# *The Loss of a Culture with an Accent*

## A Sociological Reflection on My Assimilation into the American Culture

**Dora Joseph**

*University of Massachusetts Boston*

––––––––––––––––––––––––––––––––––––––

dora.acosta001@yahoo.com

**Abstract**: So the question is: Who am I? Who have I become? Where am I going? I started on this journey to figure out how to stay true to my French roots while thriving socially, educationally, and professionally in other cultures. Realizing that somewhere in the midst of my interaction with my environment I had adopted an accent that was not my own (the British accent), I sought to retrace my steps and head in a direction that might bring me some clarity to my present identity crisis. I decided to attend a university in the U.S., thinking that it might help me solve my identity crisis. Although at first it seemed like it only made matters worse, I realized that my adventures in America has allowed me to accept the fact that I was a French citizen who spoke French with a British accent. At the end of the day, I did not lose my French culture at all. I think the bits and pieces of the American, French, and British culture equated to a unique me I was happy and comfortable being.

I remember my last week in Paris as if it had occurred yesterday. Enjoying the summer that I had felt took forever to finally arrive, I had many things to be both anxious and excited about. My friends and I sat outside of Poilane on 8 rue de Cherchemidi on a beautifully sunny Sunday afternoon, and enjoyed the Best Butter cookies in the city as they warned me of the "Americans" in what I'm sure was masqueraded jealousy and envy. How would they know? None of my friends or I have ever been outside of Europe. Furthermore, the two, Marie and Jacqueline—about whose theories of these Americans we were most adamant—have never even stepped foot outside of Paris. So I laughed at their warnings and made pinky promises to each one of them that I would not become a brute American even though I was going to spend the next five years living among them as attending Northeastern University.

All of my friends went to school in the city. They were fortunate enough to be able to come home after classes and learn English the same way language classes are taught here in the States. They all spoke a soft and coy English that did not interfere with their charming Parisian accent. And they were all going to go to continue their education at Paris-Sorbonne University. The case was not the same for me, nor did I want it to be. I was sent to Bancroft Boarding school in England from grade 7 to grade 12 (in the school it was referred to as lower to upper class). And it wasn't because I was

a child who behaved badly, but mostly because my parents' work required much traveling and it was easier if my siblings and I were in school for a majority of the time. Consequently, my accent sounded nothing like the Parisians who flooded the cultured streets of Paris. More specifically, it sounded nothing like my friends. My accent became the factor that made me stand out. My English was as fluent as my French, and I spoke it with a British accent that often reared its intrusive head when I spoke French with my family and friends. People often thought I was English and I found it harder and harder (as I grew up) to maintain or convince the world that I was actually French without some long-winded explanation behind it.

Nonetheless, I learned to appreciate this slight deviation from the social norm and from my peers in my gradual growth and development. This experience (going to boarding school in England) allowed me to begin to pose questions I deemed were fundamental in figuring out who I was, what I wanted to do with my life and what I wanted to be known for.

Rolf Muuss (1996) explains in his *Theories of Adolescence*, how humans develop according to the **epigenetic principle of development**. This principle of development suggests that growth happens in specific steps and at specific intervals in one's life. These developmental changes continue to build upon each other and (if followed properly) result in a mentally and psychologically stable human being. Perhaps what strikes me as the most pertinent to my life is his explanation that "every element must arise at the appropriate time; the failure to do so will jeopardize the development of a 'succession of potentials for significant interactions' with significant others and the 'mores that govern them'" (Muuss, 43). This was certainly the case for me, especially upon the commencement of boarding school.

