TRANSLATING SELF AND DIFFERENCE
THROUGH LITERACY NARRATIVES

Mary Soliday

The best-known literacy narratives are either autobiographies, like Frederick Douglass's *Narrative* and Mike Rose's *Lives on the Boundary*, or novels, plays, and films "that foreground issues of language acquisition and literacy" (Eldred and Mortensen 513) and that are as diverse as a Hawthorne short story, *The Color Purple*, and *Educating Rita*. But literacy narratives are also told in ordinary people's conversations about their daily lives, as recorded, for instance, in Lorri Neilsen's ethnographic study *Literacy and Living*, and in the classroom talk and writing of students. I want to focus upon how various literacy narratives portray passages between language worlds in order to consider the relevance of such passages to a writing pedagogy, particularly to a pedagogy for basic writing classes.

At the most basic level, the plot of a literacy story tells what happens when we acquire language, either spoken or written. But literacy stories are also places where writers explore what Victor Turner calls "liminal" crossings between worlds. In focusing upon those moments when the self is on the threshold of possible intellectual, social, and emotional development, literacy narratives become sites of self-translation where writers can articulate the meanings and the consequences of their passages between language worlds.

As I will suggest through a reading of two essays written by one of my students, literacy stories can give writers from diverse cultures a way to view their experience with language as unusual or strange. By foregrounding their acquisition and use of language as strange and not a natural process, authors of literacy narratives have the opportunity to explore the profound cultural force language exerts in their everyday lives. When they are able to evaluate their experiences from an interpretive perspective, authors achieve narrative agency by discovering...
that their experience is, in fact, interpretable. In my basic writing classes at an urban college, I have found that literacy narratives can expand students’ sense of personal agency when they discover not only that their own stories are narratable, but also that through their stories they can engage in a broader critical dialogue with each other and with well-known texts such as Richard Rodriguez’s *Hunger of Memory*.

A considerable literature in composition studies addresses the relationship between cultural identity and writing and calls particular attention to the conflicts which writers experience in crossing between language worlds (Bartholomae; Bizzell; Coles and Wall; Dean; Fox; Kutz, Groden, and Zamel; Lu; Moss and Walters). Discussions of the role that tensions between discourse worlds might play in the texts of basic writers—who are also usually minority, immigrant, and working-class students—raise important political concerns that by teaching students to manipulate the conventions and forms of academic language, writing teachers are unthinkingly acculturating students into the academy and glossing over issues of difference in the classroom. Considerable debate, then, turns on whether writing teachers and their students should assimilate, critique, or reject dominant discourses (for vivid recent examples, see the “Symposium on Basic Writing”; the Symposium on “Writing Within and Against the Academy”; and “Counterstatements” in response to Maxine Hairston’s “Diversity, Ideology, and Teaching Writing”). Because these (often heated) discussions involve students’ life choices and sense of personal identity, I want to focus upon the issues within the framework of the literacy narrative, with an emphasis upon literacy autobiographies. Reading and writing literacy stories can enable students to ponder the conflicts attendant upon crossing language worlds and to reflect upon the choices that speakers of minority dialects and languages must make.

Stories of self-translation involve representing difference, and the representation of difference is at the core of today’s struggles in the humanities over competing versions of multiculturalism. Efforts to build a more culturally inclusive curriculum have, however, focused heavily on diversifying ways of reading and on critiquing traditional representations of difference in canonical texts rather than on diversifying ways of writing and imagining the self through writing. Of course the issues surrounding the canon are quite vital to continuing the debate about difference in the academy, but multiculturalism should also involve building classrooms where actual translation can occur—where writing can be used as a means of self-definition and self-representation. As significant sites of translation, literacy stories exemplify the “arts of the contact zone,” in Mary Louise Pratt’s terms, and indeed may themselves resemble Pratt’s definition of contact zones as “social spaces where cultures meet, clash, and grapple with each other, often in contexts of highly asymmetrical relations of power” (34). Because literacy narratives so often focus on the meeting and clashing of identi-
ties, languages, and cultures, writing literacy stories allows our basic writing or nontraditional students—those “others” of the academic landscape hitherto largely represented by teachers speaking on their behalf—themselves to enter into and influence the contemporary debates surrounding multicultural education.

