

**BOUND BY WORDS:
HOW EFFECTIVE IS LANGUAGE AS A TOOL OF EXPRESSION?**

LISA CARDINAL

**COMMENTARY: DENISE M. SVENSON
RESPONSE: LISA CARDINAL**

Every day and every second we are engaged, both voluntarily and involuntarily, in the process of conveying a sense of our “self.” This expression can be through the clothes we wear, our facial expressions, or our actions. Even though this comes as no surprise, the most common source we employ to convey a sense of self to others and even to ourselves is through everyday discourse. We are constantly engaged in the construction of our identity through the employment of words, written or spoken, that we use to express ourselves. This ability to use words to express ourselves is often seen as a great freedom. However, what many people do not realize is that language can also be a source of imprisonment, especially when we use language to create our identity. By illustrating how language has led her to take both an active and passive role in discovering a sense of self, Rebecca Walker’s autobiography, *Black, White, and Jewish: Autobiography of a Shifting Self*, reflects on how language can be both paradoxically conducive and restrictive in our attempts to construct our identities and to express ourselves effectively.

Black, White, and Jewish is a firsthand account of one woman’s experience growing up as a “movement child.” This term was first coined in the 1960s to refer to the offspring of interracial couples, which at that time were a rarity. Rebecca Walker is the daughter of a white Jewish civil rights lawyer, Mel Leventhal, and famed African-American activist and author, Alice Walker. Throughout her upbringing, she is constantly living in two worlds: the white, Jewish, conservative world of her father, and the emerging hip, liberal, black world of her mother. She finds herself bombarded by feelings of belonging to both worlds and simultaneously feeling like she belongs to neither. Her book describes her constant efforts to define herself in one of the worlds. Her autobiography becomes her struggle to challenge people to see

past labels of both assumed and often times imposed identity, so that they may discover the essence of who she is, which is not something that can be captured solely in the words “black,” “white,” or “Jewish.”

Before exploring how language influences the creation of our identity, one needs to comprehend why language is such a commonly used tool in creating our identity. In the beginning of her book, Walker writes: “Freedom can feel overwhelming. I would not trade it, but sometimes I want to be told what to do Let me master myself within articulated limitations. Without these, I feel vast, out of control. Like I can too easily slip outside of my own life and into someone else’s” (4). This quote captures one of the fundamental reasons why we use language to construct our identity. There tends to be a universal human need to make everything tangible and defined. Without limitations and boundaries, as Walker expresses, we feel lost or out of control. The goal of language is to make sense out of things by defining them within articulated boundaries. Thus, in a similar fashion, we use language to transform our “self,” an inherently complex entity, into something tangible and definable. Language allows us to think that we are creatures with lucid identities. While language is prefabricated and is meant to give things boundaries, it does not completely take away our freedom. American linguist Noam Chomsky states in his lecture on “Language and Freedom” that “language is a process of free creation; its laws and principles are fixed, but the manner in which the principles of generation are used is free and infinitely varied. Even the interpretation and use of words involves a process of free creation” (402). In other words, even though language, in its nature of always defining, is fixed, the words we use to define are not fixed units. The “principles of generation” that Chomsky refers to allude to the idea that words are dependent variables whose meanings and uses change from generation to generation and within the different contexts in which the words are used. The best modern-day example of this notion would be the growing popular usage of the term “nigger” by the black population in America. The term has traditionally been used solely as a derogatory slur by white people to debase African-Americans. However, in the current generation heavily influenced by the hip-hop/rap industry, “nigger” has

gathered several meanings depending on the person using it and the context in which it is used. In some cases, when the term nigger is used by a black person towards another black person, it is almost synonymous with the casual word “brother”. This meaning strongly contradicts the meaning the word was originally meant to convey. One can see this reinterpretation of the word by blacks of this generation as a subconscious attempt to own a word that originally was used by white people to illustrate their perceived superiority. Possessing this power to redefine, blacks illustrate how people can take an active role in reshaping the boundaries of a word’s meaning. This example reiterates the point of how language, paradoxically, allows the writer to take an active role in giving meaning to the word through reinterpretation.

