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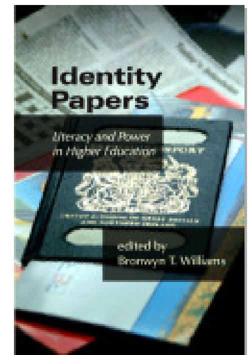

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"WHO ARE THEY AND WHAT DO THEY HAVE TO DO WITH WHAT I WANT TO BE?"

The Writing of Multicultural Identity and College Success Stories for First-Year Writers

James R. Ottery

No matter what theoretical approach they offer, the rhetoric/readers of first-year writing courses have, for at least the last decade and a half, made an ostensible bow to diversity and multiculturalism. While not altogether abandoning the essays of Anglo-European American writers such as Virginia Woolf, George Orwell, and E. B. White, most of them now feature the writings of prominent American authors whose ancestors were not originally members of their homeland's dominant culture. Such writers include Frederick Douglass, Sojourner Truth, Zitkala-Sa, Helen Keller, James Baldwin, Malcolm X, Richard Rodriquez, Mike Rose, Maya Angelou, Sandra Cisneros, and bell hooks, to name only a few. The inclusion of a broad range of cultural perspectives is meant to reflect the fact that the population of university campuses now mirrors that of the nation, insofar as cultural diversity is the norm rather than the exception. First-year writing program directors and instructors now feel that students in general education courses should be able to relate to minority writers better than those from what was once regarded as the cultural mainstream. However, the question of whether students do remains open.

The truth, as it seems to me, is that many entering first-year students, especially those from backgrounds similar to those of the writers named above, are more likely to relate to more immediately available representatives of popular culture—whether "mainstream" or "minority"—than they are the authors of literary essays and creative nonfiction. Such students often find their cultural models in popular culture icons, such as Eminem, Tupac Shakur, and Shakira. Yet such icons say little to students about the experiences and subjects that have shaped and informed the authors represented in their first-year readers. Popular culture artists don't speak to students of the nightmare of intellectual deprivation that

is all too often the unremitting experience of those marginalized by slavery (Frederick Douglass), the urban ghetto (Malcolm X and Mike Rose), or the more elusive, generalized ghetto of sex and race (Maya Angelou, Sandra Cisneros, James Baldwin, and Richard Rodriguez). They don't speak to students of the will, desire, and self-determination required to emerge fully embodied from intellectual impoverishment. Nor do they ponder retrospectively the separation between nightmare and illumination. Nor do they attest to the difference that crossing from one marginal position, the nightmare of intellectual oppression, to the other, the enlightened point of view, makes *within* the mind and heart of the one who makes the journey.

In short, the icons of popular culture, despite their much-touted "diversity," offer students a banquet of images or "eye candy" that often are so familiar that they require little more than a glance in order to be recognized. This instant of recognition, where the "eye" becomes a mirror of self-regard, a master of two dimensions of *imag*-inar*y* understanding, belies a third and a fourth dimension of real knowledge. The story of struggle and self-determination marks the point of separation between intellectual deprivation and enlightenment and conveys the effect of the journey from the unschooled identifying state to the one that develops in higher learning. Having no clue that the third and fourth dimensions of knowledge exist, and glued, as so many are, to the latest popular image, our students may be excused for asking of the authors in their readers, "What do *they* and their stories have to do with me? How can reading them help me to fulfill my goals? What do they know about becoming a lawyer, a computer graphics designer, an engineer, a business manager, an artist, an entrepreneur, and so on?"

Still more first-year writers might wonder about the relevance of the story of another marginalized American, an Indian by the name of Samson Occom, were his writings to appear in their readers. Although once published in some few collections of American literature, Occom's writings, like the author himself, have long since been superseded by the more contemporary representatives of marginalized groups. Yet Occom's story might be called the Urtext of those now published in first-year readers. Moreover, it might provide our culturally and ethnically diverse students a prototype against which to measure their mainstream aspirations, their diverse versions of the American dream.

