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### Self Portrait

As a Dominican American painter reaches out to get her paint brush, she hesitates on which self she might want to paint. She thinks about her two worlds; two worlds that consist of different languages and cultures. In school, she is an American student that has to speak the English language. However, at home she does not have that as an option; she needs to speak Spanish to communicate with her parents. As her canvas remains blank, she ponders about her life in general. “Who am I?” the painter asks herself. During her early childhood years, it took her a longer time for her to learn how to read because her parents could not read to her in English at home. She had no one to help her complete her homework assignments. As the oldest, she was held responsible for helping her younger siblings with their homework. She realized that there was a huge gap that was not allowing her to succeed in her school environment. It was the difference in language that made it difficult for her to create her self-portrait. Although she knew that her home environment was affecting her school environment, she promised herself that she will never let go of her native roots.

This struggle between the painter’s two worlds comes to action when trying to balance her American and Dominican culture. She confronts an internal conflict that consists of the languages she speaks in both worlds that make her question her true identity. These “two worlds” or environments are school and home. In school, she speaks English and carries out her American culture. However, at home, she is someone else, she is Dominican and she has to

she speak Spanish to communicate with her parents. She finds difficulty in painting her “self-portrait” because she has not found a balance in her two worlds. In a like manner, Richard Rodriguez, a Mexican American, and Barbara Mellix, an African American, are writers who experience struggles in their creation of their personal identities through language. Rodriguez and Mellix are the perfect examples that it is possible to live in two different worlds. In most households of immigrant parents and first generation American children, the division between cultures often causes tension between language and identity, making it difficult for the children to create their “self-portrait”.

In the “Achievement of Desire”, Rodriguez identifies himself as “scholarship boy” because he must learn how to balance his two environments, school and home, to form his own identity. Similarly to the painter’s experience, Rodriguez has to speak English in school and speak Spanish at home. When Rodriguez was in second grade, he asked his father if he could help him with his homework assignment. While reading the directions, Rodriguez’s father seems to struggle because he repeats the directions several times. After seeing the struggle his father was encountering, Rodriguez says “I’ll try to figure it out some more myself” (174). From this moment on, Rodriguez believes that he needs to be more cautious and should try his best to keep his two different environments separate (174). This initiative leads him to become ambitious in being successful in the future. He realizes that he needs to depend on his school environment to achieve success. Rodriguez makes it clear that he cannot easily find a connection between the way he was as a child and becoming a man by declaring, “Thus with one sentence I can summarize my academic career. It will be harder to summarize what sort of life connects the boy to the man” (173). He declares this because his academic experience created an intellectual successful man. Rodriguez does not see his parents as role models; he sees his teachers as role

models. He would consistently correct his parents' English and was angry at his parents for not helping him in his academic development. At one point in time, he felt guilty for his attempts in making his parents become more American. However, he understood that the two worlds he was exposed to were completely different (177-178). Rodriguez learns to balance his two worlds by separating them. He studies hard to attain his goal and sacrifices his free time to study. The goal he wants to achieve is to be educated. Rodriguez was capable of becoming academically successful because he attained his goal of keeping his two environments separate. He finds out that his identity lies in his academic environment and seems to let go of his Mexican culture.

In comparison to Rodriguez, Mellix, author of "From Outside, In", learns how to balance both environments by learning how to code switch between her two different forms of English to construct her identity. She has to master code switching to feel accepted in her outside and home environment. Mellix's outside environment was her school and childhood neighborhood. This neighborhood was filled with white people. The forms of English Mellix uses are "black English", the English she grew up with, and "standard English", the English she spoke in school (124). Mellix seemed to identify herself with her "black English". She felt like the proper or the "standard English" was foreign to her. Mellix and her family only spoke or wrote "standard English" when an occasion demanded it. She states that, "The language was not ours. It was something from the outside us, something we used for special occasions." (127). Speaking two forms of English gave her a sense of two identities. In order for her to be accepted in each environment, she needed to speak English the way it is spoken in each culture. In her essay, she talks about childhood years and how she had to change her identity to present herself in a more educated manner. When she used to talk to Toby, a police in her childhood neighborhood, she spoke in "standard English". Mellix states,

I had taken out my English and put it on as I did my church clothes and I felt as if I were wearing my Sunday best in the middle of the week. It did not matter that Toby had not spoken grammatically correct English. He was white and could speak as he wished. I had something to prove. Toby did not. (126)

Mellix realizes that she needs to change the way she spoke to impress people. She wanted people to believe that she is educated and can be identified as an intelligent young lady. Mellix felt that the “black English” was inferior when she spoke to white people. However, when she spoke with her family, it was vice versa. The “black English” was superior when she spoke with family (126). She concluded that the only way she was going to accomplish her goal was by mastering code switching. Mellix admired her uncle and aunt because they were able to code switch their different forms of English so easily. When she mastered code switching, Mellix managed to not let go of her native roots and she was a step closer to discovering her true identity through language.

As Mellix and Rodriguez’s accounts prove, children who are exposed to different types of environments throughout their life can lack in creating their identity. The obstacles that each individual author faced changed their overall perception of life. Language was the main barrier that kept each author from attaining their academic goals. However, they managed to overcome their personal obstacles and circumstances to attain a better life. Both authors faced similar challenges that led them to a similar conclusion. Although the painter and Rodriguez have the same problem when they try to make a smooth transition from different environments that speak different languages, the painter makes a promise to keep her native roots. Rodriguez seems to choose his school environment over his home environment. In a way, the painter can relate more with Mellix because Mellix does not want to let go of her native roots. Mellix makes an effort to

master code switching to feel accepted in both environments. Even though the painter seems to have trouble painting her self-portrait, she can use the solutions Mellix and Rodriguez made to her own benefit. She can try balancing her to worlds to find an inspiration to start painting her self-portrait.

I am the Dominican American painter who reveals her struggle between language and identity in her self-portrait. I can easily say that I am like the writers Rodriguez and Mellix; I learned to balance who I am in school and who I am at home by mastering code switching. For all who have been wondering, I have not finished my self-portrait. The question, “Who am I?” cannot quite be answered yet. The first step of being successful in two different environments is code switching. Next, individuals must learn to balance or keep the “two worlds” separate. Finally, they must find out who they are and where they stand. Basically, everyone is a painter that paints a self-portrait that consists of their creation throughout their use in languages and identity.

Work Cited

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