Since language is open to interpretation, our identity shaped through language is also open to interpretation. This means that not only does the individual involved have the power to give meaning to his or her identity, but others also have the power to impose an objective identity on the individual that may clash with how the individual views him or herself. Author Diane MacDonnell articulates this aspect of language when she writes, “Discourse is social This statement made, the words used and the meanings of the words used, depend on where and against what the statement is made: in the alternating lines of a dialogue, the same word may figure in two mutually clashing contexts . . . different social classes use the same words in different senses and disagree in their interpretation of events and situations” (3). Therefore, the way we are perceived is highly dependent on cultural context. We can see this aspect manifested throughout Walker’s autobiography, especially in the different ways both the black and the white communities describe her. Because Walker is not purely black or purely white, there is a foreign aspect to her identity that both communities have a hard time relating to. While both communities are aware of this foreign aspect of Walker’s identity, they interpret it in two very different ways based on their predisposed assumptions of what traits are considered “black-like” or “white-like.” We can see this idea take place when Walker writes about how her high school friends perceive her: “When I ask Jodi or Pam why people are sometimes quiet or reserved around me, they say that I am intimidating, which doesn’t really answer my question

but gives me a general idea of how I am perceived. It doesn't occur to me that intimidating might be another word for black" (108). Walker then later examines the other end of the spectrum when she writes, "Instead of intimidating, the word white people have used to describe what they find unsettling about me, Michael says I am snobby, the term black people use" (271). Through these quotes, the reader can see how terms used to describe others, and furthermore, how we perceive others, are often culturally influenced and split. As a result, there will often be conflicts over how two people perceive the same thing or person. Oftentimes words have certain stigmas attached to them, as in the case of Walker, and these stigmas are given birth through language. Walker attempts to fight the stigmas, born in language, which people have processed to be part of her identity solely based on the images that the terms black, white, or Jewish generate. While these stigmas are embedded in language, Walker paradoxically also uses language, through the form of her autobiography, to contest these stigmas.

The use of racial and ethnic terms also illustrates how, over time, further meaning develops and attaches to words other than the original meaning they were given. For instance, Walker writes, "Jesse is a white boy who talks and acts black" (271). Initially, such terms as "black" and "white" were used solely to describe someone's race, an often phenotypic characteristic of a person. Walker illustrates that such terms have come to express more than just one's skin color. These terms extend to represent the behaviors considered inherent and universal to a certain race or culture. This idea further supplies us with an illusion that identities are natural and in a sense given. We grow up with the belief, for example, that because we are white we need to act "white." We act this way in the hopes of reaffirming what we hold to be our identity. Walker falls under this veil of illusion while growing up because she too was in quest of a tangible, pristine identity. However, as author Karla D. Scott asserts in "Crossing Cultural Borders: 'Girl' and 'Look' as Markers of Identity in Black Women's Language Use," "Those who inhabit multiple realities are forced to live in the spaces, places, and positions in between categories and identities resulting in the consciousness of the borderlands" (137). While this may seem like an affliction, "life in

the borderlands” actually becomes a blessing in disguise. It helps Walker to banish the faulty universal notion that identities are pristine, coherent, one-dimensional entities. Likewise, the existence of multiple realities challenges the idea that we need to behave a certain way to reaffirm our seemingly natural given and uniform identity. Her autobiography reflects this gradual process of enlightenment. Walker addresses the idea of racial terms being used to describe more than just one’s race: “What is whiteness? And how can one ‘feel white’ when race is just about the biggest cultural construct there is . . . is whiteness something I can feel on or in my body like a stomach or a burn? No” (304). By stating this, Walker counteracts people’s assumptions that she needs to act or behave in a specific way solely because she falls into a certain category.

