

# “In the world of the tradition, I was unimagined”: Negotiation of identities in cross-cultural autobiographies\*

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## Abstract

The present paper focuses on an unusual linguistic minority—contemporary American writers for whom English is a second language. The study examines ways in which these writers position and reposition themselves with regard to their multiple languages and identities in autobiographic narratives. The analysis of the narratives demonstrates that five main aspects of identity may be subject to renegotiation in the process of second language socialization: linguistic, racial and ethnic, cultural, gender, and social identities. It is argued that written—and, in particular, published—texts represent ideal discursive spaces for negotiation of identities, spaces where accents may be erased and the writers’ voices imbued with authority.

Furthermore, it is argued that the importance of cross-cultural autobiographies by bilingual writers is not simply in ways in which this writing allows the authors to reinvent themselves but rather in ways in which it allows second language (L2) users to assume legitimate ownership of their L2 and to provide the readers with new meanings, perspectives, and images of “being American—and bilingual” in the postmodern world.

## Key words

*bilingual writers*

*identity*

*imagination*

## 1 Introduction

What does it mean “to be American” and is the meaning negotiable? Could one, for instance, “be American” and bilingual at the same time? Could one “become American”? Is one forever stuck in particular identity molds or could the process of second language (L2) socialization affect ways in which individuals position themselves and are positioned by others? What is the relationship between language and identity in the process of L2 learning? To what extent are “non-native speakers” legitimate “owners” of their second language? These questions are explored in the present study with regard to one, rather unique, linguistic minority—contemporary American writers for whom English is their second language. Two terms will be used interchangeably throughout the paper to refer to these writers, “L2 users” and “(adult) bilinguals.” The latter term will be used in agreement with Grosjean’s (1998) functional

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definition of bilinguals as individuals who use both languages on a regular basis, regardless of whether they are equally fluent in both. This term will also allow me to encompass the three writers in the present corpus for whom English is the first and Japanese the second language. The term “L2 users,” proposed by Cook (1999) to replace “L2 learners,” underscores the fact that while the individuals in question had learned their L2 later in life and may still be learning some aspects of it, at present they are legitimate and regular users of that language. Similarly, the two terms “bilingual” and “multilingual” will be used interchangeably, as is common practice in the field of bilingualism, to acknowledge the fact that for many writers in the corpus English is a third or fourth and not a second language.

While it is clear that bilingual writers are not always representative of most migrants and refugees and their language problems, I agree with Miller (1996) who argues that these writers’ chosen craft and skill in the use of L2 makes them ideally situated to reflect and comment on larger issues of self-representation in another language, since as writers, they “have needed to develop knowledge about language and, as a rule, an ear for its meanings that is more acute and subtler than that possessed by the rest of us” (Miller, 1996, p. 275). My analysis of the memoirs of bilingual writers will attempt to examine ways in which contemporary American cross-cultural autobiographies could contribute to the study of negotiation of identities in multilingual contexts. In particular, I will look at three issues: which identities, if any, may be subject to negotiation, what are the links between language (-s) and the identities in question, and what is the role of the written medium in negotiation of identities.

I will start out by delineating the theoretical framework of the present study, which draws on poststructuralist theories of language, learning, and identity (Bourdieu, 1991; Weedon, 1987; Wenger, 1998). Then, I will describe cross-cultural autobiography as a genre governed by a particular set of historic, social, cultural, and literary conventions and explain the reasons for which a particular corpus of narratives was chosen, as well as the methodological assumptions which have guided the study. Subsequently, I will present the results of the data analysis which suggest that five aspects of identity are subject to negotiation in multilingual contexts: linguistic, racial/ethnic, cultural, gender, and social identities. I will end the discussion by summarizing the answers to the questions above and by outlining some implications for future research on negotiation of identities in multilingual settings.

## 2 Theoretical framework

The theoretical framework adopted in the present study is best viewed as poststructuralist or postmodernist. While the terms poststructuralism, postmodernism, or critical inquiry, serve as an umbrella for a variety of theoretical approaches adopted by different researchers, in the present paper I will use the terms interchangeably emphasizing similarities which they all share. My use of the terms will follow Lyotard’s (1984) definition of *postmodernism* as that moment of modernism which defines itself against an immediate past (‘post’) and is skeptically inquisitive about all grounds of authority, assumption, and convention (‘modernism’). Of particular importance to me is the postmodernist focus on *language* as the locus of social organization, power and individual consciousness, and as a form of symbolic capital (Bourdieu, 1991). *Learning*, in turn, will be seen as socialization, or a situated process of participation in particular communities of practice, which may entail the negotiation of

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ways of being a person in that context (Wenger, 1998). Thus, "because learning transforms who we are and what we can do, it is an experience of identity" (Wenger, 1998, p. 215), a process of becoming, or avoiding becoming a certain person, rather than a simple accumulation of skills and knowledge. The notions of *identity* and *subject position* will be used to signify socially recognizable categories of membership which individuals occupy at different points in their lives (Weedon, 1987). In accordance with Wenger's (1998, p. 151) theory, identities will be seen not simply as discursively constructed categories of self but as lived experiences of participation in specific communities, where meanings of particular positions, narratives and categories must be worked out in practice.

How do these views of language, learning, and identity translate into a theory of second language acquisition? At the center of a poststructuralist theory of second language acquisition are the view of language as symbolic capital and the site of identity construction, the view of language acquisition as language socialization and the view of L2 users as agents whose multiple identities are dynamic and flexible (Pavlenko, in press). Wenger's (1998) situated learning theory is particularly useful here because it allows us to reinterpret the L2 learning process as that of participation in and of discursive assimilation to particular communities of practice, in which an individual may attempt to gain membership. In turn, as Norton (2000) points out, the process of engagement with and participation in new communities of practice where certain identities may be rendered inaudible, may lead to development of new identities, or subject positions, in order to gain a voice and "the power to impose reception" (Bourdieu, 1977). This approach forces us to differentiate between L2 learning in the target language setting and foreign language (FL) learning in a classroom setting, as the two contexts may involve different constraints on negotiation of identities. The focus of the present study is exclusively on L2 learning which takes place in target language contexts as a lived experience of second language socialization.

The outcomes of L2 learning are portrayed in poststructuralist SLA inquiry as influenced by individuals' identities in two important ways. First of all, L2 users' linguistic, social, cultural, gender, racial, and ethnic identities mediate their access to linguistic resources and interactional opportunities available in the L2 (Pavlenko, 2000). Secondly, their agencies and investments in language learning and use are shaped by the range of identities available for them in the L2. At times, the L2 discourses available to L2 users may provide them with unique means of self-representation that prompt them to cross boundaries and assimilate to the new communities or to become members of multiple communities (as is the case for many of the writers in the present study). In other contexts, L2 users or bi- and multilinguals may opt for constructing new and mixed linguistic identities (see Giampapa's paper in this issue). Yet in other situations, new subject positions may be seen by the L2 users as unacceptable or incompatible with the subject positions they occupied previously. This conflict often occurs in immigrant contexts when individuals suddenly find themselves positioned as incompetent adults, workers, or parents (see Blackledge's paper in this issue).

The poststructuralist framework and, in particular, situated learning theory also allow me to delineate individuals' multiple identities as subject to transformation, with the change in communities of practice. While I do not claim that learning of a second language is always a transformative experience, my own and others' previous research suggests that the process of second language socialization and participation in new discursive communities may entail

significant changes in ways some L2 users perceive themselves and are perceived by others (Pavlenko, 1998; Pavlenko & Lantolf, 2000). These changes have also been documented by interactional sociolinguists who looked at oral interactions in both institutional and informal contexts (cf. Bremer, Roberts, Vasseur, Simonot, & Broeder, 1996). In the present paper, I demonstrate how transformations of identities can be detected in autobiographic narratives where selves are produced and reproduced by individuals as contingent and coherent.