Occom's diary conveys an experience of marginalization that is not only outside the American cultural mainstream, it is also removed from the mainstream of marginalization. It begins, "I was born a Heathen and

Brought up in Heathenism at a place calld [*sic*] Mohegan." Without calling attention to the fact, this statement marks the significant difference between the early and late Samson Occom. It is a difference embodied in Occom's tacit acknowledgement that the lack-of-culture into which he was born—Heathenism—constitutes his real place of birth, its significance trumping that of the geographical birthplace, Mohegan. In short, the word "Heathenism" marks the limit between the two world-views represented via Occom's writing, the one unmarked by history and letters and the other illuminated (and shadowed) by both. Via Occom's story, the latter view turns back on and illuminates the former, showing the author and presumably his readers what the first Occom lacked. It was a negation, a gap or hole in perception, for which his Western education provided the cure. And it was this cure, the path from "Heathenism" to the ideals of a culturally and spiritually enlightened consciousness, that Occom wished to make available to other Indian Americans. The most effective way of doing this was to disseminate his story in writing.

Occom began his formal education at the age of 20 in 1743 under the tutelage of the Rev. Eleazar Wheelock at Lebanon, Connecticut (Ottery 1989). At the age by which today's college students have completed twelve years of primary and secondary education and perhaps their first year of college, the "heathen" Samson Occom began to learn to read and to write in English, Latin, Greek, and French. Four years later, Occom left Lebanon, according to one of his early biographers, "to take charge of a school in some part of New London" (Love 2000, 39). From headmaster he would go on to become a popular preacher and hymn writer, and an internationally successful fund-raiser. Largely because of funds raised by Samson Occom in England, Dartmouth College, which Occom thought was intended to be an Indian college, was founded (Ottery 1989).

In addition to founding, he thought, an American Indian institution of higher learning, Occom also helped to found an experimental Christian-Indian community in New York. Like Dartmouth, this community was modeled on Western institutional ideals, chiefly the democratic principle of home rule and New England town governance, concepts suggested by its name, Brothertown. Also like Dartmouth College, this experiment in Indian community-building and self-governance met with limited success, in large part because the white colonists discounted the Indians' claims of sovereignty in matters directly touching them, such as *where* and *how* they might live. As a result of the colonists' preemption of authority in matters of tribal autonomy, the Brothertowners

were relocated several times. In the shuffling of Indian tribes from the East into the Midwest, including into the area that is now Wisconsin, the Brothertown community ended up on the Eastern shore of Lake Winnebago not far from Fond du Lac. Eventually losing that land as well, the members of the Brothertown community dispersed. Today the descendants of Samson Occom and other Brothertowners seek federal re-recognition of *our* tribal, sovereign status.

I am Brothertown Indian 20261 and the Brothertown's founder, Samson Occom, is my ancestral cousin.

STORIES OF GAIN AND LOSS IN IDENTITY TRANSFORMATION

I tell this story here, as I often tell it to students in my first-year classes, because it is part of my identity and I believe that it illustrates something of what is at stake when students choose to enter the discourse of higher learning, a discourse represented by the authors of the essays in their first-year readers. Paradoxically it may seem, the university discourse demands a sacrifice—a certain loss of origins, including a loss to some degree of the mother tongue. This primordial loss is the price for dreaming the American dream. At a first glance, Samson Occom's life exemplifies such a sacrifice for such a dream. For, having overcome his "Heathenism," as his biographers indicate, Samson Occom was a great success in his career, his "chosen" field of Indian education, preaching the gospel, and community building. As I have tried to make clear, this highly successful Indian, this "Heathen" brought up in "Heathenism," owed much of his success to his having become literate, to his having learned to read and write—in order to become articulate in English and other Western languages.

The primary reason that I tell Occom's story in my classes is that the significant role literacy plays in achieving success in an incorporated, text-based world is not a bad lesson for first-year writing students to learn. Yet there is another side to the story, just as there is to all stories of gain and loss in identity transformation. This story bears witness to how an individual's identity within the dominant, white, Western culture of the United States is *re*-formed by the learned language of that culture, by, not to mince words, the university discourse.