Authors Sidonie Smith and Julia Watson further elaborate the issues of culturally marked differences and how those differences influence the ways we construct our identity. In their book *Reading Autobiography: A Guide for Interpreting Life Narratives*, Smith and Watson argue that “identities or subject positionings materialize within collectivities and out of the culturally marked differences that permeate symbolic interaction within and between collectivities” (33). One can understand the term “collectivities” to mean the process of reflection that occurs in the act of producing one’s autobiography. Thus, “between collectivities” can be understood as the process of reflection that occurs when one is not engaged in the act of writing but rather just in everyday acts of reflection. To explain their idea that “identities materialize out of culturally marked differences,” Smith and Watson write “One is a ‘woman’ in relation to a ‘man’. One is a ‘disabled’ person in relation to someone who is seen as ‘abled’” (33). Smith and Watson’s statement reflects the idea that these culturally marked differences are sustained through language.

Furthermore, we can interpret Smith and Watson’s words to mean that our “selves” come into consciousness primarily through how we relate to, or ultimately differ from, others. Initially, this seems to be the case with Walker while growing up. The title *Black, White, Jewish* alone lets the reader know that these culturally marked differences that Smith and Watson describe will play an active role in her narrative. Walker’s account of her childhood and

adolescence primarily portrays her quest to construct an identity based solely on how she relates to others within certain cultural constructs. This quest so much influences her that she accommodates certain aspects of herself to fit within culturally produced constructs. In their article “Enacting Gender Identity in Written Discourse: Responding to Gender Role Bidding in Personal Ads,” authors Laura Winn and Donald Rubin contend that, based on their “[c]ommunication adaptation theory . . . individuals vary their language choices within interactions, depending on their social goals. Thus, speakers may choose to emphasize (or de-emphasize) particular aspects of their identities as a way of aligning with . . . interaction partners” (393). Walker illustrates this point when she reflects on her experiences at Jewish summer camp: “When I get there I do what I do everywhere else, I heighten characteristics I share with the people around me and minimize [characteristics not shared] as best I can” (184). This quest to change certain aspects of ourselves is not specific to Walker alone; as Rubin and Winn reveal through their “communication adaptation theory,” this quest tends to be a universal phenomenon for all individuals who try to fit into culturally produced social constructs.

Walker’s use of “characteristics” also illustrates to the reader that she is quite aware that her identity is multidimensional and that there is not just one characteristic that captures who she is. We can relate the idea of a multidimensional identity back to Smith and Watson’s claim that “autobiographical subjects know themselves as subjects of particular kinds of experience attached to their social statuses and identities . . . in terms of many categories: gender, race, ethnicity, sexuality, nationality, class generation, family genealogy, etc.” (25, 32). To expand on this statement, one can use Scott’s claim that, “[a]s a result of movement across social and cultural roles, language becomes a vehicle for marking identity in those various worlds” (239). Both authors address that identity categories not only reflect seemingly natural, given characteristics of a person but they also reflect the diverse nature of our identity. Our identity consists not just of one role but multiple roles or multiple characteristics.

Our conscious choice to use certain identity categories to define ourselves also reflects a tendency to show which roles we