### 3 Cross-cultural autobiography as a genre

Before I proceed to my analysis of the texts by bilingual authors, I would like to provide a brief discussion of cross-cultural autobiography, underscoring that the present paper approaches autobiography as a particular kind of genre, rather than an unproblematic source of factual statements. To begin with, all life story narratives, oral or written, are shaped by historic, social, and cultural conventions of the time and place in which they are produced (cf. Linde, 1993). Moreover, in the case of written texts, to enter the cultural dialog successfully (i.e., to be published and hopefully read), the authors have to construct their autobiographical selves in terms of discourses recognizable by particular discursive communities and to adhere to particular constraints of the genre. Thus, I suggest that the autobiographies in the present study will be best understood if seen in the context of American cross-cultural autobiography, a genre governed by specific cultural, sociohistoric and literary conventions. These constraints on memoirs are particularly visible in the comparison of contemporary American autobiographies to those written a hundred or more years ago. As Fischer (1986) points out, previous autobiographical conventions involved little self-reflection, little expression of interiority and served primarily as a moral/didactic form in which the subject/narrator was little more than a sum of conventions. Not surprisingly, the didactic bent found its reflection in early American immigrant narratives which privileged the rags-to-riches theme of financial success in the New World (cf. Holt, 1990). The work of imagination in these narratives consisted of comparing the images of America as conceived of in the Old World and as encountered upon arrival. Brief references to language learning painted the process as an unproblematic one leading to happy Americanization, as in an autobiography by an anonymous Lithuanian, published in 1904 and reproduced in Holt (1990): "... I help the movement by being an interpreter for the other Lithuanians who come in. That is why I have learned to speak and write good English. The others do not need me long. They soon learn English, too, and when they have done that they are quickly becoming Americans" (p. 20). Nowhere is the ideology of necessary submission to the dominant language as visible as in the autobiography by Panunzio (1928) who states: "I am in a special way happy to have learned the English language and through its medium to have become acquainted with the stalwart thought of the Master minds of the Anglo-Saxon race" (as cited in Boelhower, 1991, p. 127). This superficial treatment of language learning is not surprising, as traditionally the master narrative for immigrant lifewriting in the U.S. has been a success story, promoted by a variety of governmental and educational establishments and encouraged by the publishers (Boelhower, 1991; Hokenson, 1995). This story focused on cultural assimilation, "marrying in" and appropriation of material benefits, all of which may be successfully accomplished by first generation immigrants. In contrast, achieving full mastery of English language and literacy is a much more challenging enterprise, which for a long time was obscured in

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American immigrant autobiographies for a number of reasons, which may include the ever-changing definition of "success" in L2 learning.

As far as memoirs are concerned, it was postmodernity with its obsessive fixation on language that changed the conventions of Western, and, in particular, American cross-cultural autobiography. Bringing language learning and use to the foreground in the late 1970s, this perspective, influenced by advances in feminist and critical theory and the revival of ethnic consciousness, demanded new stories which dealt with the role of language in the shaping and reshaping of identity, and which viewed language socialization as intrinsically related to race, ethnicity, class, and gender. The change is particularly visible if we compare two memoirs about coming of age in Chinatown as a young Chinese American female, a pioneering memoir by Jade Snow Wong (1945), *Fifth Chinese Daughter*, and *The Woman Warrior* by Maxine Hong Kingston (1975), which appeared 30 years later reintroducing America to the genre of cross-cultural autobiography. While both women criticize Chinese and American ideologies of gender which do not permit women an equal status with men, Kingston (1975) implicates language in ways in which Wong (1945) does not, pointing out, for instance, that "there is a Chinese word for the female I—which is 'slave' (p.56). Kingston's (1975) and later on Rodriguez's (1982) and Hoffman's (1989) autobiographies signaled an appearance of a new subgenre of autobiography, *language learning memoirs* (Kaplan, 1994), which acknowledge language as a primary force in identity construction and transformation. The astounding success of the groundbreaking and controversial work of these three bilingual writers and scholars contributed to the emergence of a whole new generation of bilingual writers of the 1980s and 1990s whose autobiographies and fiction enjoyed an unprecedented success in the literary marketplace (cf. Novakovich & Shapard, 2000). In what follows, I will examine a corpus of language learning memoirs to see what bilinguals' own narratives can contribute to the study of bilingualism.

## 4 Methodology

The corpus of cross-cultural autobiographies analyzed in the present study consists of 13 book-length autobiographies (Alvarez, 1998; Codrescu, 1990; Davidson, 1993; Dorfman, 1998; Hoffman, 1989; Kingston, 1975; Mar, 1999; Mori, 1997; Mura, 1991; Ogulnick, 1998; Rodriguez, 1982; Sante, 1998; Yakobson, 1994) and 15 autobiographic essays (Brintrup, 2000; Chambers, 2000; Codrescu, 1989; Danquah, 2000; Hirsch, 1994; Kamani, 2000; Kim, 2000; Lee, 2000; Min, 1999; Mori, 2000; Novak, 1994; Reyn, 2000; Rosario, 2000; Saine, 2000; Shen, 1989), published in the U.S.A. Three criteria guided the text selection in the present study: (1) bilingualism of the authors, all of whom, with the exception of Davidson, Mura, and Ogulnick, learned English as a second language, (2) the presence of one or more chapters/sections where second language learning and use, and the relationship between language and identity, were main discussion topics, and (3) publication date between 1975, the date of appearance of Kingston's book, and 2000. In a few cases these autobiographies were supplemented by statements that came from the interviews with these writers, from short autobiographic essays preceding their fiction, and from interviews with other bilingual writers. While this corpus does not aim to be fully exhaustive, it includes all American language learning memoirs, known to the researcher, which discuss the relationship between language and identity.

The cross-cultural autobiographies in the corpus can be subdivided into two main overlapping categories: (1) *immigrant autobiographies*, written by first generation immigrants who arrived in the U.S.A. as teenagers or as adults (Alvarez; Brintrup; Codrescu; Danquah; Dorfman; Hirsch; Hoffman; Kamani; Kim; Lee; Min; Mori; Novak; Reyn; Rosario; Saine; Sante; Shen; Jakobson), and (2) *ethnic autobiographies*, written by those who arrived in the New World as children or were born and grew up in ethnic neighborhoods, learning their second language in early or late childhood (Chambers; Kingston; Mar; Rodriguez). While it is clear that immigrant autobiographies may also be seen as ethnic, and while ethnic authors share some of the immigrant experiences, the distinction between the two groups emphasizes different L2 socialization experiences, the first group having joined the target language community as adults and the second as children. To offset the focus on linguistic minorities and to emphasize the fact that not only “newly minted” Americans may aim at being bilingual, I will also discuss three language learning memoirs written by American expatriates or temporary visitors to Japan (Davidson; Mura; Ogulnick).

The fact that there are twenty female authors in the corpus and only six male ones (Codrescu; Dorfman; Mura; Novak; Rodriguez; Sante) can be clarified by the demographics of the genre itself. Despite a careful search and a policy of including all memoirs which had a discussion of language issues in at least one chapter, I was unable to locate any more relevant male language memoirs than the ones in the corpus. While there is a large number of male American writers who mastered English in late childhood or adulthood and became fluent enough to create in this language (Joseph Brodsky, Jerzy Kosinski, Vladimir Nabokov, Joseph Skvorecky, to name just a few from the so-called Eastern European canon), their accounts of the language learning process per se are at present missing. While both male and female authors ponder upon philosophical issues of belonging and acculturation, or the relationship between two or more languages in translation and use, the female authors also recount in detail their personal experiences with language, something which is rarely accomplished by male bilingual writers (for a discussion of language learning memoirs as a gendered genre, see Pavlenko, 2001a).

Four questions will guide my analysis of the text corpus in the present study: (1) what can contemporary American cross-cultural autobiographies tell us about negotiation of identities in multilingual contexts, (2) which identities, if any, may be subject to negotiation, (3) what are the links between language (-s) and identities in question, and (4) what is the role of the written medium in negotiation of identities. The main analytical concept used to analyze the data in the present study is *positioning*, which, following Davies and Harré (1990), is viewed as the process by which individuals are situated as observably and subjectively coherent participants in story lines. The narrative nature of the data will allow me to illuminate the practice of reflective or self-positioning whereby storytellers signal, either explicitly or implicitly, their occupying of a particular subject position. The process of self-positioning will be closely linked to ways in which dominant ideologies of language and identity position the narrators and to ways in which the narrators internalize or resist these positionings. Two aspects of positioning will be emphasized in the study—multiplicity of subject positions occupied by an individual at any given moment, and their temporality, whereby the work of identity is seen as an ongoing process. As argued in the introduction by Blackledge and Pavlenko and as will be demonstrated later on, the distinction between the two types of positioning is not a simple dichotomy but rather a way to capture core aspects of a very

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complex and tangled relationship in which minority groups at times come to internalize dominant language ideologies and collude in their own domination (Bourdieu, 1991).

