

KEITH AND RAYMOND

KEITH GILYARD

Keith Gilyard, born in 1952, teaches at the University of Syracuse. He is the author of articles on poetry and race relations, *American 40: Poems* (1993), and *Voices of the Self: A Study of Language Competence* (1991). The even-numbered chapters in *Voices of the Self* consist of autobiographical narrative and explore the writer's own schooling and his acquisition of standard English skills; the odd-numbered chapters deal with the more theoretical issues of language and schooling, particularly the development of language, self, and the ability to "switch codes" to fit specific situations. The following excerpt is from the fourth chapter.

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WE CAME TO CORONA when the garbage trucks still ran three or four times a week. But it wouldn't continue that way for long. The White evacuation, of mostly Irish and Italians, was nearly complete and all community services would eventually tail off leaving Blacks and blight hand in hand, wondering if they caused each other. Folks who stayed in Harlem, Brooklyn, or the Bronx would say we had moved out to Long Island. With a twenty-minute cab ride they thought we had reached outer suburbia. It wasn't nearly so great of course, but I could see how it seemed like a decent deal to families fleeing from tenements. Back then you could purchase a respectable two-family house for ten to fifteen thousand dollars, probably under the GI bill, rent out the top floor, and maybe see a comparatively rosy future. In our case we even got new furniture on credit. And we were on one of the nicest blocks in the neighborhood, tree-lined 34th Avenue, a block and a half east of Junction Boulevard. That was a street most aptly named for it served as a border between two neighborhoods, Corona and Jackson Heights, and between two worlds — a Black one and a White one. Junction Boulevard was often referred to as the Mason-Dixon line in Queens.

2 I was fairly pleased. The basement and backyard held good possibilities for hideaway and play, and there was a park right in the next block with seesaws, swings, the works. No Eighth Avenue. But not all that bad.

3 We were located virtually equidistant between P.S. 92 on 99th Street in Corona and P.S. 149 on 94th Street in Jackson Heights. They were both located on 34th Avenue and Sherry and I could spot them from in front of the house. We had no idea which way to go until our mother came outside with the baby carriage and headed east toward the dark-complexioned 92. I kept right on her heels, excited. We were turned

away from that school, something about overcrowding and new zoning, and directed to 149. I kept on her heels, still excited, across the Mason-Dixon.

4 After Sherry and I were registered, the principal, Mr. Price, escorted us to class. His pants were too baggy and long. The back of the cuffs flapped up under his heels as he walked. We thought it was funny that he should want to ruin his pants that way, and all the way down the hall we fought the urge to burst out laughing. I didn't feel very humored, though, when he ushered me into Class 1-1 and exposed me to a room full of White kids. I trembled. I wanted to grab hold of one of Mr. Price's baggy trouser legs like it was a mother's apron, but I couldn't allow myself to show that much fear. I wished Sherry would come in but when I realized she wouldn't I wished the same shock on her wherever she went. Or worse. It's like they were trying to stare me back out of the room. Goldstein. Rubin. Landau. Weiss. Cohen. I knew next to nothing about kids like that. Only saw them on the subway a couple of times and in the doctor's office downtown. My eyes frantically searched theirs, trying to find some sign I could translate into friendliness. There was one Black student, a girl in pigtails and she stared as hard as anyone else. Mr. Price spoke at last.

(5) "Hello class, this is Raymond Keith Gilyard." The name suddenly sounded important to me. "He's a fine enough young man, isn't he?" They answered in synchronized yesses. The principal continued. "What shall we call you, young Master Gilyard? Shall we call you Raymond or Keith?"

6-10) 6 Nobody had ever called me Raymond before. Uptown it was always Keith or Keithy or Little Gil. Raymond was like a fifth wheel. A spare. And that's what I decided to make these people call me. *They cannot meet Keith now. I will put someone else together for them and he will be their classmate until further notice. That will be the first step in this particular survival plan.* Of course it wasn't thought out in those specific terms, but the instinct and action were there. And from that day on, through all my years in public school, all White folks had to call me Raymond.

7 The point was to have a plot. To keep a part of myself I could trust. A way to pull myself through. Be a Raymond, a brother, a son, a Keith, a son, a Raymond, a son, a brother. Keep juggling and save myself. So along with handwriting drills, simple addition, simple subtraction, and readings from the primer, I began getting familiar with these strange people around me. Peeping into their lives while trying to keep their strange pale noses out of mine ...