My developmental progressions through Erikson's eight stages were happening as they should. Then I entered Bancroft Boarding school and it all seemed to have come to a slow progressive halt. As Muuss would put it, there was some sort of hindrance or interference with the "developmental interaction between maturational advances and the sociological expectations made upon [me] the child" (Muuss, 43). At the age of 16 as I progressed through school I became stuck in what I deem to be the stage of **identity versus identity confusion** (the 5$^{th}$ of Erikson's 8 stages of development). I was not British (nor could I pass off as that) because my speech was missing that extra something that authenticated the way I spoke. Likewise, at home (according to my friends and family) I was slowly losing my "realness" as a French person as they accused and ridiculed me for sounding and thinking too much like the English. I felt like a chameleon. I seem to take on the traits and characteristics of wherever I went without ever being able to retain an identity I can rightfully claim as my own. Therefore, strictly following the epigenetic principle of development, is this fixation and confusion at the stage of identity vs. identity confusion going to result in my becoming a mentally and psychologically unstable adult? Am I doomed to never figure out who I am or where I belong?

According to Erikson's theory of identity development, identity versus identity confusion is the "period in the human life cycle during which the individuals must establish a sense of personal identity and avoid the dangers of role diffusion and identity confusion" (Muuss 1996:51). My **crisis**, which Erikson describes as "not just an emotional turmoil or emergency, it also has a meaning of opportunity" (Muuss, 43), was that I did not know which nation I could or should identity with. The back and forth that occurred between France and Britain during my adolescence caused me to lose whatever "authenticity" that I had

as a French, and I never quite got the vernacular down the way the born and breed British did. I think the situation would be simplified if the accent was all I had to worry about. But it became more than just the French accent vs. the British accent, or the French language versus British English. In my time at Bancroft I had adopted their style of speaking, eating, dressing, sense of humor, etc. I was a sponge and my fascination with the British and their way of life caused me to soak in their culture like a sponge. For a long time I envied the Indian, Asian, Pakistani, and Iranian youth who were my age and had this amazing ability to function in Britain without ever losing a sense of their culture or who they were as individuals. They spoke their language with each other, stayed faithful to their traditional wear, and spoke English without ever adopting the intrusive British accent as their own. Whether or not this was done intentionally, I was jealous, and envied the ability to do the same. No matter how hard I tried, I was too British for the French, and too French for the British.

This need to belong and to begin to develop my own identity and sense of self had a great influence on my decision to pursue a college education in the States. I remember, as a young child, my mom used to tell me stories about my birth. The way she always explained it was, while she was eight months pregnant with me, she went to visit her brother for two weeks in Redding, Pennsylvania. While she was there, she went into labor, and delivered me a month earlier than planned. After my birth, she explained, she stayed for one month and then we went back home to Paris. Of course, I had no recollection of this ever occurring. Then again, I was only a baby. But that story gave me an idea; since I was born in the States (and therefore had citizenship) I could pursue a college education there. Perhaps the United States might be able to fill in the missing holes to my identity crises and answer the questions that were left open-ended during my time in Paris and in England. This is reminiscent of the **Individualized self vs. contextualized self** contrast, as explained by Jessica Sawyer (2005) in her article "Confessions of a Maine-iac." In this article she explains the necessity of branching away from the comfort and familiarity of the family and familiar settings (i.e., a home town where one grew up in) in an effort to find one's individualized self. She mentions that "to be a 'complete' person, you must seek your 'self' in others, *but* if your 'self' gets too intertwined with others (e.g., always putting family over self), then this connotes weakness and a personal failing" (Sawyer, 196). As the case may be, I wanted, no, I needed, to break away from the familiarity of family, friends, Paris and England in a desperate attempt to find and fully explore my individualized self. I was tenaciously bound to this contextualized self formulated and projected unto me by my family, friends, and teachers. Branching out to a completely different culture would help me attain a different viewpoint of my "self." I had assumed an identity, personality, a way of doing certain things as a daughter, sister, friend, student, etc. I needed to figure out who I was, or would want to become, once I left behind this familiar environment. Of course as the article continues, Sawyer changes her mind and decides that the family helps one find oneself. I still believed that perhaps the unfamiliar territory presented by the U.S. would be helpful in teaching me something about me and who I was. It might bring some light to the confusion my accent (or lack thereof) brought to my world. So, anxiously eager, I boarded a plane two weeks before the semester began at Northeastern and prepared myself for the "enlightenment" I was convince I would gain during this experience.

My experiences at Northeastern University (especially during the first semester of my freshman year) can best be described as a time of youth or **identity moratorium**.