In order to carry out the data analysis, I first identified three types of references in the corpus: (1) references to the relationship between language and identity; (2) explicit attempts at repositioning, involving statements such as "I see myself as X" or "I no longer consider myself to be Y"; (3) implicit alignments with particular story participants or with the members of the audience. The length of references varied from one sentence to one thematically bound episode. These references were then coded and analyzed for information about particularly salient types of identity (e.g., linguistic, gender, or ethnic), and the links between language and identity, and writing and identity. Only qualitative results of the analysis will be presented below, as quantitative information about the number of references to particular issues would be meaningless in this type of narrative inquiry, which sees any experience shared by two or more individuals as no longer fully idiosyncratic.

Clearly, the choices made in the selection of a particular set of narratives limit the generalizability of the analysis in a number of important ways. To begin with, recognizing that different literary communities have different master narratives and genre conventions, I chose to discuss language memoirs written in the contemporary American tradition of cross-cultural lifewriting. This limits my discussion to a particular set of narratives, and leaves the question of how language learning may be constructed in other languages and cultures to further investigation (for a discussion of possible differences, see Pavlenko, 2001a). Furthermore, the choice of autobiographies as the primary data source also leaves out potentially interesting evidence of positioning in other types of texts, such as fiction and poetry (for a discussion of self-translation in literary texts by bilingual writers, see Besemeres, 1995; 1998; 2000, and for a discussion of a bilingual writer's positioning in both German and English texts, as well as in a codeswitched text see Belz, 2000).

Most importantly, all of the narratives in question are written and published in English. While this choice allows us to see how the authors in question position themselves with regard to their American readership and the dominant ideologies of language and identity, we are limited to only one specific population of writers who are addressing a particular audience, as explicitly acknowledged in Richard Rodriguez's (1982) autobiography: "It is to those whom my mother refers to as the *gringos* that I write" (p. 177). It is possible that the choice of English as the language in which one's life story is told, the entailed choice of audience and perhaps even market considerations may act as a "filter" of sorts and privilege authors with a particular stance toward that audience, most likely a bid for acceptance. "Learning the rules of English composition is, to a certain extent, learning the values of Anglo-American society," states Fan Shen (1989, p. 460) who delineates a number of ways in which her writing in English is distinct from her writing in Chinese. Unfortunately, space and time limitations did not allow me to look at other choices and positionings by bilingual authors, such as choices made by writers who engage in multilingual writing, writers who continue writing in their first language, despite being in exile, or writers who switch to their first language after a long time of writing in the second. The few studies of bilingual writers available to date do suggest that the linguistic, social and cultural trajectories depicted by the writers in the present corpus may be unique to this particular population (Beaujour, 1989; Belz, 2000; Kellman, 2000; Miller, 1996).

## 5 Data analysis and discussion

### 5.1

#### *Writing and identity*

To begin with, my analysis of the texts in the corpus produced a large category of references to the relationship between writing and identity. The subsequent analysis of these references suggests that cross-cultural autobiographies, and, in particular, immigrant memoirs, are best seen as narrative acts of identity, which impose order on experience that was both disruptive and confusing (Holte, 1988). In many cases, immigration or even a temporary journey make the L2 learners' and users' prior subjectivities incomprehensible to their new community and thus impossible to produce, as witnessed by a Russian immigrant Helen Jakobson (1994):

My "Americanization" took place at all levels of my existence; in one sweep I had lost not only my family and my familiar surroundings, but also my ethnic, cultural, and class identity. (Jakobson, 1994, p. 119)

Writing, first private and then public, may be one of the key ways to regain control over the self and the world (Pavlenko & Lantolf, 2000). "I felt in control of my life when I was writing," recalls Elaine Mar (1999) who came to the U.S.A. from Hong Kong as a child, "My emotions were wild and amorphous, but words had limits" (p. 212). Similarly, Minfong Ho, who grew up in Thailand speaking Chinese and Thai states:

For me, writing has become a way to try and piece together the bits and pieces of myself, a kind of glue which could cement the separate languages of my head, my hand and my heart. (Ho, in Novakovic & Shapard, 2000, p. 162)

For some bilingual writers, such as Polish-American Eva Hoffman (1989) or Chinese-American Fan Shen (1989), writing in the L2 becomes the locus of self-translation, as "remaking oneself within the parameters of an alien language is," for these writers, "like translating an intricate and elusive text" (Besemeres, 1995, p. 415):

One day in June, 1975, when I walked into the aircraft factory where I was working as an electrician, I saw many large-letter posters on the walls and many people parading around the workshops shouting slogans like "Down with the word 'I'!" and "Trust in masses and the Party!" I then remembered that a new political campaign called "Against Individualism" was scheduled to begin that day. Ten years later, I got back my first English composition paper at the University of Nebraska-Lincoln. The professor's first comments were: "Why did you always use 'we' instead of 'I'?" and "Your paper would be stronger if you eliminated some sentences in the passive voice." The clashes between my Chinese background and the requirements of English composition had begun. At the center of this mental struggle, which has lasted several years and is still not completely over, is the prolonged, uphill battle to recapture "myself." (Shen, 1989, p. 459)

At the same time, not even the double distance granted by writing in the second language appears to protect the writers from the ongoing change enforced by participation in a new linguistic community. "This language is beginning to invent another me," complains Hoffman's (1989, p. 121) teenage protagonist. "You can reinvent yourself in an entirely new language in an entirely new land," delights the teenage protagonist in Dorfman (1998, p. 49).

The metaphors of invention, imagination, and translation are among the most important in the memoirs in the corpus, where the protagonists are invariably concerned with repositioning and self-translation. Thus, Eva in Hoffman's (1989) memoir, entitled *Lost in translation: A life in a new language*, is informed by her fellow Rice University classmates: "This is a society in which you are who you think you are. Nobody gives you your identity here, you have to reinvent yourself every day" (p. 160). She then proceeds to ask:

... I can't figure out how this is done. You just say what you are and everyone believes you?  
That seems like a confidence trick to me, and not one I think I can pull off. Still, somehow,  
invent myself I must. But how do I choose from identity options available all around me?  
(Hoffman, 1989, p. 160)

Her concerns are echoed in David Mura's (1991) story of a Japanese-American man's visit to Japan, during which he attempts to study the language, to understand the culture, and to discover his roots. Soon, he learns that "... in the world of the tradition, I was unimagined. I would have to imagine myself." (Mura, 1991, p. 77)

"We invented an American-feminine speaking personality," says Maxine Hong Kingston (1975, p. 200) about her own and her sister's process of learning English and adapting their Chinese ways to the American reality encountered in the school context. "I was once a Romanian and I translated myself into an American," echoes a popular writer and NPR commentator Andrei Codrescu (1989, p. 45). "I began a project to reinvent myself," says Luc Sante (1998, p. 31) about his childhood transformation from a Belgian boy into an American teenager.

The analysis of the references to writing in language learning memoirs suggests that writing plays four important roles in negotiation of identities. To begin with, both private and public writing allows individuals to regain control over the self, the world, and their own life story narrative. For many authors, written texts, such as diaries, journals, or memoirs, represent uniquely safe spaces in which new identities can be invented and new voices "tried on." For some, writing in the midst of the turmoil of budding bilingualism allows them to accomplish linguistic transitions. The experience of writing "in-between" two linguistic worlds is well depicted by a Korean-American writer Helen Kim (2000) and by a Czech-American writer Jan Novak (1994):

At the age of twelve, I started writing poems and short stories in Korean, but I wasn't learning any more Korean, and my English wasn't good enough to describe the complex emotions I was beginning to experience. I remember sometime around age fourteen visualizing what I wanted to express and consciously leaving out the words because they were inadequate. My journals, which are filled with Korean, Konglish, bad English, and English, chronicle the frustration of this language transition.  
(Kim, 2000, p. 122)

... gradually I realized that when drafting [my poems] I was now explaining things that a Czech reader would know. I had started to write for Americans; my linguistic transformation was under way. It was to happen in three delicately unburdening stages, as I moved from writing in Czech about Czechs for Czechs to writing for Americans in English about Americans.  
(Novak, 1994, p. 264)

In addition, my research on the influence of bilingual writers' memoirs on bilingual students' self-representation (Pavlenko, 2001b) suggests that published autobiographies of L2

users are important discursive spaces where new identities can be fashioned not only for private purposes but also for public “consumption” and imagination, spaces which can give birth to discourses of resistance to dominant ideologies of monolingualism and monoculturalism.

## 5.2

### ***Language and identity***

An acclaimed writer and a winner of the prestigious National Critics Book Award, Bharati Mukherjee, who came to North America from India, states that it is America, rather than immigration per se, that offers the opportunities for reinvention: “For me the idea of America, ‘America’ in quotation marks as opposed to ‘the U.S.’, embodies the will to transform.” (Mukherjee, 1994, as cited in Novakovich & Shapard, 2000, p. 36).

