Reading and Redefining Myself

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Although I have written two essays about the subject, I have never understood my identity or felt as comfortable with it as I am now. Living in a city where people assume that it is normal to walk up to somebody and ask, "What are you?" (as if there is no other way to ask who you are) I am always put in the position of defining who I am. After reading *The Butterfly's Way*, an anthology of Haitian and Haitian American writers, which reflects their struggles in two worlds, I feel inspired to revisit my own experiences and to come up with a new definition.

Having grown up in Cambridge, Massachusetts, I have not always realized how much Caribbean blood and culture I hold within me. I was born in Haiti at a time when many were fleeing to distant France, the so-called Motherland. Others escaped to closer places, like the United States and Canada. In Port-au-Prince I received a traditional Catholic education, based on the French colonial model. Immersed in French, I had not yet been introduced to the cultures and history unique to Haiti. This became problematic for me when adjusting to American life in Cambridge. At first I was in a bilingual class with other Haitian students, so adapting was not a problem. But my parents, desiring their daughters to master English, enrolled us in a different school where students spoke only English. No longer were we being educated in both French and English. This reduced my interactions with other Haitian children and initiated an identity crisis.

I had never before questioned my identity. Switching every day from one culture to another, however, created in me a duality of consciousness that I was too young to resolve. Nonetheless, as an avid reader, I discovered Maxine Hong Kingston, Gloria Anzaldua, and Adrienne Rich, who articulated experiences similar to mine. From them I learned that biculturalism, having to conform to two identities, is never easily negotiated.

Through Kingston's *The Woman Warrior*, I learned to understand the world in which I lived. We are women who claim dual ethnicities. She is Chinese-American; I am Haitian in America. Nevertheless, I connected with her because both of us not only grew up with stories from our parents' cultures, but also had to distinguish what belongs to our original and what belongs to our American selves. Her imagery of talk-story with her mother made me attentive to the dysphoria I experienced early in my education as a Haitian female. Like Kingston's talk-story, my mother's AKrik Krak" revitalized my Haitian lineage. One Krik Krak that my mother told me about is the story of Bouki:

> *Krik? Krak! One day Ti Malice went over to Bouki's house. When he arrived at the Lakou (farm yard), he was shocked at what he saw, and watched for some time. Bouki was playing dominoes*

> *with his dog! Ti Malice said, "Bouki, what a brilliant dog you have! He can play dominoes." "I don't know," said Bouki," Ahe's not smart. I beat him 3 out of five games already!" (Charles Arthur and Michael Dash 285)*

I am unsure of what Bouki represents in "Krik Krak", but my awareness of him and other Haitian characters is sufficient to confirm that I contain not only the blood of the Caribbean, but, through my mother, its culture. Thus, I am now able to respond to those who think that Haitian culture does not transcend *vodou*. From Kingston's Chinese-American story, I realized that even though my relatives make me feel less than Haitian because I am Americanized, my mother's stories continue to reinforce that ground of my identity.

Meanwhile, Gloria Anzaldua's poem, "To Live in the Borderland means you," articulated for me a problem that neither Kingston nor I could unravel. Kingston questioned how to distinguish Chinese from Chinese-American culture. Perhaps she felt this important because she had to live with their differences and contradictions, especially with regard to gender. Like Anzaldua, I come from a hybrid culture; however, mine has African roots with French influences while hers has Indian and Spanish roots. Like her, I definitely cannot separate the two, for that would mean denying Creole, a language that represents both elements of biculturalism. Anzaldua implies that separating culture sometimes means betraying one or the other. She calls herself a "border woman," having grown up with two cultures. Although this borderland was not a comfortable place, she tells the *mestizas* not to exclude parts of themselves for acceptance into American society. She wants her people to participate in all of their cultures without limiting any single part of their backgrounds, dissolving their ambivalence towards their hybridity. Her advice to the Chicano community also applies to Kingston and me, for the idea of celebrating all parts of one's identity and living without borders can be useful to every member of society.

In "Split at the Root," an essay on Jewish identity, Adrienne Rich describes her life as an outsider who belongs to multiple identities, all of which are marginalized. She no longer allows the definitions of others, whether of parents, of Judaic law, or of what she calls "lesbian theory", to stop her from claiming the various identities that make up her hybrid self. As a Jew and a lesbian and therefore a double outsider, Rich understands that silence will not protect her from the internal damage caused by these marginalized identities.

Particularly exciting to me is how Rich discovers a way for her identity to flower in the voice of prose. In approaching her problems with identity, she portrays her vital experiences in a series of discontinuous moments to show how she learned over time to redefine herself. This proved important to me, for although I have read many works that address identity, I continue to struggle for a definition. In the past, I wrote that I felt unsure of whether to call myself a

Caribbean woman in order to recognize my other Caribbean sisters, or to affirm only my Haitian identity. I resist the term "Caribbean" for others sometime use it when trying to conceal their Haitian identities. Like Rich, I wanted to embrace both; however, I now realize that to call myself Caribbean can never be enough and that as a Haitian woman I have in my culture innumerable differences from the cultures of other Caribbean islands. I do not understand the Creole of French-speaking people in Guadeloupe. Nor did I grow up learning about the Maroons who battled in Jamaica's forest with the Red Coats to keep the island black; instead, my mother told me about Jean Jacques Dessalines, a revolutionary who won Haiti's independence in 1804, establishing it as the first black republic.

Just as differences exist between other Caribbeans and me, I find that we share commonalities as well, but so do I with Kingston, Anzaldua, and Rich, even though I cannot claim their identities as Chinese-American, Chicana, Lesbian or Jew. For this reason, I now resent continuing to identify myself as anything other than Haitian. Now that I have agreed with myself upon a new definition, the next time someone in Cambridge asks what nationality I am, I will be consistent with the term Haitian. Writing for the first time about how these writers have helped me to understand myself, I now see clearly that while some people are more marginalized than others, we are all outsiders, or, as the title of Julia Kristeva's theoretical work on identity asserts, *Strangers to Ourselves.*