During "welcome week" of freshman year, Northeastern introduced this idea of extended and open class registrations. During this time (that lasted about two months) students were encouraged to explore as many majors and career paths as they wanted, in an effort to select a major and possible career path wisely. Personally, I deem this to be a poorly planned effort by Northeastern to decrease the number of undecided freshmen that overflowed the tiny rooms of the General Education classes (school requirements for all majors). Nonetheless, I took advantage of this period to find my niche (so to speak). I started the semester a Biology student on the pre-med track, but ended it as a Criminal justice major with the intentions of attending law school. Competitive by nature, I did not want to pursue something I was only "good" at. It had to be a topic or career that I felt passionate about. With each major tried (12 total), I pictured myself pursuing a career related to the major and changed my mind if I realized it was one that was not going to keep my attention for too long. In their *Generation on Hold*, Cote and Allahar (1995) describe identity moratorium as a time that "can provide young people with opportunities to experiment with roles, ideas, beliefs, and life-styles and can set the on a life course that is rich and rewarding" (p. 74). Welcome week certainly provided me with that opportunity—making it possible for me to try out as many majors necessary to make an informative decision on what career track I should pursue which was, essentially, at the core of my identity moratorium as a college student. And to be honest, I feel better informed and guided for it. I do not have a doubt in my mind that the career I plan on pursuing in the field of law is my "calling" so to speak. Northeastern's many career fairs, co-op program, and internships certainly tailor the education one receives at their university by encouraging taking a role-playing approach. This means that you get many chances to experience a "day-in-the-life" of whatever career plan, track or major you (as a student) have in mind.

Upon entering the States and beginning my college career at Northeastern University, I suffered a major **identity crisis** while trying to define myself by means of a career or major. There was still the notion of trying to fit in as French or English. Being in America did not exactly lead me to the answers I desperately sought after. Northeastern has a rather large French community. Since I was thousands of miles away form my friends, I thought that joining a French club would help ease my transition to the United States. I was so wrong about that. Even here, these French students asked the same questions posed to me by my friends back home. "Why is it that you speak French with a British accent? Are you from England?" Looks like I was doomed to be a fraud everywhere. No matter where I went, I just did not seem to fit in. Suffering from a major case of **identity manipulation,** I longed to "find a niche in this world and to be accepted, but just how one becomes accepted [was not] clear" (Cote, Allahar, 82). Is dressing a certain way going to help me look more French and less confused? But that would only make me stand out even more with the Americans (so dressing to stand out was not the answer). I even tried to lose the French/ British persona altogether. I figured maybe as an American, life would be a bit simpler and I would have a lot less to explain to people. I started to feel more and more that this "finding myself/ developing my identity" would not be easy. I was bothered by the many questions about my accent and where I came from. The more I spoke the more questions I received (from both the French community and the American students) concerning the peculiarity of being from France and sounding like the British. Someone even had the audacity to question my authenticity because I did not sound like the Pepe Le Peu cartoon character (a cartoon skunk that

spoke French).

Was that what Americans thought French people sounded like? I felt like one of the kids in the documentary, *Monkey Dance,* who were torn between their Cambodian culture at home and the influence of the American culture at school and from their friends. They had to deal with silly stereotypes about who they were as a race. And so did I. The more I mingled and socialized with my peers, the more I realized that fitting in with the American culture (adopting the vernacular, style, hobbies, pop culture, etc.) is causing me to digress from the French community I so desperately wanted to be faithful to. Perhaps my trip to America added more to my confusion than I had anticipated**.** Like the children in the documentary, there was a need to remain faithful to my culture but at the same time fit in with my peers in a fashion that was not going to make it difficult to build a social life. Who was I trying to prove something? When I came to the States, I lost track of the reasons why I wanted so badly to be either French or British. What was wrong using a little bit of both with a hint of American to formulate a new self? Did I have to pick just one nation, one language and one culture? Could I not stay faithful to all of them?