give preference to or which most influence us. Alberto Melucci, author of *The Playing Self: Person and Meaning in a Planetary Society*, articulates this concept when he states, "Identity, then, is a process involving constant negotiation among different parts of the self, among different times of the self, and among the different settings or systems to which each of us belongs" (49). We can best understand this to mean that within an individual dwell multiple identities. These identities are not always present or made obvious unless they are called forth in certain contexts. In Melucci's example, context can include anything such as the physical setting around us, a certain time period in our life, or the familial, social, or educational systems that we are engaged in. Melucci further elaborates on his statement by using himself as an example: "As I act, my being never completely coincides with what I am doing. I choose and discard, I assign priority to some parts of myself over others, I remain partly unaware" (49). Melucci's claim is apparent in Walker's own experience. Since many of Walker's experiences took place in a critical time period in which interracial relationships and racial equality, charged topics in her society, were emerging, race is naturally a very influential factor in her life. Being born biracial, Walker involuntarily becomes a symbol for the movement for racial equality and crossing racial borders. In the case of Walker, the reader becomes aware, through her constant use of the terms "black," "white," "mulatto," and "Jewish," that Walker tends to assign priority to the racial aspect of her identity. This aspect of her autobiography may provoke the reader to question whether she is neglecting other important aspects of herself, such as her gender. For instance, feminist critics who claim that gender plays the underlying role in shaping a woman's autobiography may accuse Walker of not giving enough attention to gender in her life. An in-depth reading of Walker's autobiography lets the reader see that while gender is not the main theme in her life story, it is not an aspect she altogether overlooks. In fact, her struggle to find acceptance among the women in her life poses a challenge to many feminist theories.

One such theory that Walker's book challenges is that of feminist Sheila Rowbotham, described in Susan Stanford Friedman's essay "Women's Autobiographical Selves." Rowbotham asserts that "the very sense of identification, interdependence, and

community . . . are key elements in the development of woman's identity" (Friedman 38). This quotation reflects the idea that women can only feel themselves to exist within a community of other women, mainly because they are subject, by their dominant white male counterparts, to being constantly defined as *woman*, "a category that is supposed to define the living woman's identity" (Friedman 38). The use of the term "community" has a positive connotation and leads the reader to believe that all women have a positive influence on each other. However, this sense of "community" along with its positive characteristics, is lacking in Walker's life. The words Walker employs to describe her relationship with other women tend to project an image of disunity and rejection. This rejection can be felt in Walker's description of her relationship with her great-grandmother. "I nod my head but still don't understand why great-grandma Jennie is always so angry, why she hardly ever looks at or talk to me. I feel invisible" (36). One would assume that a figure as important as a great-grandmother should play a positive role in one's life. In Walker's case, however, her white great-grandma cannot see past racial barriers to accept her own biracial great-granddaughter. Walker's father tries to justify his mother's behavior with the argument that Walker is "too young to understand." Walker's only response is "I am not too young to feel shut out" (36).

This sentiment of feeling "shut out" indicates that there is a sense of alienation present in Walker's autobiography, but it is not the alienation that arises from being caught under the label of "woman," as Rowbotham would argue; rather, it is alienation as a result of discrimination based on race. Another quote from Walker further illustrates this claim: "Years later, in junior high, when black girls named Susan, Donna, and Monique threaten to beat me up for 'acting like a white girl,' it is this attitude they must be talking about. I act like I am entitled to bliss, like I am not afraid of what the world has to offer" (41). In claiming that "women can move beyond alienation through a collective solidarity with other women" (Friedman 40), Rowbotham and other feminist theories fail to acknowledge that the source of alienation does not always come from men, but rather from other women themselves, particularly those blinded by racial discrimination, as in Walker's case. It is, thus, impossible for Walker to experience collective

solidarity or a sense of community with other women if her interactions with them are primarily plagued by rejection. Since the basis of the rejection tends to be race, the reader can better understand why Walker gives priority to race, a more overpowering factor, than she does to gender.

In addition to reflecting our tendency to give priority to certain aspects of ourselves, our conscious employment of categorical labels reflects another universal concept. When Walker employs terms such as “black,” “white,” or “Jewish” to define herself, her writing reflects another basic universal human need that is interwoven in language. Categorical terms usually do not just describe a trait of an individual but rather a shared trait of a group. Therefore, when we use such terms to construct our identity we are reflecting the need to belong to or be part of a group. Melucci writes that “our personal unity, which is produced and maintained by self-identification, rests on our membership in a group and on our ability to locate ourselves within a system of relations” (29). The need to feel that one belongs is most definitely essential to our feeling of “personal unity” and is therefore the reason we often tend to develop a social identity. In contrast to Smith’s argument that we come to know ourselves on the basis of how we differ from others, social identity is molded on the attempts to relate ourselves to others or, simply put, to fit in. Initially, when Walker’s parents are still together, there is no focus on the differences between races, and she is not pressured by the issue of defining herself. The need to define herself within an articulated category does not come until her parents separate, and the “real world begins to bleed into the margins of their idealistic love” (59). However, the most obvious turning point comes when she is discriminated against for the first time:

Bryan Katon, the boy that I like, tells me that he doesn’t like black girls, and I think, with this big whoosh that turns my stomach upside down and almost knocks me over, is that what I am, a black girl? And that’s when all the trouble starts, because suddenly I don’t know what I am and I don’t know how to be not what he thinks I am. I don’t know how to be a not black girl. (69)

From there on, Walker’s autobiography reflects her continuous struggles to define herself within an articulated group. At first, she

attempts to define herself as “white” going on the basis of other people’s interpretation of “white.” Then, she struggles to define herself as “black” by mimicking actions and talk that others illustrate as being inherently “black.” Each of Walker’s attempts to define herself within an articulated category meets with failure and an ultimate feeling of isolation. It is not until she reflects back on these struggles while composing her autobiography that Walker realizes that most of her attempts to construct an identity were based on other people’s interpretations of what black, white, and Jewish should mean to her. Walker writes, “It is jarring to think that most my life I have been defined by others, primarily reactive, going along with the prevailing view” (74). Thus, here we see another downfall to the objective nature of language. By allowing others’ opinions to take precedence over our own, we take a passive role in the creation of our identity. This becomes especially dangerous if most of the words used to define us are negative or confining, as in the case of Walker. It is very hard to reverse the effect once somebody internalizes certain words used to define their whole existence or image. American psychiatrist Thomas Szasz effectively captures the importance of the individual taking an active role in giving meaning to his or own identity when he states, “In the animal kingdom, the rule is, eat or be eaten; in the human kingdom, define or be defined” (Andrews, “language”).

However, even if a person takes an active role in defining him or herself, the act of defining in itself poses conflict. Our individual, unique experiences are crucial factors affecting our identity. However, the failure of language to capture the unique, individual experiences that shape our identities is often ignored and falsely leads us to experience what many term as an “identity crisis.” This crisis can be seen in the following quote from Walker: “being unable to integrate my experiences into one relatively cohesive self that is flexible and unstudied and relaxed means that I am stiff and strained, nervous and sweating” (271). This argument leads us back to the concept discussed above, that our identity is multidimensional. Smith and Watson capture how the multiplicity of our identity is related to language in the following quote:

The effects of multiplicity of identities are not additive but intersectional. That is, we cannot just add the effect

of one identity to the effects of another to understand the position from which one speaks. To speak autobiographically as a black woman is not speak as a “woman” and as a “black”. It is to speak as a *blackwoman* There is no universal identity of “man” or “woman.” This is because everyone’s experience is different and to be something is always context-dependent and individually influenced. (36)

This is why Smith and Watson’s argument that “this thing called ‘experience’ . . . is in need of interpretation” (26) is so important. One can never really understand the position from which another speaks unless one undergoes the exact experience as that speaker went through. Language often underrates the role experience has on the formation of identity because categorical terms often reflect shared group traits. These shared group traits make it seem that identity is “born, inherited, or natural” (Smith and Watson 34), when most of the time it is culturally or socially produced through language. Thus, since language cannot capture unique, individual identity, we often come to know ourselves in terms of social identity. In other words, we only get a sense of ourselves in relation to how we “fit” or do not “fit” with others. Walker’s autobiography reflects her struggle to break out of a social identity and to give life to her neglected individual identity. She does this, paradoxically, through the use of language in the act of writing her autobiography. Thus, while language cannot account for our unique identity, using language to interpret our experiences is the best way we can express any true individual sense of self to others.