This discourse, which is also the discourse of capitalism,[1] demands from us all that we sacrifice the origins, the traditions, the tongues, the rituals, the tribal fabric into which, from birth, any child is woven. Yet these elements of self identification constitute themselves from a set of circumstances that construct a sense of our own meaning and our own

worth that we might describe as a sense of self, a sense of being one. It is founded on and constituted of certain knowledge: of having been born in a certain place, at a certain time, to certain parents, into a certain familial and social structure. It is welded from the necessities of representing oneself for others and being represented by others within a family of speakers operating within a certain set of discourse conventions and daily uses of language. Such self-identification more or less guarantees any person a subjective position in language and thus to a *sovereign* sense, a secure yet fragile sense of what it is to be one self in a world of others.

Yet insofar as it imposes a weight of sameness on those it assimilates to its cause, the university discourse belies such a claim. It is a discourse that holds out the promise of a sovereign universe constituted of beings united by and committed to its preservation. In the discourse of a conferred and deferred status of sovereignty, the materiality of language has a *material* effect upon identity. This weight manifests itself in the question of what one is for others. It is manifest in how one represents oneself for others, both those within and those outside the boundary of one's primary discourse community. The reciprocal effects of the university discourse structure—one assimilates it in order to become assimilated into the world of those who function via its design—reshape identity. Yet what is its design, what is the *structural* effect of the university discourse structure? This design has to do with the reason that Samson Occom learned to read and write in English. Occom became not only literate and articulate in the white man's language, but he also became *articulated* to that cultural body that speaks its tongues—the language of commerce, of business, of medicine, of law, of trade—so as *finally* to experience salvation from the alienating effects of a marginalized and therefore incomprehensible mother tongue. This step was the prerequisite to his becoming successful in the New World, a world built on the foundation of the ancient civilizations of the Western world.

In becoming thus educated and cultured in order to be thought literate, Occom assumed the burdens of a culture and civilization not his own. Thus Occom's retroactive story of the success of his effort positively spins the negative effect of Occom's process of acculturation and assimilation. That is, it attests to Occom's willingness to relinquish the "burden" of "Heathenism," a burden that was presumably greater, thanks to the arrival and virulent spread of the white man on the North American continent, than the laborious process of mastering the university discourse. In submitting to such a process, Occom took upon himself the burden of the new discourse structure, choosing, as it were,

to bear this new burden in order to yield the fruits that laboring under its yoke promised. This burden was the necessity of reshaping a new self-identity, a new way of being-in-the-world, a being composed within and by the terms of a new language.

W. DeLoss Love's 1899 biography of Occom, *Samson Occom and the Christian Indians of New England* (2000) illustrates this point. The window Love's biography opens onto the prevalent attitude of his time toward Indian identity transformation is invaluable. In Love's ineluctable purview, induction into the ways of Western civilization and Christianity in particular would not only improve the quality of American Indians' lives, it was for their good, the only good for which they had a right to hope. Awash in Christian supremacist idealism, Love depicts a grateful Occom, always fully conscious of and thankful for the opportunity granted to him to be educated by the Reverend Eleazar Wheelock and "even" treated as a guest in his home. For Love, it is simply an article of faith that the "refining influences" of the Wheelock home "were a great blessing" to Occom. Moreover, Love asserts, because he was allowed to associate with Wheelock's "other pupils," the Indian youth became acquainted with "the deficiencies of his *heathen* training and was quick to profit by the examples set before him" (my emphasis). And of course Love retroactively proves prophetic. In looking back at his lost origins from his newly acquired status as a man of education and culture, Occom implicitly judges them against the "refinements" of civilization and finds that, from the vantage offered by the new perspective, they seem lacking: "I was born a Heathen and Brought up in Heathenism at a place calld [*sic*] Mohegan."