Ethnographic research shows that telling stories at home is a rich and complex social practice through which family members establish their identities as language users in culturally specific ways (Heath; Labov; Scollon and Scollon). More particularly, telling oral literacy narratives provides an imaginative, although not fully understood, avenue through which children and adults develop a cultural sense of the literate self (Goodman; Harste, Woodward, and Burke; Neilsen; Taylor). Within our families we routinely practice representing, even fictionalizing, the nature of literacy to ourselves in ways that are probably culturally specific: parents tell stories of their children’s achievements with literacy at school or of their own successes and failures in learning to read and write, and pre-school children tell literacy stories, for example by embedding literacy events within the plots of other stories they tell.

Commonplace stories of our encounters with literacy are, to use William Labov’s phrasing, “tellable” or narratable because they can foreground the unusualness, and thus call attention to the sociocultural aspects, of learning to read and write. Here is a sample from Hope Jensen Leichter’s research, an interview with a father who told of his memory of learning to read as a child in Ireland:

The teachers were rough. I mean the discipline back then, they’d sock it to you. . . . We had a fear of the teacher, and when you have a fear of the teacher, you don’t like going to school. . . . In fact, I remember jumping in the river to avoid going to school. . . . I pretended to be sick and I was forced to go so I accidentally fell into the river. I was brought back and I got a spanking and I was sent to school anyway.

I remember trying to read . . . with the scene . . . the family on the beach . . . the beach balls, building the castles and all that sort of stuff. I guess I was 7 or 8. [If you didn’t read well] you got whipped. . . . Basically, it was the punishment idea. . . . You used to have to hold your hand and you would get it, maybe six wallops across the hand with a stick . . . and your hand would start bleeding. . . . Your ears would be beaten with a bamboo cane, and you couldn’t do anything with your hands. . . . Some kids used to freeze up there [at the blackboard], you know, you’d go blank and you’d get slaughtered again. . . . You couldn’t complain at home; you didn’t open your mouth; you had no recourse. [The kids that could never read] got beat up more than anybody. . . . We had dummies. . . . They got more stupid by every day. (45–46; Leichter’s ellipses and interpolations)

Leichter comments that “Such recollections are reconstructions and may be embellished. However, they constitute understandings that the parent brings to the child’s explorations of literacy” (46). If we regard the father’s account as a
deliberate reconstruction of his experience—as a literacy narrative—then the “embellishments” of the present and not what actually happened in the past make the story tellable. In his portrayal of the struggle between the institution, between the boy who jumps in the river in order to avoid school and the bodiless “they” or missing subject of the passive constructions, the Irish father describes not an initiation but a coercion into literacy. He foregrounds school literacy as a site of conflict between the anonymous teacher and the resisting “we” who feared the teacher’s authority. School is a contradictory place where children learn not to learn—“They got more stupid by every day”—and it is ruled by an unjust, punitive authority that closes down resistance: “you had no recourse” because no one listened to your story. By turns hyperbolic and grim, the routine crossing from home to school in this story is uncommonly violent.

The Irish father’s story is tellable because of its power to evoke his specific experience, one of the customary fruits of narrative. But in remembering the confrontation between “us” and “them” as taking place on a battleground of literacy, the father also turns the events of his past into a narratable autobiography which denaturalizes the process of acquiring school literacies. His story achieves maximum tellability in rendering strange one of the most seemingly mundane events of our lives. Literacy stories let us look at reading, writing, or speaking as unusual when, like an ethnographer, the narrator assumes that something as seemingly natural as learning to write in school is not a neutral event but is itself a meaningful social drama. In this sense, the ethnographer shares with the novelist and the autobiographer one of narrative’s most traditional uses, identified by the Russian Formalists as making the common event uncommon and hence defamiliarizing quotidian reality.

