
Reviewed by Sue Hum, University of Texas at San Antonio

Winner of the 2004 W. Ross Winterowd Award and the 2006 CCCC Outstanding Book Award, Morris Young’s Minor Re/Visions is an engaging, elegantly written text that provides a poignant yet critical analysis of the ways in which literacy practices and cultural expectations influence our notions of citizenship. Drawing on the emerging field of autoethnography—autobiographical details of an author’s own literacy narrative set within the framework of understanding his or her relationship to literacy, race, and citizenship—Young focuses on two central issues: one, the complicated relationship of minorities, particularly those who bear visible markers of difference, to the status quo; and two, the notions of literacy that dominate the expressions of citizenship by the status quo and minorities. Even as he resists the master cultural scripts and hegemonies of oppression within dominant literacy practices, Young takes neither an oppositional nor radical stance, choosing instead a progressive agenda. Preferring to reform from within the system, Young provides one minority researcher-teacher’s honest, nuanced attempt to find fulfillment and seek justice within a “racist” system, even as he enjoys the successes and rewards accorded to him by that system.

Chapter 1, as with each chapter in the book, opens with a personal anecdote related to Young’s literacy, situated within the genre of literacy narrative. He remembers being evaluated by a speech therapist. Accompanying this anecdote are several literacy artifacts, the school pathologist’s report on his school health card, Young’s first library card, and other documents from his preschool story hour programs. These artifacts, according to Young, demonstrate the power a community confers on literacy, highlight the master narratives of transformation and success, and underscore literacy’s role of conferring citizenship in America. Literacy practices, then, organize America’s sociocultural relations to maintain the beliefs of the dominant culture. Literacy narratives carry generic expectations of adaptation, belonging, and citizenship so that minorities who “interact with dominant discourse . . . understand the material conditions under which they operate and must account for their positions within dominant culture in order to critique it” (41). Two more anecdotes position Young in the nexus of two cultures: minority—he is insulted when a comic book seller asks “Can’t cha read English?”—and dominant—he considers his Filipino friend Alan different because he had just been naturalized. Young argues that the rhetoric of citizenship, when applied to minorities, particularly those with visible markers of difference, has connotations of
alienness and raises questions of their legal standing. He calls for “alternate constructions that provide appropriate forms for a polyglot citizenry” (52).

Seeking to complicate the racial landscape beyond black and white by focusing on the blurred boundaries between Asian American and American cultures, chapter 2 emphasizes the material and psychological pain connected to literacy and citizenship. Young examines the literacy narratives in Richard Rodriguez’s *Hunger for Memory*, Victor Villanueva Jr.’s *Bootstraps: From an American Academic of Color*, Carlos Bulosan’s *America is in the Heart*, and Maxine Hong Kingston’s “Song of a Barbarian Reed Pipe” from *The Woman Warrior*. He identifies Rodriguez’s assimilationist tendencies of connecting Standard English with public language and mainstream legitimacy with Villanueva’s professional life critiques of systems of power even as he draws on personal experiences and writing to craft theories about literacy, race, and citizenship. Young examines the reception of Bulosan’s work as a “cultural translator,” who reproduces the oppression and hierarchies of race and gender employed by literacy practices while trying to keep American ideals alive. He stresses the role of silence and alienation in Kingston’s story of the disturbing incident when young Maxine takes on the role of the violent oppressor by “forcing” another young Chinese girl to speak. The chapter ends with a painful revelation. After leaving Hawai‘i to begin his doctoral work at Michigan, Young encounters a marginalizing realization: “I did not become Asian American until I left Hawai‘i and entered a situation as a ‘minority,’ where those kinds of pan-ethnic coalitions are important political categories” (71). Once part of a majority, Young now understands full well the stakes involved in the intricate dance between minor and major, the agonizing benefits and losses that come with being a minority.

Chapter 3 begins with a personal anecdote about how Hawai‘ian Creole fulfilled Young’s doctoral foreign language requirement, serving as a segue into a history of Hawai‘ian literacy education, its role in constructing a white culture, and the displacement of the native Hawai‘ian language. Young seeks to shift the debate to the cultural roots and personal choices where local identity, values, and language practices are legitimized. Examining two short stories by Marie Hara and Lois-Ann Yamanaka, he explores the resistance, schooling, and power roles for students who speak pidgin, weaving his analysis of these stories with the public debate in the local newspapers concerning Standard English. The story of Hawai‘ian Creole in relation to Standard English is one of assimilation, social advancement, and economic opportunity—a familiar theme in the concerns of minorities and their literacy practices.

Quoting from his teaching journal about his first teaching day at his first job, Young admits, “I exploit my ‘exoticness’ to gain some cultural capital in this class” (141). Having “embraced” the role of minority, Young now offers
himself as a “text” in the classroom (165). Chapter 4 provides four assignments that demonstrate the pedagogical uses of literacy narratives. Students read and write literacy narratives to develop critical skills. To understand the complexities of language practices in relation to whiteness, Young describes in careful, elaborate detail how each of the four assignments helps students understand that literacy is more than the ability to read and write; literacy has the power to “maintain systems of oppression . . . [and] to construct someone as less than a full person” (148). Offering an understanding of literacy as fluid and changing, Young also discusses how whiteness and its normative values are also constructed and maintained by literacy practices. These assignments that focus on reading and writing literacy narratives are the clearest demonstration of Young’s progressive agenda of working to reform the system from within, one student at a time.

Chapter 5 focuses on the professional, academic arena with Young highlighting the symbiotic relationship between “the personal and public [which] cannot be read as discrete narratives but rather must be read together as the parts of a whole story” (172). Referring to two personal literacy artifacts, a K-6 student progress report and a literacy worksheet, Young demonstrates how literacy and good schooling are ideological and political projects that put the onus on the individual and obscure the political mechanisms of control. Thus, he maintains, personal literacy stories can serve as the lens through which public, grand narratives can be understood, examined, and hopefully, disrupted (183). By purposefully assuming the role of a minority and speaking from a minority perspective in his role as a teacher, scholar, and researcher, Young counters what he sees as a racist, oppressive, dominant culture by describing the material consequences of race: “I was becoming Asian American because I had started to understand the necessity of addressing issues of racism, of knowing the history and culture of Asian Americans, because those things are most at stake when they are innocuously absent, when they are not a ‘critical’ concern yet” (190).

Minor Re/Visions focuses reflexively on the symbiotic relationship between the personal and the public as it explores how race and citizenship influence and are influenced by dominant literacy narratives. Giving voice to and performing from a minority perspective, Young eloquently demonstrates the problematic yet ethical choices he makes to research and teach within an institution that discriminates and excludes. At question, then, is if Young seeks to “convert” his students and what maneuvering room his students have in relation to their teacher’s overt ideological stance. In describing his pedagogy, he admits that “I do push students to think” (161), leaving me wondering if students feel compelled to echo the views and beliefs of their teacher. Rather than engaging in a dialogic relationship with his students, Young de-
tails in chapter 4 a top-down relationship where the teacher controls the terms to which ideology and knowledge are investigated, discussed, and produced in the classroom. I would be less concerned with the potential of reproducing a monologic system of oppression within the classroom had he included descriptions of his students’ dissent and resistance in his discussion on pedagogy.

Minor Re/Visions is an invitation to understanding how literacy, race, and citizenship are simultaneously rhetorical, ideological, and political projects. Young offers himself and his work as one teacher-researcher’s struggle to live and practice ethically and justly in both the personal and public spheres.

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