While Occom was "lucky," enjoying and suffering, as perceived from a modern point of view, a gain and loss as a result of the weight of the discourse structure that shaped the course of his literacy and thus his life, American Indians in the aggregate were not so blessed. The indelible product of the university discourse structure is a judgmental gaze. This standard dimension of civilization crushed the American Indian population for hundreds of years before and after Occom's time. Indeed, I would argue that the university discourse—the discourse of Christianity, the market, and the law—was the primary cause of the destruction of the American Indian way of life, as the following observation from Rudi Ottery's (1989) *A Man Called Sampson* suggests,

> The Puritan colonists felt they could conquer Indians at will and gloried in the terror their conquest had inspired among the Indians. The Puritans

> had convinced themselves that as God's chosen people, their will was in accordance with His. They regarded the Indians as inferiors who were outside the laws of moral obligation, so they could do what they wished with them. (30)[2]

Doing "what they wished with them" ranged from the massacre of women and children of the Pequod (Occom's mother's tribe) at Mystic River in 1637[3] to the less physical, but no less deadly application of *force* known as acculturation and assimilation.

The force of assimilation brings me back full circle to the connection, as I see it, between the fates of Occom and many of today's college students, especially those from the populations that bell hooks describes as "oppressed" (hooks 1998, 79). (Not that the force and effect on identity in college-level literacy acquisition doesn't affect all college students—it is only more visible in the groups described above.) The issue of literacy acquisition and acculturation has for at least the last three decades furnished the site of many of the battles, known collectively as the "culture wars," fought in American colleges and universities. In the 1970s, this war resulted in the CCCC declaration of a student's right to his or her own language. More recently the issue emerges via the concept of rhetorical sovereignty. Of special interest in this regard is Scott Lyons' (2000) work on the sovereignty of American Indians in American Indian rhetoric.[4]

The very existence of the battle over the right of a people to claim title to the language of the stories that embody its myths, traditions, and ancient ways of knowing indicates the burden that the language of acculturation represents for so-called "oppressed" racial and ethnic minorities.[5] It is certainly a determining factor in the discourse of those of us who teach writing and also write about our teaching. In teaching at an open admissions institution, for example, I observe first-hand everyday the weight of the burden that language imposed on students as they struggle to compose their identities via writing—*in the discourse* that might structure and thus *materialize* their dreams of college, career, and personal success.

THE CHANGES THAT HAPPEN IN COLLEGE

Because I daily witness this struggle, I have come to believe that one of my first duties is to help students in my first-year writing classes to realize that going to college *must* change who they are. I tell them that their desire to succeed in college *must* inform their identity and dictate their

choices. I insist upon weekly, if not daily, reflections—in writing—on who they are at the moment, who they want to become, and what they must do in college and in life to bridge the gap between these two limit points. Reading about such abstract ideas as identity formation and the gains and losses that come with change and pondering in writing the effects of such change constitute the "practical" literacy "skills" that my writing classes impart. For that is how my students begin to discover what *they*—the stories of those authors in their reader—have to do with what my students want to become.

By now perhaps, you glimpse the paradox of the locus in which I, and all of us to some degree, find ourselves as we try to help our students become literate, both able to "read and write" and to be "educated and cultured." The university discourse impersonally carries and conveys the weight of personal and cultural prejudices.

In "Considerations for American Freireistas," Victor Villanueva, Jr. (1997) writes of this lapsus, the abyss between education and culture. It is Villanueva's position that the two prevalent trends among American Freireistas are (1) "to reduce politics to discussions of the different cultures and histories found in the classroom" and society and (2) "to convert the classroom into a political arena that aims at pointing out injustices and instigating change" (623). Villanueva argues "that to achieve a pedagogy that aims at more than mere reform we must begin by acknowledging the unlikelihood of dramatic revolutionary change in the most immediate future." Furthermore, he argues, "less dramatic but no less revolutionary change might come about by our becoming more aware of the workings of hegemony . . . [turning] to advantage the ways hegemony exploits traditions and the ways hegemony allows for change, ultimately making for changes that go way beyond those allowed by the current hegemony" (623–24).