In the U.S., as we will see below, the freedom of choosing who you are is rather deceptive. Certain subjectivities may be rejected or simply not understood by the interlocutors, while others forcefully imposed. My analysis of the references to language and identity in the narratives in the corpus uncovered five main aspects of identity which may become subject to transformation—and repositioning—in the second language socialization process. These aspects include: (1) linguistic identities; (2) national, racial, and ethnic identities; (3) cultural identities; (4) gender identities; and (5) social and class identities. While separating the identities into these five subcategories for purposes of clarity and better focus, I would like to emphasize that most of the time these multiple facets of multilinguals’ selves are inseparable: Linguistic identities are intrinsically tied to ethnicity and race, while ethnicity may be tied to social status, social status to gender, and gender, once again, to one’s linguistic identity. Moreover, as the discussion below will demonstrate, all five aspects of identity are seen by the authors as intrinsically linked to particular languages and ways of speaking through ideologies of language and identity in their environments.

### 5.2.1

#### *Linguistic identities*

“Becoming American is about language,” states Meri Nana-Ama Danquah (2000, p.xiii), an American writer from Ghana. Many other authors in the corpus share her feeling and, thus, it is not surprising that the first area of negotiation that emerges in the analysis is the one aptly termed by Hill (1999) “negotiation for license to use some particular body of semiotic materials” (p.542). Language ownership, and, consequently, the ownership of meaning, is the key area where identities are renegotiated in cross-cultural autobiographies. In telling their stories, the authors, in particular, L2 users, many of whom became scholars, literary critics, and writers in their second language, claim and validate their own subject positions of legitimate users of their L2, challenging mainstream linguists who, like Steven Pinker (1994) below, commonly discount achievements of a significant body of L2 users, positioning even bilingual writers as deficient and incompetent speakers:

Even the adults who succeed at grammar often depend on the conscious exercise of their considerable intellects, unlike children, to whom language acquisition just happens. Vladimir Nabokov, another brilliant writer in English, refused to lecture or be interviewed extemporaneously, insisting on writing out every word beforehand with the help of dictionaries and grammars. As he modestly explained, “I think like a genius, I write like a

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distinguished author, and I speak like a child." And he had had the benefit of being raised in part by an English-speaking nanny. (Pinker, 1994, p. 291)

Unfortunately, Pinker's (1994) attempts to ridicule and diminish Nabokov's linguistic achievements distort the facts widely available from recollections of Nabokov's contemporaries (cf. Appel & Newman, 1970; Field, 1986; Quennell, 1980). While it is true that the outlines of his lectures were always written out, this practice is generally popular in American academia where many native-speakers use notes as they are afraid of digressing too far from the main subject. The outlines, however, did not constrain the author's lectures: many former students at Wellesley and at Cornell remember Cambridge-educated Nabokov as a very popular teacher and a brilliant lecturer, distinguished by quick wit, exquisite diction, and fascinating digressions (Appel, 1980; Bishop, 1970; Field, 1986; Green, 1980; Wetzsteon, 1970). Similarly, many colleagues and acquaintances remember the writer as a supreme conversationalist, a unique master of conversational badinage, and the author of numerous clever puns (Appel, 1980; Bishop, 1970; Field, 1986). Moreover, while Nabokov indeed repeated many a time the sentence quoted by Pinker (1994), if one looks at the context in which it was uttered (see interview in Robinson, 1980), it becomes clear that this author with incredibly high and rigorous standards referred to ways in which spontaneous speech never measures up to the poetic excellence of written speech, and not to his own inability to speak extemporaneously. Finally, I would like to point out the inconsistency between Pinker's (1994) notion of language acquisition "just happening" to children and the fact that Nabokov was raised by an English-speaking nanny. Why, then, did language acquisition not "happen" to Nabokov? Is it in part because even such a distinguished linguist as Pinker has trouble envisioning any but monolingual language development, and, since Nabokov was already learning Russian, English—or any other European language in his environment—could not have "happened" to him? Is it also because orality is primary for Pinker and the presence of an accent would discount any claims to legitimacy, as in the case of Conrad, who, according to the same Pinker (1994), had an accent "so thick his friends could barely understand him" (p. 291)?

Most importantly, how could any discussion of writers who achieved prominence by writing in their L2 be limited to the few literary figures of the past such as Nabokov, Conrad, Triolet, Beckett, or Ionesco? At present, contemporary literature abounds in writers who, like Salman Rushdie, Victor Hernandez Cruz, or Andrei Codrescu, refuse to uphold linguistic and cultural borders, saluting the "disappearance of the outside" (Codrescu, 1990). This phenomenon of literary translanguaging is finally starting to attract the attention of literary scholars who acknowledge that translanguagers, writing in more than one language, or in a second (third, fourth etc.) language, "are not only a large and important category of authors. As acutely conscious of their links to others within the group as to problematics of language, they constitute a tradition, not an arbitrary assemblage" (Kellman, 2000, p. 51). While American literature always hosted a number of writers for whom English was a second language (Mary Antin, Ayn Rand, and Anzia Yeziarska, among others), it is only relatively recently that the multilingualism of its authors became visible, in part due to Nabokov's astounding success. In 1969, the first big literary award, the National Book Award in Fiction, was given to a foreign-born writer, Jerzy Kosinski. At about the same time, Nuyorican poets started expanding linguistic boundaries of American poetry to codeswitching and Spanglish, playing one language against the other. For many years, critics and scholars were not sure

where to place the hybrid writing that did not straightforwardly belong anywhere and continued to ignore the literary achievements of writers for whom English was a second language or who write in more than one language (Hernandez, 1997; Kellman, 2000; Novakovich & Shapard, 2000). In the 1980s and the 1990s, however, a new generation of bilingual writers, many of whom are writing in their L2, made this neglect difficult—if not impossible. In 1999 alone, the National Book Award in Fiction for an English language novel went to Ha Jin, a native of China, who had begun learning English at the age of 21, and four out of eight Guggenheim fellowships for fiction went to foreign-born non-native speakers of English (Novakovich & Shapard, 2000). Award-winning prose and poetry by Julia Alvarez, Sandra Cisneros, Andrei Codrescu, Judith Ortiz Cofer, Edwidge Danticat, Stella Pope Duarte, Minfong Ho, Ha Jin, Helen Kim, Jerzy Kosinski, Andrew Lam, Chang-Rae Lee, Shirley Geok-Lin Lim, Nicholasa Mohr, Kyoko Mori, Bharati Mukherjee, Luc Sante, and Esmeralda Santiago, to name but a few, completely changed the landscape of American literature, redefining what it means to be an American writer (for a discussion of American literature written in languages other than English, see Sollors, 1998).

Simultaneously, in the fields of linguistics and language education, numerous scholars accused mainstream linguistic theories of espousing monolingual and ethnocentric biases, which distort the fact that more than a half of the world's population is bi- and multilingual and that monolingual—and not bilingual—competence is the marked case (Braine, 1999; Cook, 1992, 1999; Grosjean, 1998; Kachru, 1994; Lippi-Green, 1997; Sridhar, 1994). However, while scholars continue battling against the monolingual bias on the pages of learned journals, the researchers' plight remains ignored by the general public which typically does not read scholarly disquisitions. Thus, the monumental task of "imagining" diverse—but nevertheless legitimate—"owners" and users of English falls on the shoulders of writers who, according to Hernandez (1997), are particularly important for any emergent community or for a society in the process of transition: "They must help the nascent community to reimagine itself through new perspectives. Having reclaimed a distinctive past through their texts, they must define, in imaginary terms, their present and project the future" (p. 15). From this perspective, it is not surprising that the theme of reimagining of language ownership dominates the pages of cross-cultural autobiographies in the corpus.

This reimagining of linguistic membership and ownership takes place in two ways. To begin with, by composing their work in their L2 the authors appropriate the language, implicitly claiming their right to it. Some also proclaim their linguistic rights and allegiances explicitly, like Eva Hoffman who positions her new language as the language of the inner self:

When I talk to myself now, I talk in English. English is the language in which I've become an adult, in which I've seen my favorite movies and read my favorite novels, and sung along with Janis Joplin records. In Polish, whole provinces of adult experience are missing. I don't know Polish words for "microchips," or "pathetic fallacy," or *The Importance of Being Earnest*. If I tried talking to myself in my native tongue, it would be a stumbling conversation indeed, interlaced with English expressions. (Hoffman, 1989, p. 272)

A similar stance is taken by Kyoko Mori (1997), a Japanese woman who came to the U.S.A. at the age of 20 and became a prominent fiction writer:

Trying to speak Japanese in Japan, I'm still thinking in English. I can't turn off what I really want to say and concentrate on what is appropriate. Flustered, I try to work out a quick

translation, but my feelings are untranslatable and my voice is the voice of a foreigner.

