

*Lives in Two Languages: An Exploration of Identity and Culture*

By Linda Watkins-Goffman

**About this book**

Have you ever felt like you could exchange identities with someone, disappear into the pages of a book and become the protagonist? Well, that is what it felt like when my students and I read the autobiographies, essays, and novels in *Lives in Two Languages* in my class of “Psychological and Social Background of the Bilingual Experience” at William Paterson University in New Jersey. The books by Richard Rodriguez, Eva Hoffman, Amy Tan, Chang Rae Lee, and Julia Alvarez spoke so authentically of the experience of changing cultures and identities, of crossing boundaries that we all felt we could identify, whether we had moved to another country or another city in this country. The profound process of discovering another self in a new context was fascinating, and it even inspired us to tell our own stories in class. Furthermore, in this process were discovered underlying universal issues--such as public and private identity, gender, generation gap in communication, and work identity--that have far-reaching implications as to the choices we all make as we live our lives.

Researching for this book, I found that class and race were other factors related to identity so I added some other authors, like Zora Neale Hurston, who in her day spoke about issues of identity and race that are still considered controversial today. I added research from bilingual psychologists like Salman Akhtar, sociologists like Erving Goffman, and sociolinguists like John Schumann—all of whom offered other perspectives on how changing identity can have profound effects on the individual in every aspect of life, including education.

*Lives in Two Languages* concludes with a discussion about the American identity and explodes common misperceptions about immigrants as students.

Although for the purposes of the textbook we were only able to include select excerpts from the memoirs/novels, I require my students to read the works in their entirety. The more our students read on these issues, the more they will begin to understand about their own identities and those of others. With the changing face of today's classrooms, all teachers—regardless of the subject they teach—need to understand the role of culture in our lives, and the reading of autobiographies (and some novels) has proven to be a successful method in which to expand thinking and facilitate discussions of identity and culture.

I hope you enjoy the trip you are about to take into *Lives in Two Languages*! The Reader's Guide section provides questions that will stimulate contemplation and active discussions.

### **About the author**

*Linda Watkins-Goffman* has a Ph.D. in Applied Linguistics from New York University. She is a Professor at Eugenio Maria de Hostos Community College of the City University of New York where she is Chair of the Department of Language and Cognition. She also teaches graduate courses for ESL/Bilingual Certification at Jersey City University. *Lives in Two Languages* is Dr. Watkins-Goffman's fourth book; another recent book is the college reader *Many Voices: A Multicultural Reader* (co-authored by Richard Goffman) published by Prentice Hall/Pearson in 2001. She is currently working on a group of short stories, *The Red Wagon*, set in the rural south and a fifth textbook, *Writing Lives: Exploring Identity through Literature and the Multicultural Experience* to be published by the University of Michigan Press in 2005.

### **A Reader's Guide**

These questions will guide you as you read the novels and excerpts from the novels that appear in *Lives in Two Languages*.

*Hunger of Memory* by Richard Rodriguez

Questions from the excerpt in *Lives in Two Languages* (pp. 17-20)

1. What do you think Rodriguez meant when he said, “I grew victim to a disabling confusion.” (p.17)
2. What would happen whenever relatives spoke to him in Spanish? Why?
3. What does the word “pocho” mean, and why was Rodriguez called that name?
4. What did Spanish mean to the people Rodriguez met at home when he was growing up?
5. What insight did Rodriguez gain when his grandmother called him as he was playing with an English-speaking companion?
6. According to Rodriguez, what is the definition of intimacy, and why is it important?

Questions from the autobiography *Hunger of Memory* (1983)

1. Richard Rodriguez takes the position that the acquisition of a public language, English, is more important than using the native language in class to make students feel at ease. Why do you think he feels this way? Do you agree or disagree? (p. 19)
2. According to Rodriguez, even though his parents were supportive of his academic success, they were a source of shame to him because of their lack of education. What effect do you think this had on Rodriguez’ developing identity?
3. What role did the church and the language used there play in the development of Rodriguez’s private language and identity? His public language and identity? (pp. 96-110)

4. Why was the color of his skin important to Rodriguez? What was the origin of this issue, and how did it contribute to his feeling about his own public identity? (pp. 114-130)
5. How did Rodriguez feel towards his siblings? (pp.190-192) How has his writing affected his family relationships?

