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Minor Re/Visions: Asian American Literacy Narratives as a Rhetoric of Citizenship.

Morris Young.

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“You are lucky, because you look American and can speak English well. I look Asian, I am Korean. I have paper that says I am a citizen of this country, I even took a test, but this is not my home. I speak fine, yet they do not understand, maybe they do not want too. I go back to Korea and I feel as though I am stranger. I belong neither here or there, then where?”

– Un Chin Mason

I am Amerasian, or at least that was the box I checked off when I took standardized tests or was asked on paper to classify my heritage, ethnic background, or culture. If you want to get down to numbers and the real logistics, I am actually 25% North Korean, Mom’s dad, 25% South Korean, Mom’s mom, 25% Irish, Dad’s dad, and 25% Polish, Dad’s mom. And if I had to classify myself as a type of dog, I would say I am a mongrel, one of mixed breeds. Although I embrace the diversity that is present genetically within me, I have always considered myself American under the sole condition of being born in the United States; having English as my primary language is another factor as well. But when I think of my mother, who was born in Korea, became a US citizen, and continues to feel as though she does not belong in either world, I wonder what citizenship means to her.

While reading Morris Young’s *Minor Re/Visions: Asian American Literacy Narratives as a Rhetoric of Citizenship*, I gained a greater awareness of how people of color use reading and writing as a means to articulate, develop, and establish their negotiation of citizenship (7). Through personal narratives, cultural and literary analysis, and discussions about teaching, Young reveals the tension between the anxiety and nostalgia of literacy that exists between competing beliefs and the uses of literacy from those who are a part of a dominant American culture and those who are positioned as minorities (6). As a book published in the Studies of Writing and Rhetoric series, this monograph addresses the interaction between race, literacy, and citizenship among Asian Americans, focusing primarily on Hawaiian Asian Americans. In doing so, Young is trying to complicate current scholarship in race and the formation of subjectivity as it applies to literacy practices. In order to do this, he organizes his 224-page argument into five chapters:

1. Re/Visions: Narrating Literacy and Citizenship

2. Reading Literacy Narratives: Connecting Literacy, Race, and Citizenship through the Stories of Others
3. Reading Hawai'i's Asian American Literacy Narratives: Re/Visions of Resistance, Schooling, and Citizenship
4. Teaching Literacy Narratives: Reading, Writing, and Re/Vision
5. Personal/Public/Professional: Re/Visions of Research, Teaching, and Citizenship.

In "Re/visions: Narrating Literacy and Citizenship," Young explores the idea of how people tend to use existing notions about race, literacy, and citizenship and argues for reevaluation or reformation of them when needed. To do so he employs the literacy narrative, which he asserts fulfills a particular goal or need: "Writers and readers respond to the anxieties and crises that they face in their present cultural-historical circumstance by reading and writing in the genre of the literacy narrative" (34). Particularly, he focuses on how these literacy narratives can express Asian American citizenship, which Young argues can be used as a re/vision of the dominant narratives of racial formation. Ultimately, he hopes that literacy narratives can help Asian Americans create a cultural citizenship wherein writers construct and locate themselves in America (48).

In chapter two "Reading Literacy Narratives," Young examines the construction of literacy and citizenship in the "minor narratives" of Richard Rodriguez (*Hunger of Memory*), Victor Villanueva, Jr. (*Bootstraps: From an American Academic of Color*), Carlos Bulosan (*America Is in the Heart*), and Maxine Hong Kingston ("Song of a Barbarian Reed Pipe" from the *Woman Warrior*). By minor re/visions Young envisions a subject position that can modify existing narratives about America to include individuals in a way that revises a new definition of what America is and can be (51). Young chose these texts as exemplars of the literacy narratives that provide key moments to discuss personal and public uses of literacy in the various realms of higher education. These narratives also illustrate the process of becoming a "minor" by demonstrating the racial subjectivity and citizenship issues that prevail in such communities. Through a careful reading of these "minor" texts, he identifies a series of rhetorical tropes: the writer as citizen, deterritorialization of language, literacy and emerging consciousness, literacy and anxiety, literacy and nostalgia, the myth of individuality, the tensions of the public and private, and the privileging of one identity over another. In identifying these tropes, he sees the problematics and potentials of power for "minors": "We must see how private language must transform public language. We must be willing to become minor in order to re/vision citizenship and not accept the dominant cultural narrative of easy and required transition from one self to another, from private to public, from alien to citizen" (68). And this is exactly what he does in the second half of this chapter. Young begins to tell the narrative of his intrapersonal relationships as an Asian American, a private individual, a public citizen, and finally, as a teacher.