Now on a new quest of combining the many nations that contributed to formation of my "new" self, I found a major commonality between my French European background and the American culture I was presently immersed in. There was a youth and young adult subculture that was as vibrant and involved in the community and every day life here in the States as it was back home in France. One might even argue that they were the back bone of the American way of life that was not given enough credit and acknowledgement for their potential as well as their influence on the community. I discovered a peculiar thing that both cultures shared (no matter the accent)—that is, the struggle of the youth to be gainfully employed (and utilizing their rather expensive diplomas) upon graduation from college or university. I laughed in sadness, upon the realization that a college education and degree had become as valid as a high school diploma, as job recruiters now sought and required advanced degrees (masters, and PhD's) to work for their companies or organizations. The youth that graduated from school were finding employment in jobs that had little benefits and security, such as waitressing or cashiering in fast food restaurants, etc. Therefore, in this scenario "the degree is a passport that allows one to travel the road to success, but it certainly is not a ticket to success" (Cote and Allahar, 40). The youth were the producers and **consumers** at work, school, civic life and culture. The biggest example of this is the percentage of the age group of the youth and young adults employed in today's America in comparison to fifty years ago.

The youth become the consumers mainly because they are the major targeted audience when it comes to advertisement, television shows, music, and so on. The fact is that the subliminal message sent by each medium keeps them constantly buying things they often do not need. In *Generation on Hold* Cote and Allahar write that "the controlled are not even aware of the fact that they are being controlled, and as a consequence, they offer little to no resistance to it" (130). This applies to the youth here in the United States as well as the many like myself back home. This issue transcends the borders and parameters let by accents and the cultures they hold and represent. The ability to maintain such a subtle control over such a large group or audience keeps a sort of twisted cycle alive. After graduating, one gets a low paying, low security job, make enough to pay student loans, the rest used for continuing to buy things one probably has no need for.

In light of this discovery, as time progressed, I became aware of my **racial iden-**

**tity**, when I experienced and celebrated black history month for the first time in my life during my second semester as a freshman at Northeastern University. Black History month is non-existent in France. At the student center, they had a round table discussion set up to speak about the many accomplishments and contributions that African Americans made to the society. Everything from inventions to civil rights activist and movements were discussed. What I found even more interesting was the obvious separation which occurred as the students progressively took their seats to assist the event. All of the black kids stuck together at various tables in the room. But this observation was not restricted to only the discussion panel; it was apparent all over the campus—in the Student Center, the clubs and sports, and the parties and events that occurred on campus almost every weekend. It was a kind of subconscious segregation that occurred naturally as youth tried to find people they were able to identify with. Beverly Daniel Tatum (1997) talks about this in her book "*Why are all the Black Kids Sitting Together in the Cafeteria?.*" She explains that "black students practice their 'language' in black student unions and cultural centers and at the college dinning halls on predominantly white campuses all over the United States" (p. 77). There was this subculture that existed within the university and I was fascinated by it.

As Nancy Duetsch (2008) explains in her book *Pride in the Projects* "we define ourselves in part by who we are not" (p. 80). And language was just one of the many ways the Black kids on campus defined themselves. the question "where are you from?" took on a whole new meaning as cities, suburbs, and the projects, projected and image that they either took pride in or were trying to forget and run away from. Class and gender identities intertwined with race and the inequalities associated with them. I began to piece together these

definitions to develop a sort of "working identity"It's almost as if all the black kids shared an unspoken need and want to keep their culture and identity as African Americans alive. Their world had its own language, music, trends, traditions, etc., and although they lived, work, played, partied, and studied with a variety of different races and nationalities, their identity as African Americans were evident, and thriving. For a while, after this discovery, I assumed the identity of African American. When people asked me what I "was," I simply responded "African American." It was an identity that I found short, sweet, and to the point—one that did not require the explanations that my French identity did. I took my time to carefully mimic their tongue as I fell in love with the language they spoke with an eloquence that was almost rhythmical. Slang fascinated me and the rappers were poets who saw the world as their canvas and the issues that they faced on a daily basis, their brush. They were nothing like the ones I was used to in Europe. I realize the important role that language played in their lives. There wasn't just one kind of language (or slang), there was a variety of different ways to say many things and it was constantly evolving to something new, better, shorter, and to the point. According to David Poveda (2006), "transformations in language use can be seen as part of a broader effort to develop a particular **youth style** that along with language includes forms of self preservation (dress and body care), investment in academic and non-academic activities (sports and computers), or musical preferences" (42). Each were united and individualized by the way they spoke, activities they participated in, and the music they listened to. This was the youth style and I fell in love with it.