If writers construct their interpretation of past events from the vantage point of a particular present, then the life story becomes a dialogical account of one’s experience rather than a chronological report of verifiable events. An author of a successful literacy story goes beyond recounting “what happened” to foreground the distance between an earlier and a present self conscious of living in time, a distinction familiar to those who have studied the autobiographical writing (Beach) and literacy narratives (Shirley K. Rose) of college students. To develop this dynamic sense of the autobiographical self, successful narrators acknowledge that their life stories can be composed or deliberately constructed renderings of experience (Salmon; Bateson). In writing her autobiography against the grain of the life stories told by her mother and by other working-class women, Carolyn Kay Steedman argues that “the point doesn’t lie there, back in the past, back in the lost time at which [events] happened; the only point lies in interpretation” (5). And in interpreting her mother’s life story as one of loss, envy, and lifelong exclusion from the comforts of middle-class life, Steedman concludes that “In this way, the story [my mother] told was a form of political analysis, [and it] allows a political interpretation to be made of her life” (6).
Steedman’s female narrators transmit a quotidian story of class exclusion and suppressed resentment across generations of British working-class families, but it is only through the autobiographer’s deliberate defamiliarizing of her past that she is able to turn the story of other women’s lives into a critique of classed and gendered identity. Linda Brodkey, in this issue of College English, also sees from a point in the present how the girl she once was did not grow naturally into literacy, but wrote and read in a complex relationship to class, gender, and religion. In the same way, even the most fragmentary and mundane stories about literacy, like that told by the Irish father in Leichter’s study, give their authors the opportunity to make these events strange and to reinterpret them from the vantage point of a critical present.

Traditionally, the crossing between language worlds, dramatized by the Irish father as a scene of literal violence, is both a familiar trope and the grounds for political and social critique in literacy autobiographies, Frederick Douglass’s Narrative providing one of the most powerful examples. What Janet Eldred calls a “collision between competing discourse communities, their language conventions, and their inherent social logics,” which she finds portrayed in short stories such as Hawthorne’s “My Kinsman, Major Molineux” (686), is also a common conflict explored by autobiographers focusing on their own language growth and use.

One of the earliest and most influential academic texts to address the rifts between sociolinguistic worlds is Richard Hoggart’s The Uses of Literacy (1957), which portrays the trans-class travels of “the scholarship boy,” a liminal figure whose identity turns on the choices he makes as a working-class youth crossing over into the world of middle-class British schooling. In Hoggart’s literacy story, the scholarship boy can choose to assimilate into the world of the civil service or the professions, or he can try to develop a hybrid sense of self that allows him to work in the middle-class world while remaining rooted in that of the working class. However, the scholarship boy who lacks the special strength to realize either a singular, deracinated self or the integrated self of two worlds remains suspended “between two worlds of school and home”; and although “he quickly learns to make use of a pair of different accents, perhaps even two different apparent characters and differing standards of value” (242), the boy is too much “of both the worlds of home and school” to realize an identity that allows him to live intimately or authoritatively in either (241). Instead the scholarship boy lives “at the friction-point of two cultures” where he is never really a native speaker or writer of either language, for despite his mastery of the forms of languages, he can never fully articulate a sense of self and belonging in either world (239).

In Hoggart’s text the translation of self, cultural categories, and felt experience can be incomplete, a condition explored in American multicultural autobiography and literature from W. E. B. DuBois’s The Souls of Black Folk to recent fiction such as Cristina Garcia’s Dreaming in Cuban. For some contemporary academics who focus on their language use and learning in worlds that tradition-
ally have excluded them, there is a similar difficulty in translating a sense of self across cultural borders. Like Hoggart, these writers describe their ambivalence when, as both students and teachers, they confront significant life choices about their identity in relation to dominant discourses (Mike Rose; Lu, “From Silence to Words”; Gilyard; Shen; see Rondinone for an unambivalent choice, however). These and other writers use literacy narratives to acknowledge the conflicts they face within dominant cultures and, ultimately, to develop a version of difference that is personally usable.