Walker’s autobiography also challenges certain aspects of our “selves” that many of us constitute to be the basis of our identity: “It’s mainly experience which binds us, memory, and not blood I am tired of claiming for claiming’s sake, hiding behind masks of culture, creed, religion I exist somewhere between black and white, family and friend. I am flesh and blood, yes, but I also am ether” (312). Some people might interpret this bold statement as Walker claiming that what many of us consider our identity is in actuality a myth. However, her view on identity is further clarified when she writes, “I maintain that there is a ‘real’ world to be negotiated, but not wholly defined by. There are parallel worlds, I say, internal and external, no less real” (321). While Walker does

not altogether dismiss the influence and importance such “real world” factors such as culture, religion, and creed have on the creation of our identity, she encourages people not to let their identity get lost behind labels. Our identity, as Walker might suggest, goes beyond just concrete external factors into a world often left unexplored, the internal world of identity. This is a very personal, ignored aspect of identity simply because to many it is just too challenging. It means crossing the territory into an unknown, not-so-tangible, not-so-coherent world, perhaps into what some might refer to as a spiritual world. Furthermore, what makes this aspect of our identity such a difficult issue to discuss is that due to its complex, ultrapersonal, unknown nature, it is difficult to capture this aspect of our identity in words. While we may feel it, “it” is not something we can necessarily communicate to others as we can our skin color, our religion, or other such external factors. Michael Bamberg, in “Critical Personalism, Language, and Development,” addresses this stance on identity when he writes, “it can be argued that language and language use always constrain and ultimately also limit us—or, as Ina Uzgiris has termed it, ‘there seems to be more to our thoughts and existence than can be expressed in language’”(754). Walker’s experience of growing up with a not-so-coherent, intangible identity helped her to realize the importance of not ignoring this internal realm of identity that exists beyond language. For Walker, the integration of both external and internal realms is crucial to her construction of identity. Thus, we see the paradox of language come into play again. On the one hand, Walker illustrates how we cannot rely solely on language to express our identity, but on the other hand, language is the tool she uses to convey this key message.

Rebecca Walker’s autobiography illustrates that “language is a central tool in mediating a cultural sense of being” (Budwig 769). However, Walker’s autobiography also demonstrates that while language succeeds in “mediating a cultural sense of being” it does not succeed in effectively expressing an individual sense of being. Furthermore, due to the objective nature of language, “identity contains an unresolved and irresolvable tension between the definition we give ourselves and recognition accorded to us by others” (Melucci 32). In giving her the power to share her

interpretation of words to others, Walker's autobiography can be seen as her attempt to narrow the gap between these two points of tension. While language is portrayed as a barrier to constructing identity because it does not effectively integrate both our cultural and individual selves, one must also acknowledge that language is the tool that Walker ultimately utilizes to communicate this important message and with which, furthermore, she attempts to bridge the gaps among her multiple, often conflicting, worlds of identity. Walker's autobiography illustrates that she did bridge the gaps for herself by finally acknowledging all the worlds or realities that influence her identity and giving them equal importance. Unfortunately, a gap between how she understands herself and how the reader understands her will always inevitably exist due to the nature of language. However, simply by acknowledging the often ignored limitations of language in constructing identity, Walker's autobiography succeeds, at least in part, in narrowing this existing gap. Furthermore, for readers who grasp her message, Walker's autobiography can be used as a tool to facilitate the process of bridging the gaps among the reader's own conflicting worlds of identity.