I remember the time my racial authenticity was questioned. During the welcome week, all the clubs, organizations, sports, fraternities, and sororities were displaying information about who they were, and giv-

ing the student body a chance to sign up and join their organization. I saw a table that had a huge poster that said "hip hop dancing." I found a huge relief at the fact that all the people at that table were black. For whatever reason, I automatically assumed that I would have no problem communicating and relating to them because as far as skin color was concerned, we all looked alike. I walked up to the table eager to sign up. The first question I asked was "what is this club about? What do you do?" Right away, my accent drew attention to me in a way I wish it did not. One of the girls looked at me with a curious look in her eyes. Then she replied "what do English people know about hip hop? Can you even dance? This club is about hip hop dancing." I did not know where to begin. I replied "I'm not English, I'm French, and furthermore, what does that have to do with dancing?" Again the same girl replied "yo forget this chick; she ain't even one of us." One of them? What, now **race as a shared identity** was the problem. I did not look or sound black enough to join the group. One of them even ventured as far as calling me an "Oreo Cookie" (insinuating I was black on the outside and white on the inside). This was mind boggling. In the book *Pride in the Projects*, Deutsch explains that Jade's (one of the girls at the club) actions channel an idea of 'racial authenticity' that privileges pigmentation over other aspects of social experience" (p. 103). This was exactly what was happening between me and these girls. Somehow my accent and country I was from equated to my not being an authentic black person. Therefore, racially, they felt they did not share the same identity.

Moreover, I stumbled upon the subtle racism that still existed in the U.S. during my sophomore year of college at Northeastern University. I was enrolled in an international relations class that was taught by a professor from Bulgaria. He spoke English with an accent that was heavy and evident that although his complexion was the same as the many Caucasian Americans here in the States, he was not born and raised in the U.S. I remember feeling a sign of relief when I heard him speak on the first day of class. I thought; surely this professor will be able to understand the difficulties and alienation one feels being from a different country, and speaking a different language with an accent you cannot shake. Oddly enough, that was not the case. In a lecture class of about 60 students I and one other student (my roommate) were the only minorities in the class. And as such, the professor never referred to us by our last names (like he did for all the other students). Rather, when I was called upon for raising my hand to answer a question, he referred to me as "the black girl in the back" and to my roommate as "the Spanish girl in the back." At this point I realize that **racism** had reared its ugly head once again, and it came from the place and person I least expected. In his article "Hmong American Youth American Dream, American Nightmare," William Wei (1989) writes "As a people of color in the United States, the Hmong have been exposed to the usual stereotyping, discrimination, harassment, and violence, giving rise to feelings of fear and inferiority" (p. 319). This is the case for many minorities, not just the Hmong, and it certainly applied to me as I sat in class feeling embarrassed and alienated because everyone else had a name, I was noticed by my color. Racism exists in Paris, and it goes beyond an accent. But I somehow thought that it was more understood here. Paris is a predominantly Caucasian country, with an overbearing French culture. Although subcultures exist within the country, one was still living in a French land, surrounded by the French culture, language, and overall way of life.

I came to America, expecting something different, perhaps a bit of understanding since (in my observations) the American culture consists of bits and pieces of the many subcultures that comprise it.

Why then is it so hard to accept a minority with and for their differences? Do you not need "us" to maintain your identity and ideals as an American culture? I never did understand that. Although this experience was my first here in the States, it certainly was not my last. Since then, my British accent drew attention to me when I spoke, but did not protect me from the usual stereotypes and racist antics associates with being a black person living in the United States. Since that first encounter with racism in this country, I found myself trying to look and sound more like an American than French. I kept thinking, perhaps, if I can mimic the American accent, I would not be made fun of, slandered, or picked on as much. At this point, I was trading in my accent, culture, and pride that I took in being French for peace of mind in a land suffering from its own identity crisis.

