spark a coursing connection between reader and text, reader and world” (p. xii). The educative moment of being shocked into new awareness is something particularly inspiring about meaningful aesthetic experiences. Such moments can touch upon the flux of the semiotic. With critical reflection, the movement of flowing water can nourish one’s inner self through carrying one to reach out for the other. When unrecognized relationships are claimed, the student expands the self into new realms of subjectivities. Kristeva (1996) also talks about the role of the teacher in bringing out the unknown in students. To reflect back students’ unknown desires and ideas, the teacher encourages students to move from the fixed structures and explore into what is not yet personal and communal.

Auto/biography, novels, films, poetry, drama, performance, painting, music, sculpture, and, in a general sense, metaphor, when used reflectively and critically with thoughts and passions, all can play a bridging role between the maternal and the
paternal. Maxine Greene (1995) affirms that “the role of imagination is not to resolve, not to point the way, not to improve. It is to awaken, to disclose the ordinarily unseen, unheard, and unexpected” (p. 28). When the unseen, unheard, and unexpected are brought into awareness, the taken-for-granted symbolic can be destabilized into new directions. The distinction between the semiotic and the symbolic does not disappear, but both are set into a dynamic play with each other so that a third space emerges from interaction and transformation.

In my classroom, there are times when students bring into the classroom stories and narratives but do not attempt to make new meanings out of personal experiences; there are times when students watch movies with emotional responses but refuse to relate the theme of the movie to difficult knowledge; there are times when students narrate their resistance against multicultural education at the beginning but remain locked up in a defensive posture no matter what they read and what they see in the class. In moments like these, when the unheard remains inaudible and the unseen is still invisible, the initial effort of bringing imagination, narrative, and the aesthetic, I believe, needs to be sustained to work more on the boundary of the dammed flux. When the flux between the semiotic and the symbolic is blocked up and the semiotic is securely controlled by the symbolic, the wave of water is especially needed to keep beating the block. Pedagogically speaking, questioning with a caring attitude and setting up a potentially unsettling peer interaction can be helpful in working through what is secured. Questioning from the teacher cannot be lost in rational arguments but needs to be woven into the web of an expansive personal identity (Garrison, 1997). Peer interaction can be emotionally challenging when confrontation happens among students from different backgrounds. Yet when they enthusiastically argue and debate with each other, they may begin to move towards one another from different directions rather than merely fighting with one another. While disagreement is not resolved, repressed emotions may flow out and deeper mutual understanding may be reached. Role playing, performance and debates may help students feel safer and freer to express their emotions towards difficult concepts such as race and gender. When emotions are addressed one way or another, the block between the semiotic and the symbolic can be loosened and the intensity of resistance from students can be lightened. Such a difficult work of mediation and negotiation lies at the heart of multicultural pedagogy.

For Julia Kristeva, the recognizing of the other and alterity is necessary not only to establish any kind of relationship but also to make one’s own identity become an open process of creation and re-creation. Alterity of the other can be within the self (unconsciously) and our fear of strangers can be the fear of our own otherness within. A loving relation with the other can be fulfilled only with a loving relation with the self who is open to ruptures of differences and multiplicity. One’s ability to not see the other as the enemy goes hand in hand with one’s willingness to confront one’s own fears. Based upon such an understanding of self and other, Kristeva calls for a paradoxical community in which we recognize one another as foreigners and
strangers. In such a community, dependency, interdependency, and independency are all claimed in an interactive and compassionate way. Such an interconnected web of human relationships generated at the creative site of woman as stranger asks us to approach a class community in a different way: a community in which strangers get together to celebrate life not by agreement but by polyphonic dialogue. Such a notion of interrelationship has the potential to turn students around to hear the unheard with an expansive feeling of the self. When the denial of the other also means denying a part of the self, one might be able to take one step forward rather than refusing to leave “home.”

In my multicultural education class, the explicit or implicit aggression from especially my male students, the student’s self image of being a critical thinker who actually does not challenge oneself, the stubborn denial of the other both within and without, and the hidden anger at discussing taboo topics, all strike me right in the face with intensity beyond my expectation. As Pinar (2001) points out, the notion of masculinity in this country has its specific contexts, which are closely related to the frontier mentality of self-made men. Such a conflation between culture and gender, despite my best efforts to mediate and negotiate, constantly asks me: Is curriculum in a third space possible? Can the space beyond the dichotomies of self/other, masculinity/femininity implying the necessity of recognizing interconnections ever be available to that group of students who hold the strong belief of seeing individuals merely as individuals? How can literature and film be used in such a way that students’ emotions can be loosened? How can the teacher utilize autobiographical and narrative writings to put students in touch with their emotions or even touch upon their denial to work through a pedagogical space in which both love and provocation can be affirmed? Does my refusal to rely on institutional authority as a Chinese woman teacher undermine or promote my own vision of a transformative multicultural education? With questions in mind, I am still in the search for a curriculum in a third space.