WORKS CITED

- Andrews, Robert. "Language." *The Columbia Dictionary of Quotations*. New York: Columbia UP, 1993.
- Bamberg, Michael. "Critical Personalism, Language and Development." *Theory and Psychology* 10 (2000): 749-67.
- Budwig, Nancy. "Language, Practices and the Construction of Personhood." *Theory and Psychology* 10 (2000): 769-86.
- Chomsky, Noam. *For Reasons of State*. New York: Pantheon, 1973.
- Friedman, Susan Stanford. "Women's Autobiographical Selves: Theory and Practice." *The Private Self: Theory and Practice of*

- Women's Autobiographical Writings*. Ed. Shari Benstock. Chapel Hill: U of North Carolina P, 1988.
- Macdonell, Diane. *Theories of Discourse: An Introduction*. Oxford: Blackwell, 1986.
- Melucci, Alberto. *The Playing Self: Person and Meaning in a Planetary Society*. New York: Cambridge UP, 1996.
- Rubin, Donald and Laura Winn. "Enacting Gender Identity in Written Discourse: Responding to Gender Role Bidding in Personal Ads." *Journal of Language and Social Psychology* 20 (2001): 393-418.
- Scott, Karla D. "Crossing Cultural Borders: 'Girl' and 'Look' as Markers of Identity in Black Women's Language Use." *Discourse and Society* 11 (2000): 237-48.
- Smith, Sidonie and Julia Watson. *Reading Autobiography: A Guide for Interpreting Life Narratives*. Minneapolis: U of Minnesota P, 2001.
- Walker, Rebecca. *Black, White, and Jewish: Autobiography of a Shifting Self*. New York: Riverhead, 2001.

COMMENTARY

DENISE M. SVENSON

As the author of autobiographical poetry, I have often found it difficult to accurately convey my emotions through language. At certain times, there simply are no words sufficient to describe the way I am feeling. I have struggled with the notion of expressing to my reader that I find myself somewhere between melancholy and despondence, but not exactly depressed. There is no doubt that authors and scholars throughout the centuries have been bothered by, and have contemplated this deficiency. In her essay, "Bound by

Words: How Effective is Language as a Tool of Expression?” Lisa Cardinal does an excellent job of exposing the insufficiency of language as not only a “tool of expression” but as a means of fixing one’s identity as well. Through a study of *Black, White, and Jewish: Autobiography of a Shifting Self*, the autobiography of Rebecca Walker, Cardinal thoroughly explores the many complicating factors that make language incapable of truly articulating identity, but also astutely points out that despite its shortcomings, language is the best tool that humans possess for the task.

Of particular interest is Cardinal’s discussion of Noam Chomsky’s “principles of generation,” which identifies how the meanings of words change over time. Cardinal explores the meaning and use of the word “nigger” with an insight and dexterity that clearly exposes the fallibility of language as a “tool of expression.” Furthermore, this discussion left me contemplating the efficiency of literature as a means of expression and communication. For example, can contemporary readers ever truly be certain of the intended meanings of words in antiquated works such as Shakespeare’s? After all, although many scholars and historians have spent their lifetimes studying Shakespeare, there is still disparity among the definitions offered by different editions and editors, often leaving the reader to decide which is correct based solely on preference. One wonders, then, if an author can ever be completely successful in his or her task using only the tools of language, which are so susceptible to periodical metamorphoses.

Cardinal also raises an important point in her discussion of Laura Winn and Donald Rubin’s “communication adaptation theory” which states that, to quote Cardinal, “individuals vary their language choices within interactions, depending on their social goals. Thus, speakers may choose to emphasize (or de-emphasize) particular aspects of their identities as a way of aligning with . . . interaction partners.” This theory is of vital importance when understanding Walker’s autobiography, as Walker, being interracial, would find this skill highly valuable in her relations with different ethnic groups. Yet it also helps to underscore the notion that everyone’s identity, as defined through his or her “language choices,” is malleable. For instance, as an older student, I must constantly reconfigure my identity to conform to the social

circumstances I find myself in. Clearly, I would not use the same “language choices” with my twelve-year-old daughter as I would with my professors, yet both aspects of my identity are genuine and important to me. Again, this demonstrates that language is insufficient as a means of defining ourselves, as it cannot represent more than one facet of personality at a time, and must always leave other aspects latent beneath the surface.