At my college, we are trying to address issues of cultural and linguistic diversity within a three-year FIPSE-funded Pilot Project called the Enrichment Curriculum, which features a two-semester writing course that groups remedial and freshman students heterogeneously. We recognize that our students, whose backgrounds reflect a stunning array of cultures, may use the literacy narrative as a framework for reflecting upon linguistic and cultural translation. In one of the experimental classes that preceded this curriculum, I asked students to begin their literacy narratives by examining their own and others’ language use and history. Students interviewed one another, their peers, or family members; they defined terms such as “dialect” and “Creole”; they talked about orality and literacy, bilingualism, and Black English; they read excerpts from Deborah Tannen’s *You Just Don’t Understand*, Richard Rodriguez’s autobiography and reviews of his book, and literacy stories by Michelle Cliff, Amy Tan, and Gloria Naylor. After a passionate discussion of the issues raised by Rachel Jones’s “What’s Wrong with Black English,” the students in this class composed a list of twelve questions, which we then used as the assignment for writing; students chose questions such as “Do you feel you are losing your own culture’s language when you are learning a different language? How do you feel talking two or more languages?” and “Why does sounding educated seem to people of color to be associated with being white? Why does black and white have to be an issue?”

To pursue the possibility of literacy stories becoming sites of translation in our classrooms, I want now to look at two texts written in response to this class assignment by one student, Alisha, who used her essays to investigate her own position in relation to issues of assimilation for speakers of minority dialects and languages. In the first text, a five-page essay titled “English: A Language Within Many Other Languages,” Alisha chose to examine Amy Tan’s assertion in “My Mother’s English” that we all speak different “Englishes.” As Alisha notes in her introduction, “English speaking natives like myself tend to overlook” the hybrid quality of their daily speech:

From interviews I’ve conducted, I’ve found that native English speakers feel their language doesn’t differentiate, because it’s the only language they use. However, I realized after analyzing English used by myself and others, that English does differ depending on the setting and who you are talking to. It’s funny to say, but English
can be several different languages combined together. That's why when asked if I speak English I say: "I speak many Engishes."

To develop her thesis that daily speech is in fact stranger than she had previously thought, Alisha describes crossing the social and affective borders of language worlds. Using three separate mini-stories that dramatize shifts in situation, audience, and topic, Alisha depicts a "frozen," stiff style that she uses with her professors; a relaxed, "cool" style used by her girlfriends, all speakers of New York City Black English; and a "warm," intimate style used with parents and other authority figures in her African-American community.

In the first mini-story, Alisha reconstructs a writing conference between herself and her first basic writing teacher, parodying her responses to the teacher's questions about her rough draft. Her body is "like an ice cube, cold and square, with no voice box at all," but when the teacher inquires about her work, she answers smoothly, "Oh, actually, my paper assignment is going better than I expected. I used brainstorming, freewriting, editing, and revising as writing techniques, to help me clearly express myself. In addition, they also allowed me to familiarize myself with the writing criteria expected of me, now that I am in college." When the conference ends, Alisha meets her girlfriends outside the teacher's office, and as she slips into the "cool" style of the vernacular, she slips into a different sense of self, translating from "proper" English into a slang "that spells r-e-l-i-e-f," moving from a bodily stiffness into a coolness that she compares to a soothing bath and a relaxed frame of mind.

Alisha observes that when she leaves her girlfriends and goes home, she crosses another physical as well as figurative boundary. "Whenever I leave the outdoors (hanging out in places outside of my house), to hibernate indoors (in my own house), I don't speak street talk/slang English," she writes. She categorizes the language used at home as a "warm" English, not the cool style of the street but still a style through which "you can speak your mind to a certain extent." These boundaries, however, are subject to negotiation because "the way I perceive myself as speaking . . . is different from the way my mother perceives it. There have been times," she recalls,

in which I'll engage in conversations with my mother, and with a big smile she'll ask me, "Why am I talking like a white girl?" Whenever she asked me this question, I sat with a puzzling look on my face, while feeling hurt and confused inside. I never quite understand what she is trying to say. What exactly is white English?

To answer her question, "What exactly is white English?" Alisha considers that the boundaries between white and black Engishes are not as stable as people usually think and may in fact result in hybridized speech—some whites may speak "street talk/slang," while some blacks such as herself may speak academic English. Alisha reasons that "Even though there is a majority of whites speaking proper
English, there are also those who speak, ‘Yo dude! What’s smokin’!’ I don’t exactly consider that proper English!” The boundaries between Englishes are fluid and not impermeable. Therefore, she argues, “I don’t think black people, my people, should label [standard English] as being white English.”