Villanueva illustrates, at a cultural and political level, the loss–gain factor of identity change that students in my classes find themselves having to encounter. The essays I ask them to read constitute stories that embody this encounter. I often begin with Malcolm X's "Coming to an Awareness of Language" (Malcolm X and Haley 1995). Most students are aware of Malcolm's reputation as a black revolutionary, a fiery religious activist, and political leader. While those aspects of his identity are implicit in Malcolm's jailhouse education piece, less implicit is the method by which he became literate and the radical manner in which it redefined and reoriented him. For in developing literacy—the acquisition of both an education and the cultural awareness that accompanies it—the

man who entered prison calling himself Detroit Red also acquired the ability to examine Red's boundaries—the personal, social, and historical reference points that had shaped his thought and behavior to that point in his life. Thus in the tradition of Samson Occom, but taking that tradition to a limit unimaginable in Occom's time, Detroit Red emerged from the last prison cell he was ever to occupy as the formidable thinker and speech-maker, Malcolm X.

The story of Malcolm X's identity transformation begins with Malcolm's retroactive summary of his strongest identity trait: "I've never been one for inaction. Everything I've ever felt strongly about, I've done something about" (9). This tendency to act on his convictions led him, as he explains, to writing letters to which he never got replies. In looking back at his former identity, Malcolm X sees what he could not see from behind its narrow bars. Lacking the vital sense of audience that might have garnered them readers, the letters were little more than illiterate rants declaring that "the white man is the devil," penned in "ragged handwriting" that didn't even go "in a straight line" (10–11). Moreover, their writer didn't even know how to address the envelopes that contained them. Frustrating it must have been. Yet this frustration constituted the first step the man of action was to take on his road to literacy. The other significant step occurred because of the sudden, searing envy Malcolm felt in the presence of another prisoner's glibly displayed "stock of knowledge," a raw desire to regain the position of envy and admiration in the gaze that Malcolm himself had held on the streets: "I had always been the most articulate hustler out there" (10).

The conjunction between these two events opened up within Malcolm the sense of a gaping hole in his being, similar perhaps to the one that his former "Heathenism" represented to Samson Occom. Lacking a Reverend Wheelock to guide him along the path to education in the white man's tongue—the language of law, business, commerce, and philosophy—Malcolm devised his own "homemade education." Having asked for a dictionary, tablet, and pencils, he began copying down the symbols and letters, the definitions and phrasing, which operate this tongue. By the time he had finished copying the entire dictionary, from one cover to the other, Malcolm had not only acquired an astonishing vocabulary, but also a knowledge of history, geography, and etymology. This knowledge he rigorously applied to and augmented with books from the Norfolk Prison Library. The end result was the freedom of the life of the mind, the freedom to roam in the infinite rooms of the prison house of language. The excerpt from the Autobiography that I use in

my classes ends with Malcolm's ringing affirmation of this life, a cliché that speaks afresh to every student who, in reading it, takes it to heart: "Although still in prison, I had never felt so free" (11).

Once a class finishes reading this remarkable personal story regarding the transformational power of literacy, I ask the students to trace Malcolm X's identity transformation. We begin with its earliest incarnation in the child and adolescent Malcolm Little and trace its metamorphosis from the street hustler Detroit Red, to the civil rights leader Malcolm X. In tracking the major steps of the process, the students inevitably make two astonishing discoveries. First they see that, for the storyteller, Malcolm X himself, the evolution of this identity is made visible by writing. They also discover that the things that Malcolm X felt strongly about remained constant throughout the entire process, essentially fixed and unalterable. What does change is the manner in which this message is expressed. Structured by the rhetorical strategies and aims of the university discourse, strategies that Malcolm developed along with the ideas to which such strategies lend shape and substance, Detroit Red's "crazy" rant becomes a passionately stated, yet cogent and arguable thesis: "The white man is responsible for the black man's condition in this wilderness of North America" (11).

