

Inside the Subject: A Theory of Identity for the Study of Writing, by Raúl Sánchez. NCTE, 2017. 127 pp.

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Raúl Sánchez's *Inside the Subject: A Theory of Identity for the Study of Writing* is a refreshingly practical book about heavy theoretical terrain, addressing some of the most obdurate binaries of writing studies—individual/social, empiricism/postmodernism—with an unembellished acuteness that makes his view seem as if it had always been there, just waiting to be discovered.

Ultimately, Sánchez's purpose is to outline a thoroughly rhetorical definition of identity, one that adequately describes the function of identity in acts of writing. His project, therefore, nudges us to revise our thinking about identity in writing, which Sánchez argues relies on a series of foregone conclusions. According to Sánchez, identity has been repeatedly and rigorously critiqued but remains stubbornly at the center of the way the field seems to imagine writing nevertheless. Sánchez argues, however, that this persistence isn't a bad thing, that in fact the intractability of identity suggests that identity is a recurring function of writing, and therefore something observable in acts of writing.

Sánchez begins with the premise that when we think, talk, or write about writing, we do so from the assumption that there is something outside or beyond language that we're representing, some referent we're aiming at, or grasping for, even when, as good postmodernists, we know better (8).

To illustrate this point, Sánchez provides thoughtful and generous readings of some of the field's major recent texts on identity, invention, and style, including Alex Reid's *The Two Virtuals: New Media and Composition*, Donna LeCourt's *Identity Matters: Schooling the Student Body in Academic Discourse*, Collin G. Brooke's *Lingua Fracta: Towards a Rhetoric of New Media*, Thomas Rickert's *Ambient Rhetoric: The Attunements of Rhetorical Being*, and John Muckelbauer's *The Future of Invention: Rhetoric, Postmodernism, and the Problem of Change*.

In all these works, despite their varied approaches and topics, despite their focus on writing as a fundamentally relational process, a space remains for the writing subject, an agent who is responsible for producing new text, or for making stylistic decisions. Rather than see this as a product of incomplete or faulty reasoning in the works analyzed, Sánchez suggests that this space, what he refers to as identity or interiority, is a fundamental if undertheorized property of writing. Perhaps writing, he argues, demands this space, this function that we call identity. Sánchez is not really interested in whether or not identity exists as identity (he acknowledges postmodern critiques that it doesn't). Rather, he is interested in what function identity continues to play in writing, especially at the moment of inscription. This shift in emphasis, according to Sánchez,

moves theorizing about identity out of philosophy—where it has remained even in writing studies, and which focuses on what identity is—and into rhetoric, which focuses on what effects identity might have.

After reviewing the postmodern critique of identity and some responses to it, most notably from “post-positivists” Satya P. Mohanty and Linda Martín Alcoff, Sánchez provides his own theory of identity as event, a term he borrows nominally from Alain Badiou and substantively from Jacques Derrida. The event, Sánchez writes, “[describes] the encounter between the functions of exteriority and interiority,” and identity “[describes] that encounter as it is said to take place at moments of inscription” (112). Drawing primarily on Derrida’s lecture, “A Certain Impossible Possibility of Saying the Event,” Sánchez argues that every act of writing is compelled by identity, that is, that writing necessarily carries identity with it. This is distinct from postmodern axioms about the nonexistence of a neutral language, in its suggesting that every act of writing also calls out, so to speak, to identity as a concept. As Sánchez argues, “We should think of identity as a feature, a function, a symptom of every act of inscription, at work in every scene of writing” (72-3). If, as Sánchez argues, identity is a Derridean event, then identity befalls the writer in the act of writing as a singular expression, and yet in its repeatability is not purely singular, but relatable, a symptom of language use. Neither an expression of who one (really) is, nor a violent, oppressive constraint, identity names the feature of writing that, qua writing, compels us toward a notion of agency.

Sánchez ends the book by writing, “I have not been trying to say something new about writing. I have, instead, been trying to say something new about what we say—and how we think—about writing” (113). This is why *Inside the Subject* draws so extensively on interpretations of many of the last decade’s seminal works in writing studies, in order to recontextualize arguments as they relate to identity. Despite this, or perhaps because of it, this reviewer would have appreciated greater development of Sánchez’s event-based theory of identity itself. Many of the book’s central questions overlap significantly with those of philosophy, but Sánchez makes clear that he wants to leave philosophical grounds for rhetorical ones. This move is understandable, but the task of severing questions of identity, reality, exteriority and interiority, and the event (and, indeed, rhetoric) from philosophy is a staggering (if not impossible) one, hence done incompletely here. The result is an occasional ambiguity of terms. For instance, the interrogation of the interiority/exteriority binary is sometimes slippery, substituting for inside subject, identity, writer, and discourse, and for outside reality, empiricism, essentialism, and event. This very binary—specifically as it relates to identity—is the subject of Alcoff’s *Visible Identities*, but regrettably—perhaps to veer away from philosophy—Sánchez draws only on her earlier essay, “Who’s Afraid of Identity Politics?”

Ultimately, Sánchez's *Inside the Subject* is a compelling nudge for writing scholars to bring identity into the study of writing itself, to see identity not as a purely theoretical construct, a lens that ought to shape our studies of writing, but as an empirical feature of writing at the point of inscription. Identity, Sánchez argues, is observable. This claim is profoundly valuable for writing studies, not only for its methodological implications but also because it reveals how philosophy's longstanding animosity toward identity has influenced work in our field. Identity is not a false construct, not a narcissistic delusion, not a source of bias. Instead, Sánchez argues, identity is a real and productive effect observable in acts of writing.

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