In "Reading Hawai'i's Asian American Literacy Narratives," Young explores scenes of re/vision by two Hawaiian Asian American writers, Maria Hara and Lois-Ann Yamanka, focusing on how their literacy narratives act to respond to

specific historical and sociocultural contexts for literacy (111). In the previous chapter, the author outlines his personal understanding concerning how reading literacy narratives acts to define the broader connection made through race, literacy, and citizenship. But now he specially focuses on his own cultural background and how Hawai'i's Asian American literacy narratives operate in the re/vision of minor subjects, in the insertion of these minor subjects in culture as citizens, and in the uses of literacy in these processes (112). After historically situating his work in Hawai'i's plantation culture, Young argues that a divide soon emerged in education: public schools intentionally prepared minority students for agriculture, and private schools served the white privileged class: "school became a site for maintaining culturally scripted roles" (119). Interestingly, while trying to employ a rhetoric of Americanization, the creators were antagonistic to the very ideals of democracy and American citizenship. Children who were not seen as full citizens because of their different races and cultures could not "escape the anxiety and pressure of being constructed less than American and less worthy than other children of receiving a good education" (121). Young integrates Hara and Yamanaka's personal experiences as exemplars of the hardships endured in an institution that resisted Hawai'i's Asian Americans in their use of Pidgin. Young argues here that minority discourse can be used strategically to resist standardization, which can lead to critical awareness about the ways literacy, race, and citizenship are often conflated to the detriment of students. Furthermore, these narratives also exemplify how literacy and language can deterritorialize dominant discourse, move toward political action, and provide collective experiences that complicate dominant narratives about Asian Americans. Young then suggests the larger implications of these narratives by analyzing the current public discourse about Pidgin in Hawai'i. This re/vision provides alternatives to the American Story (112).

In chapter four, "Teaching Literacy Narratives," Young turns his focus onto literacy narratives in a classroom setting. Young utilizes Aristotle's three appeals of rhetoric to describe how literacy narratives can evoke an emotional response and can create ethos between authors and audiences. He emphasizes the transformative potential of drawing students into a conversation about literacy, race, and citizenship to explore "our roles as readers and writers in our culture and how our positions affect the way we read and write" (146). Young believes this compels his students to become empathetic and engaged in the experiences of others while challenging them to extend their views and opinions of the "minor's" position. He strongly emphasizes the dynamic context of how literacy is not strictly defined in terms of reading and writing; rather, literacy is the ability to understand the personal and public beliefs concerning literacy practices. Through the writing projects he assigns, he defines the uses of literacy, develops a critical approach to reading literacy narratives, guides students through writing them, and finally articulates these processes together to understand how culture works (162). He reiterates the theme of "re/vision" since it is

critical in the classroom, so that students begin to understand that they are a part of culture—not outside of it—and just as others have

an effect on their lives even if in tiny ways, they have effects on the lives of others. Having students read and write literacy narratives provides them with a way of understanding that literacy, race, and citizenship are both personal and public experiences, intertwined intimately and inextricably. (166)

By doing so, students will move toward re/vision, which is a trope of citizenship that expresses their place in American society and in the classroom.

In the final chapter, "Personal/Public/Professional," Young reflects on the implications for his research, teaching, and profession, considering three layers for engagement: 1) the inherently personal aspect of subjectivity; 2) the meaning marginalized in the classroom; and 3) how society can participate both in and beyond the institution including the educational sphere. From a personal stance, Young as a teacher and person of color is able to identify the frames in which he studies literacy to gain a greater understanding from the position of a researcher, teacher, and citizen. Further, he feels responsible and compelled to influence his students to learn about diversity in its present and future contexts because of his subject position and profession. He also expresses a desire for those who are in the racial minority to feel inspired to overcome the prejudices of racism in the American story. A question that he posits at the beginning of this book encapsulates the key purpose for this chapter: "What does it mean to become a public citizen from a minor position?" Young believes that being a minority citizen is already a "public act"; it inserts a person into a conversation with the dominant American culture, which brings richness to the diversity of voices currently present (16).

Young scripts elaborately and thoroughly how Asian American literacy narratives are a rhetoric of citizenship because of the complex relationships of literacy, race, and citizenship. Although the title was misleading (he primarily focused on Hawai'ian Asian Americans), he creates a context in which we can locate personal experiences within a larger framework of literacy, history, practices, and concepts. He also presents the opportunity for how we can insert ourselves into this framework, to participate in the process of self-discovery and self-fashioning, and to take a critical look at the way we become literate and use literacy (157). Through this process and re/vision, "the cultural work of unpacking hidden histories about literacy, race, and citizenship" and by reading and writing these narratives, [assist in creating] full and complex portraits of American culture" (192). Young stresses how we cannot neglect addressing issues of diversity and the intellectual value of examining our many American cultures so that these minor narratives do not remain "between the drafts of this American story" (192). Regardless of our race, Young focuses on how we must have an active presence in this landscape and not just settle for being part of the conversation.