For more on these topics, you might choose to read Rodriguez's two follow-up books: *Days of Obligation: An Argument with My Mexican Father* (1993) and *Brown: The Last Discovery of America* (2003).

*Lost in Translation* by Eva Hoffman

Questions from the excerpts in *Lives in Two Languages*

First excerpt: (p.32)

1. How is Eva's diary different from what it might have been had she remained in Poland?
2. What does Eva mean when she says that her diary is about her and not about her at the same time?
3. What does Eva mean when she writes about her "English self" that "exists more easily in the abstract sphere of thoughts and observations than in the world." (p. 121, *Lost in Translation*)

Second excerpt:(p.34)

1. Why does adolescent Eva feel less confident in her appearance?
2. How does culture influence standards of beauty and attractiveness in girls and women?

Third Excerpt (p.36)

1. Why does Eva feel that her sense of detachment isn't real or genuine?
2. Why did her friend say that he saw her "with a steel rod running down the middle of her back"? (p.139)

Fourth Excerpt (p.37)

1. How is triangulation a metaphor for Eva's acculturation process? Is it a negative or positive way of adapting to a new culture?
2. What part does language play in the process?
3. How is detachment a characteristic in the triangulation process?

Questions from the memoir *Lost in Translation* (1990)

1. Why do you think that the 1960s was a confusing time to immigrate to the United States?
2. What can we learn from Eva's experience that can help us assist children who immigrate as adolescents, particularly in the classroom?
3. What does Eva Hoffman have in common with Richard Rodriguez? Did she develop a public and private language?
4. Eva Hoffman discusses the following more common responses to acculturation: development of voice in the public language, detachment and renunciation, the need to overachieve, overidealization of the native culture, loss of confidence and self-esteem, and the need to triangulate experience. Can you think of other responses and strategies that you have observed or experienced?

Eva Hoffman continues the exploration into some of these same issues in *Exit into History: A Journey Through a New Eastern Europe* (1994).

*Something to Declare* by Julia Alvarez

Questions from the excerpt "I Want to Be Miss America" ( pp. 44-49)

1. Why was the family so fascinated with "The Miss America Pageant"? How did most people in

the United States feel about the pageant in the past, as compared with the present?

2. In what way does the author feel American people stereotype Hispanics?
3. What did Julia and her sisters do in order to feel they “fit in”?
4. What does Julia Alvarez have in common with Richard Rodriguez with regards to perception of physical appearance in this culture?

Questions from the memoir *Something to Declare* (1998)

1. How has being from the Dominican Republic affected Julia Alvarez as a writer? How did she get to be fluent in English?
2. How did Julia feel when she went to the Dominican Republic as a girl and dated the local boys there?
3. Why do you think that Julia hid under the bed to avoid going to school when she was a child?
4. Which members of her family and intimates have had the most influence on her?
5. Why did Julia Alvarez describe herself as “a picky eater”?
6. How are gender roles different in the Dominican Republic than they are in this country?
7. What have you learned about identity from Julia Alvarez? What does she have in common with Amy Tan?

Many of Julia Alvarez’s personal experiences can be found in her fiction; one of her best known is *How the Garcia Girls Lost Their Accent* (1992).

*The Joy Luck Club* by Amy Tan

Questions from the excerpts from *Lives in Two Languages*

“Without Wood” (pp. 55-65)

1. Why do you think this chapter is entitled “Without Wood”?
2. What is the significance of the word “hulihudu”?
3. Who is Mr. Chou and what does he represent?
4. Explain Rose’s dream at the end of this chapter.
5. In general, how did Rose’s mother influence her successes as well as her mistakes?