As a child, my brother, sister and I traveled constantly. Mom was the legal representative for World Vision, an international company, and dad was an engineer who spent most of his time heading and overseeing the development of new electric companies in a variety of different countries. This meant a childhood of constant travel, new schools, new cultures, and an ever changing and infinite number of "friends." Even before I began to struggle with the idea of needing to be authenticated as a French citizen, I felt that as I grew from a child into a young adult, I always took with me a part of each and every country, culture, language and person I have met up until my boarding school days. In her book, *Act Your Age*, Nancy Lesko (2001) argues that adolescence can be defined as "always evolving," suggesting that as time progresses and social ways of life begin to change, adolescence will change as well. Therefore time takes on this sort of shadowing role, as it is a constant factor at all points of the adolescent's lifetime. She explains this as **panoptical time**. As I grew and matured, I experienced and array of so-

cietal and social ways of life ranging from the laid back way life of Haiti in the Caribbean to the English influenced life of the South Africans and everything in the middle. The combination of all these cultures and countries had begun to influence the development of my identity, unique in its own right. The amount of time I spent in each culture and country contributed to the development or evolution (so to speak) of my identity. I consisted of bits and pieces and everyone, everywhere, and everything I did up to boarding school. So, playing the cards that I was dealt, perhaps this identity crisis I was experiencing was doomed to happen, no matter what.

The constant changes of scenery contributed to my overall need to identity with a specific group of people—to have a culture I can retain and claim as my own (so to speak). As I struggled to maintain my **ego identity** I became more aware of the sense of confusion that existed within me. Erikson explains the concept of ego identity in the sense of "how an individual maintains or loses their sense of continuity as individuals over time and through social institutions" (Cote and Allahar, 73). That was exactly the case for me. As I matured, the social situations I was exposed to at school (boarding school and college) and the many countries, cities, towns, and neighborhood I moved to, made it rather difficult for me to maintain a "sense of continuity" as an individual, especially since as a child I was very impressionable. Everything that I witnessed, and participated in exerted some sort of influence over me, the most pertinent being my attending a boarding school in England and adapting the British accent as my own. I carried this with me and over all aspect of my life, especially when I went back home to Paris. The realization that the English accent stayed strong even while I spoke French was a wake up call (if nothing else) that my individualism was slowly slipping away.

Furthermore, Erikson describes the **ego**

in the sense that it "designates a set of mental processes that are created by dialectic tensions" (Cote and Allahar, 72). Therefore, the ego determines the aptitude or capability of being an active social agent. My interactions with the French "world" and the British "world" around me and the many social situations I encounter, contribute to the shaping and formation of my ego. My identity as a French citizen accustomed to the British culture and language (and every thing that led up to it) formed as a result of my ego and contributed to the ego identity. The too go hand in hand and were necessary in helping me come to the realization of my lack of individualism.

My life in the States taught me more about myself than I first anticipated. As I progressed with my education in college, I experienced mini self-discoveries that rendered deeper than a need to adopt the "right" accent. I realized that as a French citizen living in the United States, I had to work hard to stay true to my culture and keep the promise I made to my friends before I left to begin my life in the States. I became more aware of the idea of **gender intensification and the ideology of gender** when I joined the girls' basketball team at Northeastern University and again when I got my first job at Roxies of Quincy meat market. I realized there were "exaggerated notions associated with the different roles that still hold many men and women in separate spheres of endeavor" (Cote and Allahar, 84). I remember when I went to my first practice, I was underestimated as a basketball player because I was small (5 feet, 2 inches), too "girly" and many of my teammates asked me "what do French people know about playing ball anyway?" I was being ridiculed because I did not look manly enough; therefore people automatically assumed that I would not know what to do on the court. Admittedly, I was intimidated by the massive height and muscles of all the women in the team, but I was not going to let that throw me off my game. It became more than just having to prove myself to them; I had to represent for the entire French basketball players from back home as well. This idea that you had to look like a man, dress like a tomboy and be "hood" to play ball had to go, and I was going to be the one to prove them wrong.