As my students read, discuss, and learn more about Malcolm's childhood and street life, they almost invariably begin to see the logic of the antisocial behavior exhibited by Detroit Red. As a child, the former Malcolm Little had watched while an angry white mob lynched an innocent black man; had learned that, while pregnant with him, his mother, along with her other children, was terrorized by white-robed Ku Klux Klansmen; had felt his hopes of becoming a doctor or lawyer dashed when a white teacher told him "you people don't do things like that." Moreover, as if forever to punctuate the rape of young Malcolm Little's self-identification, Malcolm X also learned that he was the by-product of an ancestral rape, the mother of his mother having been raped by a white man.[6] This knowledge, always already there within his consciousness, as my students are quick to realize, ultimately informed and drove Malcolm's process of transformation. It knotted together the separate periods of his life into one formidable and articulate representative, the relentless social critic, Malcolm X.

My students also begin to see, almost in spite of themselves, that loss of the mother tongue is necessary in order to function as an adult. For Detroit Red's loss *is* Malcolm X's gain. Without the one, there would not be the other. They see that ultimately the university discourse, the

discourse of the oppressor, offers the only feasible way out of oppression by affording a path back through it and out again at another place, a locus of critique and self-understanding.

WRITING ABOUT IDENTITY TRANSFORMATION

I'll close by describing a typical final essay assignment in my writing classes and then discussing one student's written response to it. For this particular assignment, I asked the students to read excerpts from Richard Rodriguez's *Hunger of Memory* (1998) and from bell hooks' *Talking Back: Thinking Feminist, Thinking Black* (1989). They first outlined the essays in their reader-response journals. Then they wrote a personal experience essay prompted by passages from each text.

Rodriguez's book is famous for enraging many liberal educators with its stance against bilingual education in the public schools. Thus my first writing prompt challenges students to think about the implications of Rodriguez's position: "It is not possible for a child—*any child*—ever to use his family's language in school. Not to understand this is to misunderstand the public uses of schooling and to trivialize the nature of intimate life—a family's 'language'" (1998, 64). I ask them to write their reading responses to the following questions: "What do you think about Rodriguez's statement? What is your experience regarding 'private and public language'"?

The bell hooks excerpt is a response to Rodriguez. Hooks argues that Rodriguez suggests that "attempts to maintain ties with his Chicano background impeded his progress and that he had to sever ties with community and kin to succeed at Stanford" (1998, 83). My second prompt includes two passages from hooks' essay. In the first one, hooks writes,

> Often I tell students from poor and working-class backgrounds that if you believe what you have learned and are learning in schools and universities separates you from your past, this is precisely what will happen. It is important to stand firm in the conviction that nothing can truly separate us from our pasts when we nurture and enrich that connection. An important strategy for maintaining contact is ongoing acknowledgement of the primacy of one's past, of one's background, affirming the reality that such bonds are not severed automatically solely because one enters a new environment or moves toward a different class experience. (82)

In the second, she writes,

> Even in the face of powerful structures of domination, it remains possible for each of us, especially those of us who are members of oppressed and/

> or exploited groups . . . to define and determine alternative standards, to decide the nature and extent of compromise. (83)

The prompt then asks students to write a response that demonstrates their understanding (paraphrase/summary) of hooks' writing. Once they have done that, they are asked to interpret the statements based upon their own experience regarding people and events that might alienate them from their roots. Within the writing process, the Rodriguez reading response acts as essay prewriting, while the response to hooks moves student writing toward an essay draft. These writings are shared and peer evaluated as a way of helping the student writers develop more ideas and questions about issues related to the issues that Rodriguez and hooks, and now they themselves have written about. Next, they move on to a more complete, formal essay.