To cap off this statement, in her last two paragraphs Alisha turns to Gloria Naylor’s “The Meaning of a Word” to argue that “language does shape the way people in society perceive” one another. She concludes that categories such as “white” and “black” English depend upon the contexts and sociopolitical perceptions of language use rather than upon a neutral “truth” about the inherent properties of a dialect of English. Thus in this first attempt at translation, Alisha relativizes the differences between dialects, which for her means accepting her double-voicedness as a strength rather than as a sign of her cultural disloyalty.

When Alisha recognized the legitimacy of her own hybridization, she was then prepared to consider the difference between hybridizing and assimilating languages. She thus turned to contemplate the figure of the scholarship boy and the relevance of his journey to her own life. In the second essay, a critical reading of Rodriguez’s Hunger of Memory, Alisha set out to explore how education is “a process of remaking a person’s life.” Comparing her story of learning to read and write in school with Rodriguez’s, Alisha argues that while she agrees that education is transformatory, she disagrees with Rodriguez that in order to embrace the culture of the school, students must necessarily distance themselves so painfully from their home cultures. “Even though learning [in school] started changing my life,” she wrote, “I never allowed it to separate me from my intimate life”; as one example, she recalls how she tried to explain to her grandmother the nature and purposes of a sociology project, in contrast to Rodriguez, who hid his intellectual self from his family, underscoring the rigid distinction between public and private selves. Rodriguez depicts a translation of difference that she doesn’t want to copy: “I’ll never allow education to remake me to the extreme that I could no longer admire my grandmother.”

Alisha argues that Rodriguez’s feeling of distance is rooted in his urge to find his identity by imitating authority figures in the mainstream culture, such as teachers. By contrast, “Instead of sitting in a classroom obtaining my teacher’s identity, I focus on obtaining my own public identity.” She concludes that she has begun to develop a new sense of self that allows her to negotiate the complex demands of her cultural situation in mature ways:

Whenever I learn something new, I process the new information for my own benefit. Because I’m looked upon as a double minority (a young black woman), I can’t afford to mimic someone else’s identity. Although, in life, we all need someone to look up to or help guide us on the right track. For this reason, I can understand what Rodriguez says when he says, “I wanted to be like my teachers, to possess their knowledge, to assume their authority, their confidence, even to assume a teacher’s persona” (p. 55). However, different from Richard Rodriguez,
I feel learning involves more than simple imitation. I totally disagree with his motives to imitate others. When you imitate others, you're a stranger to yourself, because you do not possess your own ideas.

In the vein of contemporary autobiographers like Maxine Hong Kingston and Audre Lorde, Alisha squarely confronts the issue of hybridized identity; her dilemma is how she can learn to become a fluent speaker of "many Englishes" without becoming "a stranger to" herself. Where Rodriguez splits himself into two selves, the self of the family and that of the academy, Alisha portrays overlapping versions of self: the speaker of "many Englishes" writes alternately as a young black woman, a new college student, a writer, a granddaughter, and an intellectually questing self in the process of "remaking her life." The "I" in Alisha's essay is not monological. As Alisha engages with Rodriguez's representations of the nontraditional student, she sympathizes with him ("I can understand what Rodriguez says") even as she interrogates his canonical story of assimilation. She accepts direction from her teachers even as she parodies the voice of authority. She claims she is responsible for her own decisions, but she is also deeply connected to others in her family and community. Alisha's "I" is a writer with many voices and stories to tell.

Alisha perceives Rodriguez's literacy story to be a complex process of struggle and choice, and through writing her own response to Hunger of Memory Alisha practices a sort of autoethnography, one of the arts of the contact zone in which, Pratt says, "people undertake to describe themselves in ways that engage with representations others have made of them" (35). In the process of her writing, Alisha contends with complicated affective and social issues of translation that the scholarship boy could not resolve without losing a sense of self: how to be independent from teachers, yet also how to accept direction from them; how to switch codes according to context without being an opportunistic rhetor; how to enter one discourse world without losing the words and values of another. How, in short, to translate self and difference between language worlds without becoming "a stranger to yourself."