This gender ideology was not restricted only to the basketball court. I held my first job in the States as a cashier at Roxies (a meat market in Quincy). I was employed as a cashier. During my time there, I realized there were certain job functions that they always asked the female employees to perform. The one I hated the most was having to clean the bathroom. It was a unisex bathroom reserved only for the employees, but no matter who was actually working, it was always a female employee's job to clean it. When I asked the managers (both male) why only females cleaned the bathroom, they laughed and replied "because I figured you guys would be naturals at it." That was one of the most insulting things I ever heard. The funny thing was, back in France I never scrubbed a bathroom. This was a complete first to me. How is it in a society as advanced as is the U.S. today people still try to find ways to uphold and enforce certain gender differences between men and women?

Feeling a need to reach out to this community and understand the youth of this, the American culture, I decided to become a tutor on campus. Back home, my friends and I used to get a kick out of making fun of the American tourists that flooded the streets of Paris in search of some type of culture. Since the table had turned (so to speak) it was only fair that I took the time to understand the American youth, their culture and way of life, especially if I was going to incorporate the American culture into my "new" identity. Tutoring seemed like the best place to starts. To my surprise, a majority of my tutees were minorities, African American athletes and freshmen. Many came to see me to get help with En-

glish and mathematics (college algebra and trigonometry). It seemed that the biggest problem was learning to write a good paper. Many told me that when they begin to write a paper, they begin writing the body paragraphs first and then proceed to type their introduction and thesis. Some did not know what a thesis was, and had no idea how to begin to formulate a thesis. It might be wrong to say, but if one cannot perform the simple task of developing a thesis, how did he or she get through high school? Let alone college.

I once asked a boy whom I tutored regularly what he felt was the most important thing he learned in school. He replied, how to be "hard-core and gangsta to survive in the hood." So naturally (unsure of what the "hood" was) I retorted, why did you have to learn to survive in the hood? He replied, "because that's where school is at." His demeanor is reminiscent of the demeanor of J. Slade Anderson in his essay "Why I love Gangsta Rap" in the book *Things get Hectic.* He writes that the word "hard-core" pertained to "people who have nothing and have to scrounge around for food or fight to survive…" (Anderson, 89). Just from his answer, it seemed that being in an inner city school was a completely different lifestyle and battle when compared to being in suburban schools. I also asked some of the other students I tutored to tell me how writing was taught to them in school and what I concluded was a rather interesting discovery. There was a definite difference in the strengths and weakness (in English and math) between the students I tutored that attended a charter school and those that attended a public high school.

The students that attended the charter schools needed help, but not as much help as the kids (mostly athletes) from the public schools. I began to wonder why there was such a difference. In his essay, "School and the Reproduction of Social Class," MacLeod (2000) argues that the way social class is reproduced in schools is in two spe-

cific ways: **tracking** and **cultural capital**. He illustrates this idea using the story of the Brothers and their performance in school and involvement in the community. The Brothers conformed to and complied with the **achievement ideology** which states if you just work hard and apply by the rules you will succeed in school and in life. While you may be born into different social classes and have different social conditions, schooling is supposed to be the big equalizer. The Brothers realized that "academic performance is the crucial link to economic success" (MacLeod, 405) and furthermore, that "education is viewed as the remedy for the problem of social inequality" (MacLeod, 405). However, although these ideas were shared and understood between the Brothers and their communities, they still did not perform as well as other students academically. MacLeod explains that this academic shortcoming is due in part to their cultural capital, that is, "their manners, norms, dress, style of interaction, and linguistic facility… [are] devalued by the school, while the cultural capital of the upper class is rewarded" (MacLeod, 407).