The writing assignment begins by asking them to repeat the process they used in responding to hooks, only this time they add the excerpt from "Public and Private Language" to the mix. Once they have done that, they are asked to evaluate each writer's essay and claims, discussing their value for an audience of college-age readers. The return in the reading of and written responses to Rodriguez and hooks, as well as other texts they want to discuss and the re-reading of and writing about the student's own experiences and knowledge, moves them from instant of the glance recognition of ideas and events to a time for understanding them in a complex and contextual manner. The writing of a final essay provides evidence to the students that they have moved beyond the surface, two-dimensional view of their own lives to that the point of separation between intellectual deprivation and enlightenment that begins their journey within the realm of higher learning.[7]

MARITZA'S REFLECTIONS ON LITERACY EXPERIENCES

Maritza, who had just graduated from high school, was taking an Upward Bound section of Introduction to College Writing when she wrote in response to the assignment described above. Her essay, "My True Identity," is not only an insightful response to Rodriguez and hooks, as well as Sandra Cisneros (1984), who we had read earlier in the semester, but also a powerful testimony to issues of identity that I have raised in this chapter.

Maritza begins her essay by describing how her "culture, language, and economic status" helped to shape her identity. She writes of the expectations of her Mexican-American family regarding females.

"Women had to behave like ladies, and many strict rules were set upon us." She notes that growing up in the United States created "conflicts" between those expectations and the kind of young woman she grew up to be. She cites an excerpt from Cisneros' "A House of My Own" from *The House on Mango Street*, in which the speaker declares independence from Mexican macho expectations. "Women are supposed to be housewives and do every thing their husbands' request." Maritza writes, "I want to be a career-woman who does not depend on a man to stand on both feet." She joins Cisneros, Rodriguez, and hooks in writing of conflicts in the realm of the private and public, the home and community in regard to ethnicity, and hooks and Cisneros in the realm of gender. By beginning to compose an identity in the discourse of higher learning, in the context of writers who have published similar identity experiences, Maritza is becoming aware of what was once unconscious—her state of being.

Next, Maritza moves on to the issue of language, for as surely as she is influenced by American culture, she recognizes that her identity is also "influenced by the English."

She describes how her experience parallels that of Rodriguez: growing up in a home where her "parents [like his] speak Spanish fluently," so that she "was raised speaking Spanish." Like Rodriguez, she begins school speaking only Spanish and learns English without the benefit of bilingual education. She writes of being proud of that accomplishment and of the benefit of being able to write in two languages. She also writes of the loss that accompanies that gain:

> As portrayed by Richard Rodriguez, once you learn something new it is hard to share it with your parents. "The family's quiet was due to the fact that as we children learned more and more English, we shared fewer and fewer words with our parents" (Rodriguez 70). Once I spoke English fluently, the dialogue between my parents and myself decreased. As I learned more English and got an education, I had less things to talk about with them.

Maritza's writing of identity also echoes bell hooks:

> My education has influenced my identity a great deal. Going to school and gaining knowledge has shaped the person that I am today. As I mentioned earlier, I was brought up to believe certain things, I was influenced by my parents. For example, I was raised to believe that homosexuality is wrong. Yet as I got older and went to school I learned more about the subject. I started to have my own believes [*sic*] and ideas, most of them always contradicted either my parent's or cultures [*sic*] believes [*sic*]. As

> bell hooks states in "Keeping Close to Home: Class and Education": "Like many working-class folks, they feared what college education might do to their children's minds even as they unenthusiastically acknowledged the importance." (hooks 1998, 76)

In order to illustrate the point, Maritza tells the story of attending Chicago's Gay Pride Parade:

> I went with one of my best friends because I wanted to support him and let him know that I accept him the way he is. My parents did not approve much of me attending the parade . . . My parents feel that homosexuality is wrong, that it is a sin in God's eyes. Yet I think differently.

The reason for thinking "differently," according to Maritza is the influence of "teachers, writers, and philosophers" that she has encountered throughout her education. Class conflict does not only manifest itself in a conflict of morality with her parents. Maritza writes of a culture clash with other relatives.

> In my family not many people have gotten an education. Now that I am going away to college and try to get an education, my relatives (aunts, uncles, cousins, etc.) do not speak to me. They think that I am a "sell-out" [and] they claim that I have forgotten about my culture and that I am trying to be American. I really do not argue back because it would only be a waste of time because they would still not understand me. The thing with my relatives is that they are conformists, and I am not. I actually want to change and strive for a better life.