“Two Kinds” (pp. 66-77)

1. How did her mother’s wishing that her daughter would become a prodigy influence Jing-Mei Woo’s thoughts while she was growing up?
2. Based on what you know of her mother, why do you think Jing-Mei’s mother wanted her to be a prodigy?
3. Why was Jing-Mei so angry?
4. When the recital ended, what devastated Jing-mei most?
5. Describe the differences between mother and daughter, citing the passages that helped you see the differences.
6. Why do you think the chapter was called “Two Kinds”?

Questions from the novel *The Joy Luck Club* (1994)

1. In the previous section from the textbook, we examined the relationships between two mother-daughter pairs, Suyuan Woo and Jing-Mei Woo and An-Mei Hsui and her daughter Rose Hsu Jordan. What happened to Lindo Jong and Ying-Ying St. Clair in China, and how did their experiences in China influence the identities of their daughters, Waverly Yong and Lena St. Clair?
2. Why and how do we learn about identity in this novel? How is it affected by our closest

relationships?

3. As an optional activity, rent the movie *Joy Luck Club* and compare it with the novel you have just read. Are the stories of the aunties and their daughters expressed any differently in the film? What differences do you notice?

All of Amy Tan's novels explore the dynamics of Chinese-American life in the U.S. and understanding one's culture and heritage.

*Native Speaker* by Chang Rae Lee

Questions from the excerpt from *Lives in Two Languages* (pp. 83-88)

1. Why did the protagonist and his family end up spending the summer in Ardsley?
2. How did Mitt's appearance demonstrate his mixed background? How does the author describe his appearance?
3. Do you think that the prejudice shown by the nicknames used by the neighborhood kids is exaggerated?
4. How could Mitt's death be seen as a metaphor?
5. What do you think happens next to Lelia and Henry?

Questions from the novel *Native Speaker* (1996)

1. There are many interesting minor characters in the novel, such as John Kwang and Dennis Hoagland. What is their relationship with Parks?
2. How do the politics in Queens reflect politics in general in the U.S. today?
3. Parks' wife, Lelia, has an important role in shaping his identity. Describe her and discuss her relationship with Parks and his family.

4. How can one's professional or work life impact on his or her identity? Why was this the case in Henry Parks' story?
5. What ideas are expressed in the novel about cultural diversity and racism?
6. How is Henry's story different from or similar to Jing-Mei in *Joy Luck Club*?
7. How is the language issue different from or similar to that of Rodriguez in *Hunger for Memory*?

Chang-rae Lee's second novel, *A Gesture Life* (2000), similarly tackled issues of identity, diversity, and racism.

*Dust Tracks on a Road* by Zora Neale Hurston

Questions from the excerpt from *Lives in Two Languages*

First Excerpt (pp. 100-101)

1. What is Zora Neale Hurston's opinion of stereotypes, and why is it controversial?
2. What do you think that she means with her remark in the last sentence about class in the Negro race?
3. Richard Rodriguez has controversial views about identity and culture. How are he and Hurston alike? Different?

Second Excerpt (p.103)

1. Explain what Hurston means when she says, "I am not tragically colored."
2. Give a summary of a contrasting point of view with regards to race in the United States.

Then read the excerpt by Mark Mathabane on pp 109-115 of *Lives in Two Languages*. How is he alike and how is he different from Hurston?

Questions from the autobiography *Dust Tracks on a Road* (1996)

1. Explain how Hurston's real-life experience was reflected in her writing *Their Eyes Were Watching God* (1998).
2. What is Hurston's perspective on religion, especially Christianity?
3. Why is it that Hurston is not bitter in spite of being poor and having negative experiences in her life, such that her father left home when she was young?
4. Describe Eatonville, the town in which Hurston grew up. How do you think living there influenced her identity?
5. Hurston uses metaphor to express ideas. Find some of these, read them aloud, and give your own interpretation of each.

For more on Hurston, particularly tales and lore based on her anthropological work in the South, try *Mules and Men* (1994).