(Mori, 1997, p. 17)

Mori (2000) strongly responds to a continuous barrage of questions whether she considers herself a Japanese or an American writer:

Because all of my formal training as a writer took place in an American setting, and because I only write in English, I always thought of myself as an American writer—a writer who has learned much from contemporary American literature and expects to be measured by its tradition. I could not think of myself as a Japanese writer because I don't identify with the Japanese literary tradition and I don't write in Japanese.

(Mori, 2000, p. 141)

Her statement is echoed by a Puerto Rican poet Victor Hernandez Cruz, a Romanian-American writer Andrei Codrescu, and a Dominican-American writer Julia Alvarez, who refuses to imagine herself as anyone else BUT a legitimate speaker of English and an American writer:

The truth was I couldn't even imagine myself as someone other than the person I had become in English, a woman who writes books in the language of Emily Dickinson and Walt Whitman, and also of the rude shopper in the grocery store and of the boys throwing stones in the schoolyard, their language, which is now my language.

(Alvarez, 1998, p. 72)

I consider myself an American writer because I write in English and not Spanish. It must sound like a wild contradiction, but my poetry is in English and thus part of the North American literary landscape.

(Cruz, in Hernandez, 1997, p. 65)

I am an American writer with some twisted roots in other tongues: this has always seemed to me an occasion for joy, never a loss.

(Codrescu, in Novakovich & Shapard, 2000, p. 46)

Some of these L2 users explicitly reject any attempts to present English as their second language and claim full rights accorded to the first one:

What does it mean to speak and write English as a second language? In truth, I cannot answer, for English has been my first language since I was of an age to choose—which would be about the age of six, when I began attending classes in a British colonial school.

(Lim, in Novakovich & Shapard, 2000, p. 201)

I never wrote in another language. English is, in fact, my "first language" if we are speaking of the books and writing.

(Alvarez, in Novakovich & Shapard, 2000, p. 218)

Bilingual writers writing in their L2 are not the only ones who have to continuously argue their legitimacy and defend their language rights. Similar, and perhaps even more poignant, negotiation is taking place in the stories of ethnic writers born in the U.S.A.: many of them feel that they continuously have to prove to those around them that they have the same rights to language as white middle-class Americans. "Where did you learn English?" kids and teachers keep asking David, a third-generation Japanese-American, and he has to explain over and over that he "learned English in the same way they had, at home, in school, on the streets of my hometown, Chicago" (Mura, 1991, p. 76). Later in life, he finds himself trying to prove his superior command of English to his Caucasian teaching assistant: "Somehow I needed to prove that I had the same rights to the language that she had" (Mura, 1991, p. 75).

Most importantly, the cross-cultural autobiographies in the corpus suggest that despite the widespread multilingualism in the U.S.A., bi- and multilingual Americans continue to be marginalized and discriminated against (see also Crawford, 1992; Lippi-Green, 1997). They remain unimaginable in the country dominated by the one language-one nation ideology which gave birth to the “English Only” movement and rendered the subject of bilingual education the nexus of a bitter controversy (Crawford, 1992). For many monolinguals, be it professional linguists like Pinker(1994) or lay people on the street, the use of any language other than English may still create doubts with regard to one’s competence in English. Alvarez (1998) recalls one such encounter in a grocery store that took place soon after her family came to the U.S.A. from the Dominican Republic:

An elderly shopper, overhearing my mother speaking Spanish to her daughters, muttered that if we wanted to be in this country, we should learn the language. “I do know the language,” my mother said in her boarding-school English, putting the woman in her place.

(Alvarez, 1998, pp. 61–62)

This story, together with others, recounted below, suggests that L2 users’ linguistic rights continue to be challenged in the U.S.A. linguistic marketplace—based on one’s bilingualism, “accent,” “foreign” status, as well as ethnicity, race, and class.

## 5.2.2

### *National, racial, and ethnic identities*

As seen in the preceding section with regard to ethnic writers, in the U.S.A. context language is often implicated with race, whereby standard English is equated with whiteness. This ideology is not only imposed on the newcomers but may also be internalized by them. Thus, a Korean-American writer Helie Lee (2000) describes her parents moving out of their ethnic neighborhood because they perceived its linguistic mix threatening to their children’s acquisition of English:

We didn’t stay there long though. My parents didn’t want us to mislearn English. They worried that we’d mix up our *r*’s with *l*’s and *v*’s and *b*’s like they did and cripple our chances at success. They wanted us to speak the language as well as a “native” person. That meant white.

(Lee, 2000, p. 129)

Similar links between whiteness, Americanness, and English were drawn in the environment where a Dominican-American writer Nelly Rosario (2000) grew up:

Whiteness and blackness were relative, their meaning changing as I got older. Growing up, we Dominicans were the blacks and Puerto Ricans the whites in a Latino community that replicated the United States’ racial polarities. White status came with lighter skin, automatic American citizenship, and English fluency, sometimes at the expense of Spanish.

(Rosario, 2000, p. 160)

The dominant ideologies of language and identity position Spanish not only as unsuitable for those who aim to be white, but often also as incompatible with being black, as recalled by a Panamanian-American Veronica Chambers (2000):

As a black woman in America, my Latina identity is murkier than my mother’s. Without a Spanish last name or my mother’s fluent Spanish at my disposal, I’ve often felt isolated from the Latin community.

(Chambers, 2000, p. 21)

It is important to emphasize here that the connection between language ownership and race, perceived by Chambers (2000), Lee (2000), Mura (1991), and Rosario (2000), is not an idiosyncratic perception of highly sensitive individuals. Rather, it is a reflection of ways in which individuals are positioned by the discourses of language and identity dominating American society, and, in particular, the media where speakers of standard English are perennially white, speakers of African American Vernacular black, and where foreigners are funny people who speak English with a heavy accent, pretty much like Apu in the ever-popular TV show "The Simpsons" (for a discussion of discriminatory practices in American media, see Lippi-Green, 1997).

As to cross-cultural memoirs, not only do they depict American society as setting up definite ethnic and racial boundaries for linguistic memberships, many authors also suggest that certain ethnic identities may be hard or even impossible to perform in the U.S.A. context. Thus, new arrivals may face the fact that their own identity categories are meaningless to the members of their new community and that they have to reposition themselves (or to allow others to reposition them) in order to be "meaningful" in the new environment:

After moving to this country, I discovered that the label "Gujerati" conjured up no images amongst suburbanites. I was suddenly emancipated from my childhood culture and projected into being Indian...

(Kamani, 2000, p. 97)

Still, despite the international flavor of our neighborhood, I found it almost impossible to explain to my elementary school friends why my mother would speak Spanish at home. They asked me if I was Puerto Rican and I would tell them I was not. But Panama was a kind of nowhere to my young Brooklyn friends. They understood Puerto Ricans because there were so many of them and because of movies like *West Side Story* and groups like Menudo. Everybody knew where Jamaicans were from because of famous singers like Bob Marley. ... So in my neighborhood, my brother and I were a sort of fish with feathers. We weren't so much Panamanians as much as we were assumed to be Jamaicans who spoke Spanish.

(Chambers, 2000, p. 22)

This incommensurability of discourses and identity options may lead to depression, resignation, return to one's native country (if this is a possible option), or, in some cases, for a painful search for new terms, memberships, and belongings. To perceive these dilemmas solely in terms of negotiating old and new allegiances would be, however, highly misleading. To begin with, not all immigrants identify with their former countries or communities of origin. As illustrated in an essay by a Russian-American Irina Reyn (2000), the majority of Russian Jews in the U.S.A. embrace Russian culture but never identify with Russia or the former Soviet Union:

... I can never say I am a citizen of both countries. That is the uniqueness of the Russian-American experience. Russian Jews left with a bittersweet taste in their mouths, something I may have been too young to experience, but the residue of which was always visible in the adult conversations. This residue was particularly evident in their relieved Thanksgiving toasts, the unfamiliar glow of a Sabbath candle and sporadic memories filtered through a cloudy lens. Russia is a country that requires passionate devotion to the motherland, but as Jews my parents were always relegated to the sidelines. They knew nationalism was something they could hardly afford.