Revising an affective and sociolinguistic sense of self went hand in hand with Alisha's increasing ability to do what some minority educators believe students don't get the chance to do: begin to master the language of the school without paying the price of unexamined assimilation. Alisha's skillful intermingling of life writing and exposition of other texts implies a pedagogy which, as Keith Gilyard puts it in his literacy story, "is successful only if it makes knowledge or skill achievable while at the same time allowing students to maintain their own sense of identity" (11). By reconstructing her own criss-crossing between language worlds, Alisha challenged Rodriguez's view that the private and the public self are always divided and argued that the scholarship boy's refusal to negotiate the friction-point between cultures amounts to a surrendering of self. By defa-
miliarizing her language use, Alisha represents herself as a speaker of many Englishes making multiple translations between worlds rather than assimilating the values and words of one world at the expense of those of another. In writing these two accounts, Alisha, a first-year college student in a basic writing class, moved beyond summarizing a text and beyond reporting the events of her life to foreground the tellability of her story, and, consequently, to view her life through a critical and interpretive lens. For me as her teacher and reader, Alisha’s ability to see her experience as narratable is one critical achievement both of a literacy narrative and of a writing pedagogy.

In general terms, self-translations are critical to learning how to write in any new context since, as Robert Brooke has cogently argued, we learn to write by negotiating a sense of self as writers living in time and in specific social situations. For authors who speak minority dialects or languages or who have crossed class and ethnic boundaries, negotiating a sense of self as a writer also means making important cultural choices about the meaning of passing through various language worlds. As I think happened for Alisha, students can read and write literacy narratives in order to see that reading and writing are not natural acts, but culturally situated, acquired practices. In the process of exploring their language use in various cultural settings, students can also begin to think through basic issues of difference and assimilation that are confronting American education today.

Versions of difference and attitudes toward various states of betweenness are legion and highly contested in American culture, as suggested by, for example, the multiple perspectives elaborated in Gerald Early’s volume of collected essays on race, identity, and assimilation, *Lure and Loathing*. According to a recent report in the *New York Times*, the tension between “standard” and Black Englishes in several major urban school districts, including Los Angeles and New York, produces a complex conflict for minority students who at an early age must make choices about their cultural identity in relation to language use (Lee). On the college level, ethnographic evidence (DiPardo; Weis) further suggests that the interrelated issues of language use, identity, and assimilation demand significant choices from some students living and writing at Hoggart’s “friction-point of two cultures.”

In their explorations of these friction-points, the authors of literacy stories reflect this ongoing struggle in American society; from the radical political critiques of Michelle Cliff and Min-Zhan Lu to arguments for assimilation by Peter Rondinone and Richard Rodriguez, literacy narratives wrestle with the kind of relationship to dominant discourses a writer wants to imagine for herself. To deal fully with the complex debates about assimilation is outside the scope of this essay, but I want to move toward a conclusion by highlighting two possibilities which get played out in literacy narratives and more generally in discussions of
identity and language use. Let me then briefly consider how two autobiographers of their language use, Richard Rodriguez and Eva Hoffman, describe their relationships to different cultures.

In his reading of Hoggart's *The Uses of Literacy*, Richard Rodriguez comments that what Hoggart "grasps very well is that the scholarship boy must move between environments, his home and the classroom, which are at cultural extremes, opposed" (46). The journey between polarized "environments" that Rodriguez describes in his book (from working-class, Catholic, Mexican-American culture into middle-class, secular, Anglo worlds) portrays difference in oppositional and irreconcilable terms. In Rodriguez's version of multiculturalism—one which still holds powerful sway in the academy and in popular discourses—the translation of difference means shedding one identity in favor of another as the student moves between worlds that "are at cultural extremes, opposed." Although in Rodriguez's case this position leads to assimilation into the mainstream and a loss of intimacy with his first language, his view of the purely oppositional relationship between cultures also supports the reverse choice, an unambiguous separateness from and rejection of dominant discourses.