8 [In second grade,] I was the only Black in the one-level class because Sandra Meritt, whom I had grown to like during our time together in first grade, was placed in 2-3. Nowadays in public schools they may designate classes by room numbers

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like 2-301 or 2-315. There may be differences in performance levels among the classes but the students, at least the younger ones, may not be acutely aware of them. Probably better that way. But back in '59 I knew I was in with the so-called cream of my grade level. Even without the class numbers, the few dark faces I saw in each of the other classes made it easy to figure out what was going on. I had been "identified." I was, however, gaining more and more confidence in my role as student.

9 Along with Eddie Goldstein I became a class clown. We came up with the funniest quips and made the funniest faces. But we both wanted to be laughed with, not laughed at, so we scored highly on all our tests and raised our hands as vigorously as anyone else. I liked being able to play it either way. I also began expressing a certain physical dominance in the schoolyard, as I could outwrestle any of my classmates. This was as much due to aggression as to my skill. I could handle these people. And Mrs. Lehrman didn't hassle me much. She occasionally had to put my clowning in check, but her main beef seemed to be the way I would not dot an *i*. I still hear her sometimes: They're just dots, Raymond. Not giant colored-in circles. Dots. Dots. Dots. Not anything so terribly important. If that was her major complaint against me I knew I had to be progressing satisfactorily. I even had an opportunity to show off for my father.

(10) He showed up on one of those parents' observation days in a brown suit with a gray Ban-Lon shirt and a tan raincoat. When he came through the door all heads turned toward me. Then Linda Katz, as if she alone knew the scoop, tapped me on the shoulder from behind and whispered the obvious: "There goes your father, Raymond." Pops didn't bother to look my way, simply nodded to the teacher and strode swiftly to the back of the room where several other parents were already gathered.

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11 We were working with the calendar. It was the fourteenth and Mrs. Lehrman wanted to know who could show her which date was exactly one week away. Hands shot up all around the room. Nearly everyone wanted to pounce on such an easy question, and I was among the most desperate. Waving my hand wildly and straining forward half out of my seat, squirming like I had to go to the bathroom or something, moaning, "Ooh ooh ooh Mrs. Lehrman, ooh!" She studied the contorted pleas on our faces, in our eyes. She hesitated as if she were trying to select a proper head of lettuce and then settled on Helen Rubin, who hadn't even raised her hand. Her mother was in the back, yet the girl still wasn't eager. It didn't seem fair she should be called on before I was.

12 I tried to attract my father's attention to let him know I knew the answer, but he was staring straight ahead. It was ironic because I had learned what I knew about the calendar from watching him run his finger down the left margin of the one in our kitchen in order to count the Sundays. There just couldn't have been any easier question for me.

13 But Helen had it. She accepted the rubber-tipped pointer from the teacher and stuck it straight in the box marked 20. I couldn't believe she blew it like that. Hands shot up all over again, even more urgently, and Helen was told to sit down. I didn't bother raising my hand this time because I had become more interested in Helen's mother. She was wringing her hands. She lowered her head, then lifted it slowly and blew a thin stream of air from her mouth. I imagined her in a cartoon with steam spouting from her ears, forming a scowling mist over her graying head. I was still having fun with this vision as Bernie Cohen went up and pointed to 15. Eddie called him stupid and Bernie's father was in the back smiling. Fake. I could feel it. I turned my eyes back to Mrs. Rubin's anger.

P14-22) 14 "RAYMOND." I whirled to face the teacher. I was nervous because I thought she was going to reprimand me for not paying attention and it was certainly no time for that, but when she asked "Can you show us?" it took all the control I could muster to refrain from howling with laughter.

(15) "I think I can show you, Mrs. Lehrman."

16 "Well let's hop to it then." She looked back at the group of observers and asked rhetorically, "We are having our little adventures today, aren't we?"

17 I fidgeted with my notebook, opened and shut my inkwell a few times, you know, appearing uncertain so I could build the suspense. I slowly rose to my feet, very deliberately tucked in my shirt, and hitched my trousers. Show time. I took the pointer from Mrs. Lehrman, switched it from hand to hand, tapped the floor with the rubber tip a couple of times, and picked out that glorious 21.

18 "Thank you, Raymond" said Mrs. Lehrman in relief. She smiled and I poked out my chest and headed for my seat. Cast a glance at Pops. He wasn't one for the big grin, but his faint nod of approval let me know he was pleased.