At first I found this reason a bit farfetched and hard to believe, but as I continued to tutor and interact with these students I began to compare their stories and experiences in high school to those of my own during my time at boarding school. Culture and community involvement was a big part of my elementary as well as high school education. And as a youth I felt that I was not an exemption to this case. Perhaps my situation is not as grave as having to "survive" high school and I did not fail in the school as such. However, I felt I could certainly relate to this in terms of my experience with identity crisis. In fact, I would argue that the reason I seemed to have been lost as my French accent faded into its British opponent is in fact due to the lack of involvement of my (French) community. I wonder, in fact, had there been a bigger

group of French people or community to relate to, would I have been able to stay true to my accent and culture like all the other international students were able to do so effortlessly? There was such an emphasis on remembering our history, our traditions, our culture and the important role they play in our lives as a people and as individuals. I guess I never realized how important that factor was in my education. On a social level, these schools that many of these college students graduated from reflected the social class and economic situations of the neighborhoods their grew up in. Therefore, it makes sense that the social class is reproduced by the education system. Community and cultural involvement can make a great impact on the education as well as social reproduction of class in the schools and the lives of their students.

So the question is: Who am I? Who have I become? Where am I going? I started on this journey to figure out how to stay true to my French roots while thriving socially, educationally, and professionally in other cultures. Realizing that somewhere in the midst of my interaction with my environment I had adopted an accent that was not my own (the British accent), I sought to retrace my steps and head in a direction that might bring me some clarity to my present identity crisis. I decided to attend a university in the U.S., thinking that it might help me solve my identity crisis. Although at first it seemed like it only made matters worse, I realized that my adventures in America has allowed me to accept the fact that I was a French citizen who spoke French with a British accent. At the end of the day, I did not lose my French culture at all. I think the bits and pieces of the American, French, and British culture equated to a unique me I was happy and comfortable being.

Who am I? Well, I am French, and American. Who have I become? Well, in the spring of 2010, I will be a graduate student comfortable in her own skin and proud of her many accomplishments. Where am I going? Well, I don't exactly know the answer to that question yet, but I'm sure wherever it is it will continue to be adventure filled, and bring me personal and self fulfillment. This time the only difference will be that I will proudly speak English and French with and British accent. It's just who I am.

## WORKS CITED

Anderson, J. Slade. 1998, "Why I love Gansta Rap," in Youth Communication (ed.) *Things Get Hectic: Teens Write About the Violence That Surrounds Them*. New York: Touchstone, 89-90.

Cote, J. and Allahar. 1995. *Generation on Hold: Coming of Age in the Late Twentieth Century*. London: NYU Press.

Deutsch, Nancy.2008. *Pride in the Projects: Teens Building Identities in Urban Contexts*. London: NYU Press.

Lesko, Nancy. 2001. *Act Your Age!: A Cultural Construction of Adolescence*. New York: RoutledgeFalmer.

MacLeod, Jay. 2000. "School and the Reproduction of Social Class." Pp. 397-408 in Garth Massey (ed.) *Readings for Sociology, Third Edition*. New York: Norton.

Muuss, Rolf E.1996. *Theories of Adolescence*. Sixth Edition. New York: McGraw Hill. Moore, Ryan. 1998. "... And Tomorrow Is Just Another Crazy Scam: Postmodernity, Youth and the Downward Mobility of the Middle Class." Pp. 259-260 in Joe Austin and Michael Nevin Willard (eds.) *Generations of Youth: Youth Cultures and History in Twentieth-Century America*. New York: New York University Press.

Poveda, David. 2006. "Language and Talk." Pp. 41-46 in Shirley Steinberg et. al. (eds.) *Contemporary Youth Culture: And International Encyclopedia, Vol. 1.* New York: Greenwood Press.

Sawyer, Jessica. 2005. "Confessions of a Maine-Iac: The Family, Academia, and Modernity," in *Human Architecture: Journal of the Sociology of Self Knowledge*, 3(1&2), 193-203.

Tatum, Beverly. Daniel. 1997. *"Why Are All the Black Kids Sitting Together in the Cafeteria?" And Other Conversations About Race* New York: Basic Books.

Wei, William. 1989. "Hmong American Youth American Dream, American Nightmare." Pp. 311-325 in Joe Austin and Michael Nevin Willard (eds.) *Generations of Youth: Youth Cultures and History in Twentieth-Century America*. New York: New York University Press.