However, as Alisha observes in her discussion of who "owns" standard English and who speaks "street talk/slang," different worlds need not be opposed, a view of difference that Eva Hoffman, in her autobiography, *Lost in Translation*, shares. Unlike Rodriguez, Hoffman portrays the crossing of boundaries as a continual, lifelong process of shuttling back and forth between the Polish of her past and the English of her present. Where Rodriguez's journey is unidirectional and irrevocable, Hoffman's is bidirectional and subject to ongoing writing and thinking about her growing sense of self and the meaningfulness of language in regards to that self. Although the world of the Eastern European family and the North American cultures of school and work clash and are in many ways opposed, Hoffman struggles to find points of dialogical contact between the two, places where "Each language modifies the other, crossbreeds with it, fertilizes it. Each language makes the other relative" (273). This process of relativization (which Bakhtin theorizes as a liberating property of narrative in *The Dialogic Imagination*) allows Hoffman to consider her difference in dynamic and sometimes contradictory terms. When she recognizes her hybridization of voice and self, she discovers a way of holding her Polish and English selves in creative tension and is able finally to achieve a successful—although never fully complete—translation of her difference.

Like Alisha's, Hoffman's portrayal of the writer's relationships to cultural friction-points goes beyond the duality of insider/outside because each writer imagines a relationship of relativizing interdependence between her languages. Similarly, in composition studies, the move toward more dynamic models of community leads teachers away from the view of students as initiates into foreign
language cultures and, more particularly, questions the portrayal of basic writers as “outsiders” and their teachers as “insiders” (Severino; Harris). If, instead, we see the classroom in terms of Alisha’s or Hoffman’s literacy narratives, then the outsider’s own language overlaps, conflicts with, shapes, and is shaped by the insider’s language; movements between worlds take on a liminal rather than a dichotomous character. If students and teachers begin to see their languages as mutually shaping, they also recognize their double-voicedness and, in so doing, can see the self as rooted in other cultures yet also belonging to, becoming transformed by, and in turn transforming school cultures. Instead of being seen as outsiders who must choose to write either from within or against the academy, students assume a position of strength.

It is surely true that educators have often failed to acknowledge difference in the classroom, even when students directly address issues of class or gender in their writing (Brodkey); yet we should not let our zeal to recognize historically repressed differences create a polarizing rhetoric of difference that turns on a reductive view of culture. Relevant here is Cornel West’s recent critique of contemporary identity politics, “Beyond Multiculturalism and Eurocentrism,” which cautions educators that a one-sided rhetoric of difference can put multiculturalism into a stiff, ahistorical opposition with an “Other,” Eurocentrism. West argues that in so constructing the debate, rhetors on either side of the Multiculturalist-Eurocentric struggle produce a “monumentalist conception of culture” which offers “crude” versions of the historically reciprocal relationships between marginalized and mainstream cultures (125). In a monumentalist view of culture, either the celebration of a radical difference or its erasure decontextualizes the particularity of the stories we can tell about daily life and denies the tense interdependence that has historically existed between dominant and subordinate cultures in American society. Within the classroom, we can recognize this cultural dynamic of interdependence by developing a pedagogy that allows students to represent themselves in reference to each others’ literacy stories and to those of professional writers. If we trust our students to fashion a debate about language and multiculturalism in this way (as Alisha and her classmates did), then students’ individual stories can challenge monumentalist representations of the passage between language worlds by offering holistic portraits of writers with multiple and sometimes conflicting commitments, aspirations, and choices.

At their best, literacy narratives provide a space where students like Alisha can defamiliarize their ordinary language use and perform imaginative acts of self-representation in order, as Eva Hoffman puts it, to translate “[b]etween the two stories and two vocabularies” “without being split by the difference” (269, 274). Students’ stories of everyday life enhance their personal success as writers in the university; these stories can also deepen their teachers’ understanding of difference and shape their responses to today’s competing versions of multicultu-
eralism. In this way, literacy narratives contribute to the broader goal of building a more dialogical, multicultural curriculum that includes—indeed, that both respects and responds to—the voices and stories of individual writers.

**Works Cited**


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