(Reyn, 2000, p. 152)

The urgent need to establish new, “clearly readable” subjectivities leads some bilinguals to reposition themselves (or to allow themselves to be repositioned by others) in terms of discourses comprehensible in their new society. At present, these postmodern discourses privilege hybrid identities, nonexistent even 50 years ago:

I came as a Chilean white European with two German names. Now I am Hispanic. . . . Instead of becoming just an American, I became a little part of America and a little piece of Hispanic-Latino-Chicano. (Brintrup, 2000, p. 20)

... for the first time, I too was seeing a new part of myself: a proud Korean American who could finally hear her own voice. (Min, 1999, p. 290)

The identity work going on in the pages of the autobiographies in the corpus is not, however, limited to deconstruction of links between language, ethnicity, and race and repositioning in terms of hybrid identities. Some authors, such as Codrescu (1990) or Rodriguez (1982), do not focus on presenting themselves in terms of the new categories. Instead, they challenge the need for categorizing *per se*, depicting such assignments as a “linguistic minority” as misinformed and limiting:

In the 1970s “ethnics” began to replace “aliens.” In the cities, “ethnic fairs” appeared, at which curiously costumed crypto-peasants sold fly-covered, meat-filled lumps of various sorts. . . . I tried to be neither an “ethnic” nor a “minority,” but an aristocrat, a poet. (Codrescu, 1990, p. 47)

These challenges do not go unnoticed and, at times, may lead to a public outcry of indignation, as the one recalled by Rodriguez (1982):

I publicly wondered whether a person like me should really be termed a minority. But some members of the audience thought I was denying racial pride, trying somehow to deny my racial identity. They rose to protest. One Mexican-American said I was a minority whether I wanted to be or not. And he said that the reason I was a beneficiary of affirmative action was simple: I was a Chicano. (Rodriguez, 1982, p. 148)

The controversy that arose around Rodriguez’s (1982) autobiography in the American media clearly demonstrated that criticizing the majority/minority dichotomy is a dangerous enterprise which may bring repercussions from both communities — as experienced by Rodriguez (1982) and by a Korean-American Helen Kim (2000):

I became a “coconut”— someone brown on the outside, white on the inside. I was the bleached academic—more white than the *Anglo* professors. (Rodriguez, 1982, p. 162)

They now have terms for what I was then, “banana,” or “Twinkie,” yellow outside and white inside. (Kim, 2000, p. 119)

Finally, while the main focus of this study is on American immigrant and ethnic narratives, it is necessary to underscore that the links between racial and linguistic identities are not limited to American contexts. A brief look at the memoirs of Americans describing their experiences in Japan (Davidson, 1993; Mura, 1991; Ogulnick, 1998) demonstrates that there Western visitors encounter the ideology of *nihonjinron*, which emphasizes Japan’s racial, linguistic, and cultural homogeneity and posits that no foreigner can ever learn to speak Japanese in a native-like fashion. “The incongruity of my white face and Japanese speech seemed to prevent people from psychologically registering that I was speaking Japanese.”

recalls an American, Karen Ogulnick (1998, p. 8), describing numerous occasions when people refused to interact with her in Japanese.

### 5.2.3

#### *Cultural identities*

The texts in the corpus also demonstrate that, in addition to racial and ethnic belongings, ideologies of language and identity link linguistic memberships to cultural allegiances. The narrators may come face-to-face with these ideologies in a variety of places, even in a nail salon, as in the story by a Korean-American Sarah Min (1999) who recalls slowly internalizing the attitude of Korean manicurists who had chastised her for not being able to speak Korean:

As I got older and moved to a city where I met more Koreans, I began to feel as the women in the nail salon did: That those of us who didn't speak Korean had something to be ashamed of, that we were distancing ourselves from our cultural heritage. (Min, 1999, p. 290)

What does it mean to be bi- or multicultural, the latter label so popular in the present day United States? The authors of cross-cultural memoirs do not provide us with easy answers on this matter. If anything, for many of them "biculturalism" is a problematic notion, because as newcomers they have seen their alternative systems of cultural values clash time and again, and have suffered the inability of explaining their "other," alternative, worlds to those around them:

I wasn't intentionally secretive, merely confused. I didn't know how to describe my life in a way that my friends would understand. Speaking in English, I had the vocabulary, but not the context: The words *family* and *home* would not carry the meanings I intended. Compared to their Chinese correlates, the English words were limited; they didn't imply generations bound up in one identity, rooted in one place. Using English, I couldn't convey my sense of loss. I couldn't make my friends understand how much it had hurt to leave Aunt Becky's house, how lonely it was to live in Glendale now. I didn't want to sound stupid, so I chose silence instead. I spent my time in my friends' worlds, rather than inviting them into my own. (Mar, 1999, p. 215)

Painstakingly I learned that it wasn't possible to speak up and be silent at the same time, or think about the welfare of myself and others simultaneously, or be submissive and assertive in one breath. (Kim, 2000, p. 118)

In America I was approached with words, and expected to communicate fully with words. Unconsciously, I did not trust words in the way I could an open face studded with shining eyes. In Indian culture, a large component of talking is equated with shame. Talking is heavily circumscribed, as it must be, in a culture marked by hierarchies, roles, self-censorship, and the constant anticipation of the needs of others. To speak openly and plainly, which is the American cultural mandate, to "come clean" on information, ignorance, feelings, speculations, judgments, fears, and desires is still largely taboo in India, and considered bizarre, with personal information generally used deviously against the fools who reveal it. (Kamani, 2000, p. 100)

Far from the "happy assimilation" of the early immigrants, many bilingual writers emphasize the impossibility of unproblematic biculturalism. "In essence, I could not meld together the two cultures or find a happy medium," confesses Helen Kim (2000), "Rather, I

dealt with the demands by pulling out a different identity from the compartments of myself as I needed” (p. 118). At the same time, while pondering upon the complexities of negotiating dual allegiances and contradictory cultural values, many authors, such as Eva Hoffman (1989) and Kyoko Mori (1997), emphasize that newcomers can become legitimate participants in their current cultural communities (at times, perhaps, at the expense of cultural expertise in the native community):

My life can be divided right down the middle: the first twenty years in Japan, the last twenty years in the American Midwest. I’m not sure if I consider Green Bay to be my “home,” exactly. Having grown up in a big city, I am more comfortable in Chicago or Milwaukee. But even the small towns in the Midwest are more like my home than Japan, a country I know only from a child’s perspective. I don’t understand Japan the way I have come to understand the Midwest—a place I learned gradually as an adult so that I can’t remember when I didn’t know the things I know now and take for granted. (Mori, 1997, p. 4)

My mother says I’m becoming “English.” This hurts me, because I know she means I’m becoming cold. I’m no colder than I’ve ever been, but I’m learning to be less demonstrative. ... I learn to tone down my sharpness, to do a more careful conversational minuet. Perhaps my mother is right, after all; perhaps I’m becoming colder. After a while emotion follows action, response grows warmer or cooler according to gesture. I’m more careful about what I say, how loud I laugh, whether I give vent to grief. The storminess of emotion prevailing in our family is in excess of the normal here, and the unwritten rules for the normal have their osmotic effect. (Hoffman, 1989, pp. 146–147)

These portrayals of former “foreigners” as competent cultural participants, no longer faltering, blundering, and funny, are an important and continuously rare depiction of what it means to “become” American at the end of the 20th century. Nowhere is this depiction, this attempt at creating a new “assimilation” narrative, as explicit as in Kyoko Mori’s (2000) autobiographic essay, inspired by yet another encounter with people who denied her the right of legitimate belonging based both on her looks and her accent:

A few months ago in Lake Geneva, Wisconsin, a librarian asked me if I felt “more and more American these days.” *I’ve lived here for twenty-two years*, I thought. ... The librarian who asked the question, however, assumed that after all these years I was still slowly adjusting myself to “being in America,” that living here everyday was not something I took for granted, the way she must take it for granted. Even though all of my writing life has taken place in the American Midwest, I was still considered to be a foreigner whose identity and allegiance were at some formative stage—more and more but not fully American. ... I’ve spent the last twenty-two years in the American Midwest: two years in Rockford, five years in Milwaukee, fifteen years in Green Bay. In that time, I’ve experienced the big events that make up the lives of many American adults: pursuing and completing advanced studies, finding employment, getting married and divorced, buying a car, buying a house. I have been an American citizen since 1984: I’ve voted, paid taxes, signed petitions, volunteered in a local election campaign. I have only experienced these events—events which are marks of full adulthood—in the American Midwest. Maybe that’s why I’m miffed by people asking me if I feel American. As an adult, I have never been or felt anything else.