Although Cardinal covers all of the bases having to do with the difficulties of language as a “tool of expression,” I did find myself wanting more direct engagement with Walker’s personal experiences. I was fascinated with the notion that Walker was a triply marginalized figure, in that she was not only a woman but black and Jewish as well. It is rare to find an individual who is categorically a minority, and historically oppressed in terms of gender, race, and religion. Even today, with the major strides women have made in society, I have sometimes felt that I was at a disadvantage as a woman, and can not fathom the kinds of prejudices that Walker must have faced at every turn, and the frustration and dejection she certainly would have endured. Cardinal gives the reader a taste of this in her discussion of Walker’s early encounters with a love interest who didn’t want to date a black girl, but this glimpse into Walker’s psychological world merely left me wanting more.

On a positive note, however, that I found myself thoroughly engaged in the essay and wanted to read more is a testament to the strength of Cardinal’s scholarship. Not only does her exploration of Walker’s autobiography substantiate her claim that language can never be an infallible means of expression simply because of its inherent nature, but she further challenges readers to ponder why we as humans feel so strongly the need to define ourselves through writing and language, and if indeed a more effective means of communicating oneself can be found.

RESPONSE
LISA CARDINAL

I was glad that Denise Svenson could relate to the notion that, ironically, our most common and relied-on tool of expression, language, may not allow us to express ourselves as effectively as many people once thought and continue to think. Rebecca Walker's autobiography brought to light the frustration in trying to establish an identity through language. This is perhaps a frustration many of us have shared but never related to language. However, I think as Walker and Svenson reiterate, it is important to acknowledge the limitations language has as a tool of expression, especially when trying to create the "self" through it. Svenson brings up a valid point when she writes, "One wonders, then, if an author can ever be completely successful in his or her task using only the tools of language, which are so susceptible to periodical metamorphoses." However, what I extracted from Walker's autobiography was that while language has its boundaries and is not completely successful in its intended purpose, we should not dismiss it as a tool of expression altogether. The vital thing is that we are not misled into the notion that language can account for all aspects of our complex, multidimensional identities. It is only when people cease to acknowledge this essential reality that language becomes counterproductive. For example, when we ignore the boundaries of language, we might be neglecting some critical aspect of our self that cannot be captured in words, as Walker's experience illustrates. While language will always have its limitations, we should not view it as a complete failure but rather just be more conscious of our employment of it. Furthermore, the limitations of language serve as a reminder that we should not be dependent on language as our only tool of expression.

Svenson also commented that through the reading of short excerpts from Walker's book, she found that "this glimpse into Walker's psychological world merely left me wanting more." I had to laugh a little when I read this because I had gotten this critique once before from a student reviewing my paper. Being a psychology major, I wholeheartedly agree that there is a lot to be said about the psychological aspect of Walker's experience. In fact, in writing

this paper I often found myself tempted to stray from the topic of language and wanted to delve more deeply into Walker's experiences from a psychological viewpoint. However, I quickly discovered that if I included and expanded on this aspect of Walker's autobiography, I would no longer be writing a paper, I'd be writing a book. Nevertheless, ironically three months after I had written my paper, while reading a book about Carl Jung for a psychology class, I found a striking correlation between Jung and Walker's experience. Jung had discussed how he had felt that that everyone was essentially comprised of two personalities. The first personality was what we might consider the "social" personality, consisting of all the verbal categories we can place ourselves in, such as "daughter," "student," "father," and so forth. The second personality was of a more metaphysical nature—what Jung sometimes refers to as the "collective unconscious." This second personality reminded me very much of the dimension of identity that Walker stressed which many of us tend to ignore. It is something that is in all of us, but may not be able to be verbalized, and as a result many of us tend not to validate it. If I were to ever expand on my paper, I would love to include a more in-depth analysis of Walker's psychological world. On the other hand, I am glad that reading the paper left Svenson with a yearning curiosity to discover more about Walker's life. I hope people who read my paper are left with this type of yearning so that it intrigues them to pick up a copy of Walker's book, read it for themselves, and formulate their own interpretations.