**An Engaged/Provocative Pedagogy in a Third Space**

In my classroom, I do not expect students to take any risks that I would not take, to share in any way that I would not share…. [M]ost professors must practice being vulnerable in the classroom, being wholly present in mind, body, and spirit. (bell hooks, 1994, p. 21)

My first encounter with the phrase “third space” was through David Smith’s (1996) writing. In his East/West inquiry, he approaches the issue of identity from the third space, a middle space which is neither east nor west but questions the taken-for-granted assumptions. Smith borrows the notion of “the third space” from Homi Bhabha (1990) who argues for the newness of the third which comes from two original moments in terms of cultural translation and cultural hybridity. A third space I am interested in is a space in which both parts of a conflicting (cultural, gendered,
classed, national or psychic) double interact with and transform each other so that multiplicity of the self gives rise to a new realm of subjectivity in new areas of negotiation. The multiple landscapes of the self unfolded at the intersection of culture and gender (in this study) and through different languages and communities make a third space of identity, a space of the multiple and one’s own space at the same time, in which both interdependence and independence are claimed. My cross-cultural inquiry leads me to a new space of relational individuality, my gendered studies of the self pave the way to a new site with a vision of expressing both femininity and masculinity in creative ways, and the intersection of both culture and gender for me as a teacher asks me to affirm my own identity while at the same time transforming my own way of life in a new country. The interdependence across culture and gender is claimed and mediated to my own creation in a unique way—the self is simultaneously multiple and one. Multiple layers of the self must be negotiated to weave a rich and complicated picture of identity which is by no means unified. Such a journey is an ever-evolving unfinished journey stretching through time and place towards a shifting third space.

Hybridity and alterity of subjectivity can unmask something covered, create something different, something new to meaning-making and representation of self and community. bell hooks (1994) celebrates “teaching that enable transgressions—a movement against and beyond boundaries” (p. 12). Such movement beyond boundaries cannot happen without working along and with the border in order to make it possible for other positions to emerge. Beyond boundary but without banishing the border—living with aporia—is necessary to painstakingly cultivate a shifting space in which contradictions are not overcome to achieve consensus but more passages are further generated through polyphonic dialogue across differences. This dynamics implies both movements across boundaries and the significance of the border: Pedagogically it points to the necessity of affirming the political reality of race/racism, gender/sexism, class/classism while at the same time deconstructing the very concept of race, gender, and class. Such is the aporia multicultural educators (and students) have to live with in the classroom.

The notion of third space I am trying to articulate pedagogically implies the necessity of both distance and engagement. Without engagement with the original two spaces nothing new can be generated, while being immersed in any one space uncritically merely leads to the reproduction of the existent. The complexity of identity politics on the one hand asks us who we are and where our starting points are in terms of race, gender, class, sexuality, religion or other social contexts so that crucial issues of social justice can be addressed; on the other hand, though, we resist the confinement of the boundary, and the very intention of addressing cultural and social layers of the self is to go beyond racial and gendered boundaries so that conversation across differences and the originality of each person in creating one’s own identity transgressive of social constraints are made possible at the same time. The process of constructing and deconstructing social, cultural, and political
identities makes a transformative pedagogy of multicultural education an ambiguous effort swirling in a third space.

Speaking about the teacher-student relationship, Peter Taubman (1992) argues for “the right distance” between caring and guidance as the teacher. Madeline Grumet (1988) attempts to build bridges and passages so that “the most loving and creative expressions of masculinity and femininity” (p. xix) can be expressed in the middle place. Such pedagogical relationships call for a critically engaged position. To maintain an engaged distance is a difficult position for me. When I am upset, I have to ask myself: Should I “love” students more so I can be more patient with their denial of difficult knowledge? When I am tired and let students go wherever they want to go, I also question myself in reflection: Did I abandon the responsibility as a teacher of “guiding” students through resistance into new possibilities? Worse still, I have moments of asking myself both questions at the same time. Students can be emotionally involved, too. Being emotionally charged is one quality of multicultural education. Even the reading process can be painful for any engaged students because texts more often than not directly challenge their own personal identities. I attempt to set up the tone for students to feel comfortable having negative feelings in the classroom, which, as I explain, allows the class to become a community of welcoming strange thoughts and strange feelings. Still, the teacher is expected to be emotionally neutral, while engagement is hardly devoid of feelings. In the meantime, my distance from students culturally makes it more difficult for me to become a negotiator among different layers of self and community. When feeling pushed to become more like a “male” authority, more like an “American,” I find it a particularly delicate effort to keep a balance. If I become more aggressive and perhaps more effective, am I moving into the space I personally resist entering? If I remain my own style of non-authoritarian sharing, am I putting myself into the stereotype of the Chinese (Oriental) woman who does not assume her own position? How can I claim both gestures in a third space towards loving and questioning across cultural and gendered identities?