(Mori, 2000, pp. 138, 141)

When looking at alternative narratives, such as Mori’s (2000), it is important to remember that while claiming the status of an American, Mori (2000) and many other bilingual writers are

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not reproducing the ideology of assimilation which dominated the early immigrant narratives—instead, they redefine what it means to be a member of the American culture.

#### 5.2.4

##### *Gender identities*

The fourth important area where bilingual authors, in particular female authors, often reposition themselves is that of gender. To begin with, the inability to fit within a particular society's normative models of femininity is cited in several autobiographies as the primary reason for immigration:

There was no future in Japan for a woman from my upper-middle-class milieu who wanted to be a writer more than she wanted to be a nice suburban homemaker.

(Mori, 2000, p. 139)

Perhaps not surprisingly, many of my German girlfriends... emigrated, like myself, to Italy, England, Brazil, France, and, of course, the United States. In order to escape repression, particularly of gender.

(Saine, 2000, p. 172)

Negotiating new gendered subjectivities in a new community may not be an easy enterprise, as normative conceptions of femininity and masculinity may be different within different communities of practice, and entail new ways of being daughters, sons, husbands, wives, parents, lovers, and professional males and females (for a detailed discussion, see Pavlenko, 2001c). These new subjectivities come with new linguistic repertoires and discourses that have to be mastered and internalized, often at the expense of one's values and beliefs. At times, the new positionings may catch individuals completely off guard, as happened to Cathy Davidson (1993), one of the first Western women to visit Japan in a professional capacity, and to Karen Ogulnick (1998) who came to Japan a decade later:

... the word *foreign* complicated *female* in ways that I still don't fully understand. Perhaps because in 1980 most visiting foreign professors in Japan were men, the rules for how to treat a woman in my professional capacity just didn't exist. The Japanese professors I met were all friendly, but it was obvious that my male colleagues, in particular, didn't quite know what to do with me. Should they invite me out with them for the normal after-work drinking as they would a visiting male teacher, or would this be an insult to me (or, worse, to my husband)? Should they exclude me from such socializing, as Japanese women professors were routinely excluded, or would I consider that to be insulting, not to mention hopelessly sexist? ... In professional contexts, more than one Japanese woman remarked that I was often spoken of and to with forms of respect reserved for men in Japan.

(Davidson, 1993, pp. 87–88)

Even as my fluency developed and began to surpass the level of English that was spoken to me, people often did not acknowledge my attempts to communicate with them in Japanese. On noticing how American men were responded to in Japanese, I began to consider that gender may be a factor that contributed to my not being taken seriously as a Japanese speaker.

(Ogulnick, 1998, p. 8)

The association between Japanese language and sexism, perceived by these two women—however subjective it may be—is shared by Kyoko Mori (1997) who carries this attitude over to her American environment where she favors the use of English:

Talking seems especially futile when I have to address a man in Japanese. Every word I say forces me to be elaborately polite, indirect, submissive, and unassertive. There is no way I can sound intelligent, clearheaded, or decisive. But if I did not speak a “proper” feminine language, I would sound stupid in another way—like someone who is uneducated, insensitive, and rude, and therefore cannot be taken seriously. I never speak Japanese with the Japanese man who teaches physics at the college where I teach English. We are colleagues, meant to be equals. The language I use should not automatically define me as second best.

(Mori, 1997, p. 12)

Recognizing the impossibility of reconciling the irreconcilable differences, several female authors, including Alvarez (1998), Mori (1997, 2000) and Hoffman (1989), explicitly position themselves as particular kinds of women who fit very well within the new community of practice:

This goddamn place is my home now ... I know all the issues and all the codes here. I'm as alert as a bat to all the subliminal signals sent by word, look, gesture. I know who is likely to think what about feminism and Nicaragua and psychoanalysis and Woody Allen. ... When I think of myself in cultural categories—which I do perhaps too often—I know that I'm a recognizable example of a species: a professional New York woman ... I fit, and my surroundings fit me.

(Hoffman, 1989, pp. 169–170)

Others, like Ogulnick (1998), emphasize the continuous repositioning and internalization that take place with the change in communities of practice. Realizing that local ideologies of gender position her in unfavorable ways, Ogulnick (1998, pp. 90–91) admits that she can't completely resist this positioning and, in her attempts to “fit in,” begins to view herself in local terms as a spinster, or as “old Christmas cake” (*furui kurismasu keiki*). Below she describes how an outing with a Japanese friend makes her realize how deeply she internalized the attitudes around her:

even just being out on a Sunday afternoon, standing apart from all the (seemingly) heterosexual couples around us made us feel the sting of the stigma many single women feel when they are referred to as *sabiishi* (lonely) and not *ichininmae* (complete human beings).

(Ogulnick, 1998, pp. 96–97)

In sum, it appears that, regardless of the context, ideologies of language and gender may be differentially affecting male and female learners, exerting more pressure to conform on women.

### 5.2.5

#### *Social and class identities*

“Becoming American is an experience that cannot be the same for every immigrant,” notes Lilian Brintrup (2000) who came to the U.S.A. from Chile, “The experience of selling tacos in Los Angeles and being a professor at MIT or a researcher at NIH produces very distinct human beings” (p. 20). Hers and other autobiographies make it clear that social and class identities are as inextricable from the issue of language ownership as race, ethnicity, culture, and gender. To begin with, upon arrival in the U.S.A., many newcomers discover that dominant discourses of identity link the identities of a foreigner and an immigrant with poverty, humility, and illegitimacy. “More than anything, I wanted to obscure my foreignness, that combination of ethnicity and poverty,” recalls Elaine Mar (1999, p. 158), who was the only Chinese in her high school. For Mar (1999), just like for many others, it is the full mastery of language that offers

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the way out. A similar perception of full linguistic competence as the key to success in the new society is portrayed in the memoirs of Eastern European immigrants Eva Hoffman (1989) and Irina Reyn (2000):

The class-linked notion that I transfer wholesale from Poland is that belonging to a "better" class of people is absolutely dependent on speaking a "better" language. And in my situation especially, I know that language will be a crucial instrument, that I can overcome the stigma of my marginality, the weight of presumption against me, only if the reassuringly right sounds come out of my mouth.

(Hoffman, 1989, p. 123)

I sensed the power of language in classes and on the playgrounds. I noticed the way the teachers leaned toward the more articulate students and recognized the status of those children who straightened their spines while eloquently retorting to an assailant's affront. I knew that having control of English was one of the few chances I had of not being swallowed up here, both as an immigrant and as a female.

(Reyn, 2000, p. 151)

Perhaps most poignantly class and language are interconnected in Rodriguez's (1982) memoir of a journey from a bilingual child of working-class Mexican immigrants to an American scholar and writer:

Once upon a time, I was a "socially disadvantaged" child. ... Thirty years later I write this book as a middle-class American man. Assimilated.

(Rodriguez, 1982, p. 3)

The boy who first entered a classroom barely able to speak English, twenty years later concluded his studies in the stately quiet of the reading room in the British Museum.

(Rodriguez, 1982, p. 43)

For that child the two languages were associated with different worlds: the private one with Spanish and the public one with English. Learning English, argues Rodriguez (1982), provided him with authority, confidence, and public identity that he may never have had if he were to continue his education in Spanish. At the same time, his fluency in English came at a price in a monolingual society where language competence is an either/or proposition:

... I felt that I had somehow committed a sin of betrayal by learning English. But betrayal against whom? ... I felt that I had betrayed my immediate family. I *knew* that my parents had encouraged me to learn English. I *knew* that I had turned to English only with angry reluctance. But once I spoke English with ease, I came to *feel* guilty. (This guilt defied logic.) I felt that I had shattered the intimate bond that had once held the family close.

(Rodriguez, 1982, p. 30)

This admission, like no other, questions the assumptions held by many, that there could be only one true linguistic, ethnic, and cultural membership, that of inheritance, and any claim to something other than that original membership is an act of an impostor. Both Rodriguez (1982) and Mar (1999) manage to reframe their learning trajectories, and indicate that rather than being outsiders' stories of linguistic betrayal, theirs are common stories of children who go beyond their parents' educational level and find themselves separated from the previous generation. Thus, instead of being an assimilated immigrant story, theirs is an all-American story of social mobility:

I also speak Spanish today. And read Garcia Lorca and Garcia Marquez at my leisure. But what consolation can that fact bring against the knowledge that my mother and father have never heard of Garcia Lorca or Garcia Marquez? What preoccupies me is immediate: the

separation I endure with my parents in loss. This is what matters to me: The story of the scholarshipboy who returns home one summer from college to discover bewildering silence, facing his parents. This is my story. An American story.