It is clear in her writing that Maritza recognizes the loss/gain production of the process of identity composition in literacy acquisition and acculturation. Reading and writing about the ways that others have confronted these issues helps her recognize and validate her own experience in a way that aims her toward her desire of the success of self-realization, or, as hooks puts it, "to define and determine alternative standards, to decide the nature and extent of compromise" of private and public life, of her past present and future. She ends her essay by expressing that desire:

> Throughout my life I have had to deal with many changes. Now my life is heading in a totally different direction than that from my family. I am going to go to college, graduate, and eventually attend Law School and become a well-respected attorney. All of these changes will eventually

> separate me from my family, because I will start a new life. After college I see myself taking up on the identity of a responsible, studious, focused young woman. I have always set goals in my life and so far I have accomplished all of them. I always finish what I start, and I started getting an education and I will finish it.
>
> All of my identities have been partially influenced but they have also been my creation, because I am happy with myself and with what I have accomplished. As I mentioned before my parents, culture, and language have and will always play an important role in my identities. They have all become part of my daily life and personality.

PRIVATE AND PUBLIC IDENTITIES AND LITERACIES

I began by noting that those of us in Rhetoric and Composition have been addressing issues of literacy acquisition and acculturation and assimilation for decades. In "Rhetorical Sovereignty: What Do American Indians Want from Writing?" Scott Lyons (2000) writes that "Indians generally do *not* want . . . stereotyping, cultural appropriation, exclusion, ignorance, irrelevance, rhetorical imperialism. . . rhetorical sovereignty requires above all the presence of an Indian voice, speaking or writing in an ongoing context of colonization [the discourse of the university and capitalism] and setting at least some of the terms of debate" (462). While Lyons' concern is aimed at Indians themselves putting an end to the "Indian problem," the lessons that he teaches are valuable to all practitioners and teachers of writing. For, as he writes, "rhetorical sovereignty requires of writing teachers more than a renewed commitment to listening and learning; it also requires a radical rethinking how and what we teach as the written word at all levels of schooling, from preschool to graduate curricula and beyond" (460). Lyons then cites Hawaiian nationalist Haunani-Kay Trask: "Language, in particular, helps to decolonize the mind . . . Thinking in one's own cultural referents leads to conceptualizing in one's own world view which, in turn, leads to disagreement with and eventual opposition to the dominant ideology" (462).

All of our students have the right to their own language, their own voices. Within each one of their own identifications, they have the right to private language and intimate life. They also have the right to a public language and a public identity, based upon, in Lyons' words, "the inherent right and ability of peoples to determine their own communicative needs and desires in the pursuit of self-determination" (450). The inherent right to pursue "self-determination" not only requires, but demands literacy. The world's business increasingly is dominated by the university

discourse structure, a discourse that disseminates knowledge in reference to political and cultural biases and stereotypes. Paradoxically, because it is the universal discourse of politics, law, business, and religion, it affords the only means for addressing and changing the biases and stereotypes perpetuated by its use. It is the discourse in which students are expected to pursue the life of the mind, which might be said to be a locus or temporality providing a breathing space. While in this space, we may think through and examine the sources of our instantaneous judgments, reflect upon where we have been, where we are now, and where we wish to go. In this locus, we may discover our own point of view and develop a voice to bear witness to our vision.

In working with the language of writers confronting "stereotyping, cultural appropriation, exclusion, ignorance, irrelevance, [and] rhetorical imperialism," Maritza writes of her experience in developing a voice of her own. In the process of writing, she finds herself in a position of choice and self-determination, able "to define and determine alternative standards, to decide the nature and extent of compromise" within the cultures that define her. Such self-definition, composition of identity if you will, is necessary if one is to direct one's own course rather than yield this duty to another. Samson Occom was only one the first to learn this lesson in America. And literacy within the dominant discourse structure constitutes the first step toward countering its constricting effects.