In articulating an “engaged pedagogy,” bell hooks (1994) calls for professors to share their own journeys with students in a communal inquiry even though it means, on the part of professors, to be vulnerable. I agree that the teacher’s sensitivity and openness to mutual challenge and willingness to “share in the intellectual and spiritual growth of our students” (hooks, 1994, p. 13) are important for engaging students in meaningful learning. Even though it indicates the risk of being vulnerable, teachers sharing their autobiographical experiences with students’ efforts to write autobiographically, either on an individual base or in group activities, can be a powerful tool to not only understanding but also feeling our connected humanity. Autobiography can become a site on which the semiotic is re-memorized through narrative and poetic writings.

Such an engaged pedagogy must be coupled with a provocative pedagogy which questions students and asks them to think beyond, feel the unspeakable, and act differently. Being vulnerable to students, does not mean abandoning the
responsibility of the teacher who guides through a student’s personal journey and who dares to challenge the student’s limits. Jim Garrison (1997) points out: “If we allow ourselves to grow, we will lose our ‘selves,’ our personal identity, many times along the way” (p. 38). This is true for both teacher and student. A community of love, faith, and hope (Huebner, 1999) becomes important here to sustain such courage and commitment of growth, a community in which the stranger is welcome (Kristeva, 1996), a community in which tears, pain, humor, and laughter can be shared. As both leader and member of this community, the teacher’s capacity to both share and question makes a unique contribution to a communal journey in which members are willing to risk becoming different.

An engaged and provocative pedagogy implies the ability to live with paradoxes and relational ambivalence, a perspective which is affirmed by curriculum scholars in this so-called post-modern age (Doll, 1993, Hwu, 1998, Morris, 1996, Pinar, 1994, Smith, 1996, Davis et al., 1997, Martusewicz, 2001). The interactive relationships we build among and within teacher, student, and text intend to give students more freedom to develop and transform their own sense of the self through critical communal inquiry and self-reflection. The number “three” means “multiple” in ancient Chinese and in the Taoist myth generates thousands of things, which inspires me to approach a third space through multiplicity of the self while affirming that the multiple is the site for creating the singular. Freed from the accepted and the habitual, a member of the class community can not submit to the other’s gaze, neither can one hold on to one’s own horizon as long as one intends to make any effort to reach out for the other. Such an interaction between interconnections and independence sets curriculum in constant movement between and among one, two, and the multiple. Without assuming that contradictory directions must meet as a result of the class dynamics, it is the process of affirming yet questioning self and other through addressing differences that really matters. It hosts a potentially generative site on which different senses of identity and community can emerge. My own ambiguous position as a teacher in a multicultural classroom shows me the complexity of pedagogy in which the teacher needs to constantly shift her angle of seeing in order to address students’ different needs. While affirming one student’s racial identity is empowering for her, race is hardly a category another gay man would prefer to put himself in because gender is the most important key to his self-understanding. While the significance of family and community is unquestionable for one student due to traditions and shared struggles of minority groups, another student with extensive experiences of other cultures might want to emphasize the significance of the individual whose social contexts should be approached in a more implicit than explicit way. Such different directions can make class discussion intense and even confrontational. But polyphony also can facilitate communication and exchanges to build bridges, passages, and tunnels.

To address both questioning and engagement, fiction (Doll, 2000, Greene, 1995, Edgerton, 1996) can be utilized to negotiate a space in which the given can be challenged with a certain degree of distance. Edgerton (1996) shows how student use
fictions and poetry to write autobiographically. Writing fiction and poetry facilitates the flow of students’ inner self yet does not ask students to write in a personal voice with which certain students might not feel comfortable. The distance and engagement students have with texts allow them to express themselves with imagination, which also makes it easier for the teacher to be engaged with questioning without involving too much personal touch. The combination of reading fiction and autobiography can be particularly powerful too, especially when the teacher encourages students to revisit their own writings to re-write through multiple angles.

An engaged and provocative pedagogy in a third space valorizes both distance and engagement, differences and communications, questioning and nurturance, self and stranger, individuality and relationships, and polyphony and conversation. Refusing to merge with students’ demands and needs, yet being open to students’ own construction of diversity issues, playing the role of critic in the classroom, yet allowing myself to be questioned and criticized, I have found the site of multicultural educator highly problematic yet stimulating. My own position as an outsider working with insiders presents a particular challenge for my efforts at the boundary to address cultural and gendered differences in unsettling gestures. This is, I believe, also one of the positions that curriculum theorists in a post-modern age encounter in order to keep the field moving towards new directions.

References