(Rodriguez, 1982, p. 5)

I wanted to tell my parents about my revelations, but I didn't have the language for it. How could I describe my essay on Narcissus as metaphor for the artist? How could I talk about our debates over the existence of external reality? My family and I didn't relate to each other on this level. ... Like my grandfather, I'd immigrated with no way to send for my family.

(Mar, 1999, pp. 273, 292)

This rewriting of “assimilation” stories into all-American narratives represents perhaps one of the most important achievements of bilingual writers—instead of writing themselves “into” America, as did the immigrants at the turn of the century, these L2 users reimagine and rewrite America.

## 6 Conclusions: multilingualism and imagination

In what follows, I would like to summarize answers to my four research questions and reflect on what can be gained by the field of bilingualism from a close reading of bilingual writers' memoirs. To begin with, the present study suggests that language learning memoirs of bilingual writers provide unique evidence of ways in which ideologies of language and identity in specific contexts impact language learning and use by particular individuals. Most importantly, these testimonies force us to reconsider our definitions of “native speakerness,” “language ownership” and “linguistic competence” and to acknowledge linguistic rights of those who live and tell their stories in “the stepmother tongue” (Novakovich & Shapard, 2000). Interestingly, it appears that many bilingual writers “discovered” the enriching and transforming relationship between their multiple languages, or multicompetence (Cook, 1992, 1999), much earlier than did experts in linguistics and second language acquisition, seeing the fusion of their diverse idioms as one of the key sources of their creativity:

When I speak Polish now, it is infiltrated, permeated, and inflected by the English in my head. Each language modifies the other, crossbreeds with it, fertilizes it. Each language makes the other relative.

(Hoffman, 1989, p. 273)

I did not stop being a Romanian poet when I became an American one. The Romanian language became my covert dimension, a secret engine, like childhood, while American English covered all the aspects of my lived life. In the deep interior I maintained this core of crisis, prayer, high diction—the phrases of drama—in the Romanian language. My daily language, American English, received both fuel and poetry from this core. Eventually they fused, but it took time.

(Codrescu, 1990, p. 46)

Sometimes I write in English and sometimes in Spanish. It depends. ... I can control both and mix them. All the possibilities of blending two languages are at the disposition of our bilingualism.

(Lavieria, in Hernandez, 1997, p. 80)

Consequently, I suggest that the study of cross-cultural autobiographies, as well as elicited personal narratives of L2 users, would nicely expand and complement previous research on negotiation of identity, which focused predominantly on oral interactions (for

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similar arguments, see also Belz, 2000; Kramsch & Lam, 1999; Pavlenko, 1998; Pavlenko & Lantolf, 2000; Tse, 2000). I also hope that the phenomenon of translingual literature will catch the eye of scholars in the interdisciplinary field of bilingualism as there is a lot to be gained from the study of multilingual writing, such as Nuyorican poetry in the U.S.A. or *Gastarbeiterliteratur* in Germany. The study of multilingual and L2 users' texts will redress the imbalance between importance accorded to orality and literacy in the study of language (cf. Lippi-Green, 1997) and significantly aid our overall understanding of the process of transformation of identities in second language learning and of ways in which linguistic choices function as "acts of identity" (Le Page & Tabouret-Keller, 1985).

To answer my second and third questions about which identities are subject to renegotiation, and what links exist between these identities and languages in question, I conclude that, according to the present study, five main clusters of identities may be subject to negotiation in the process of second language socialization: (1) linguistic identities and the issue of legitimate language ownership; (2) racial, national, and ethnic identities; (3) cultural identities; (4) gender identities, and (5) social and class identities. The discussion above demonstrated that for the authors in the corpus all five aspects of identity are intrinsically linked to language through links made available by the dominant ideologies of language and identity. Future studies may refine this analysis with regard to other identities, including religious and sexual, and examine if it can be applicable to other areas where negotiation takes place, such as institutional encounters.

To answer my final question about the relationship between negotiation of identity and the written medium, I have argued that cross-cultural autobiographies written by bilingual writers represent ideal discursive spaces for repositioning in terms of particular identities and the invention of new ones. While in spoken interactions opinions of some L2 users may be discounted by others due to their physical appearance or traces of accent in their speech, published texts constitute excellent equalizers and unique arenas where accents are erased and voices are imbued with sufficient authority. The notion of self as fluid, fragmented and multiple, espoused in these memoirs, allows the authors to explore the links between multiple languages and selves in ways that were previously nonexistent and/or impossible: challenging the essentialist notions of self, deconstructing various ethnic, national, colonial, and gender identities, creating new discourses of hybridity and multiplicity, and imagining new ways of "being American" in the postmodern world. Here, I have to underscore that one should not grant published texts a unique authority in establishing linguistic ownership and the ownership of meaning, since such an act would entail privileging middle- and upper-middle class L2 users with unlimited access to linguistic resources. Future research needs to examine how identity work and repositioning take place in the lives of working class individuals or individuals who have not achieved the same linguistic mastery as the bilingual authors in the corpus. Nevertheless, to simply say that the bilingual authors are privileged in having access to the written medium and an opportunity to position themselves as legitimate and competent members of their new community is to ignore the main function of these texts. A close reading of cross-cultural autobiographies of the kind attempted in the present paper reveals that despite the much-touted change of the "melting pot" metaphor for the "tossed salad" one in the U.S.A. immigration discourse, the pressure on the newcomers to become monolingual speakers of English may be very similar to that experienced by immigrants from the Old World a hundred years ago, and there are still very few outlets in which contemporary Americans can

be imagined as bi- and multilinguals. Thus, the importance of cross-cultural autobiographies —and perhaps even the more general body of writing by bilingual writers— is not in the fact that they allow the authors to reinvent themselves but in ways in which they supply new images, meanings, and perspectives for others through this reinvention and reimagination. For instance, Meri Nana-Ama Danquah (2000) who came to the U.S.A. from Ghana as a child says that in the beginning she did not believe it was possible for people to “become” American:

I felt that either a person was an American, or she was not. And, of course, the only way to be an American was to be born in America. There just wasn't any room for in-betweens.

(Danquah, 2000, p.xiii)

Soon, however, her own friends and relatives started pointing out the many ways in which she had changed and became Americanized; at times these comments sounded like praise and admiration and at times like accusations of betrayal, as in their world it was possible to be either/or but not both and multiple. It is the discovery that being a contemporary American is about multiplicity and invention as much as it is about “fitting in” in some preconceived identity options that fuels the process of reimagining for many of the authors in question:

My history of multiple displacements—linguistic, religious, relational—makes displacement (and relocation) my strategy of survival. ... Often longing for a more singular and straightforward sense of identity and identification, I nevertheless embrace multiple displacement as a strategy both of assimilation and of resistance.

(Hirsch, 1994, pp.81, 88)

Far from embracing “the stalwart thought of the Master minds of the Anglo-Saxon race,” the new generation of bilingual authors celebrates multiplicity of their identities and linguistic choices, renouncing the either/or terms imposed on them by the dominant discourses of language and identity. This invention of new models appears equally crucial to third-generation Americans like David Mura and to immigrants like Bharati Mukherjee:

The trick, then, was to learn to write out of my sense of duality, or rather plurality... In order to understand who I was and who I would become, I would have to listen to voices that my father, or T.S. Eliot or Robert Lowell, did not dream of. Voices of my family, of Japan, of my own wayward and unassimilated past. In the world of the tradition, I was unimagined. I would have to imagine myself.

(Mura, 1991, p. 77)

I would like to make up my own myths. As an immigrant I don't have models here in America.

(Mukherjee, 1998, in Novakovich & Shapard, 2000, p. 37)

The innovative depictions of linguistic competence and revised “assimilation” stories encountered in the corpus lead me to suggest that the cross-cultural autobiographies in the present study fully support Anderson's (1983) observation that imagination is also a way to appropriate meanings. In the present case, the meanings reinvented and appropriated are those of “legitimate language ownership” and “legitimate belonging.” Thus, the new generation of bilingual American writers deconstructs the links between language and race, class, ethnicity, culture, or gender, and between “Americanness” and monolingualism, celebrating multiple ways of being American — and bilingual.

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