19 It would have been better still if Pops could have caught my act a few weeks later when Mrs. Lehrman asked if anyone knew the difference between a house and a home. No one else in the class even attempted an answer. The perfect stage for me. I mean getting called on and supplying the correct response was exciting enough, but you knew there were other young knights who could have handled the question. To dominate the floor completely, however, was to be top royalty. And there I was, the king.

(20) "A house can be anywhere you live with walls and ceilings and floors. But it's not a home until there is love." This answer seemed to really excite the teacher.

21 "That is well put, Raymond. Very, very interesting." I sat down as my classmates stared in amazement, probably wondering where I picked up this information. I wouldn't tell them I had learned it in Sunday School. And I was really somewhat amazed

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myself that not a single one of them could answer that question. I began to wonder more seriously about what these Jews were learning in those synagogues and those one-afternoon-a-week Hebrew School classes. What were the few Catholics, who got out early on Wednesdays for religious instruction, learning over at Blessed Sacrament?

22 I felt I was coming along nicely. Sang "America the Beautiful" and "My Country, 'Tis of Thee" as loudly as anyone. Recited the pledge of allegiance at a time when it was mandatory to do so. Related strongly to "Jack and the Beanstalk" and felt great admiration for both Androcles and the lion. Thought Miles Standish was a hero for fighting Indians and beheading Witwamat. Respected wig-wearing, silver dollar-slinging George Washington, and President Eisenhower. Showed the proper concern for the Cold War, was glad Red China was denied entry to the U.N., and was properly upset when a spying Francis Gary Powers was shot down from the Russian Skies. Smooth sailing on into 3-1....

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23 I was on course even steadier than ever. Spelling tests. Book reports. Multiplication. Division. History. Astronomy. Current events. Mr. Price came on the loudspeaker to request we give a moment of silence for U.N. Secretary-General Hammarskjold, who died in a plane crash while on the way to take care of some business in the Congo. Kennedy was in, took our class decisively, and we were in the era of manned space flights. We jammed the auditorium to listen to the radio broadcast of Alan B. Shepard's joy ride aboard the Freedom 7. I clapped in tune with everyone else. Yes sir. Raymond was doing fine.

24 Keith was developing well also. Found my first best friend, Lonnie Blair, while I was walking down 97th Street on the way to the store. He was in front of his house throwing pebbles up onto his own roof. He held the bunch in his left hand and plucked and tossed them with his right. He was a skinny, close-cropped young boy, very much like myself. When he noticed me approaching, he dropped the pebbles right where he stood and came up straight to my face.

(25) "Hey boy, what's your name?"

"My name Keith."

"Oh yeah?"

"Yeah. What's your name?"

(30) "Ain't none a your damn business. That's what the hell it is."

↳ "Well mine ain't none a yours then."

"Is too 'cause you just told me your name stupid."

"I did not."

"Did so."

"What I say?"

(35) "Said your name was Keith, dummy. Can't remember what you just said?"

"I was just foolin you."

"You wasn't foolin me, Keith. You can't."

He did have me on that one and I didn't like it one bit. I stepped around him and continued on my way. He kept following, paused to pick up a rock and hurl it up on a neighbor's roof, then pulled alongside.

"You know I seen you before in school."

(40) "So I seen you too."

"Yeah, Keith, but I seen you first 'cause I always see people first before they see me. Where you used to live at?"

"I come from Harlem."

"Harlem? I heard about that place. That means you 'pose to be tough or somethin? You ain't as tough as people from Brooklyn."

"That's where you from?"

(45) "Yeah, Keith, that's where I'm from."

"So that don't make you so tough."

"Tougher than you."

"No you not."

"Yes I am, Keith. What if I did somethin to you? What would you do?"

(50) "Do somethin back to you."

"Like what?"

"You'll see. I'm use ta fightin. I been in gang fights."

"Aw man, get outa here. You ain been in no gang fights."

"I have so. Where you think I got this scar from?" I put a hand up to the left side of my face to really draw his attention to it. I closed in on him, but kept enough distance so that out of the corner of my eye I could watch his reaction. He really appreciated that scar. I had an edge on him, had him leaning toward belief.

(55) "How that happen?"

"I told you I was in a gang fight. I got cut with a butcher knife. You don't know about stuff like that. You too little."

"I'm just as big as you" he said defiantly.

"Yeah but you couldn't get out like I could. When everybody in my house was sleepin I use to sneak out at midnight. That's when the big people had the gang fights. I was the only kid they let in. This big man cut me and I was bleeding a lot but my side got him."

- "Did they kill him?" he asked eagerly.
- (60) "Yeah they killed him. What you think?"
- "Well they 'pose to anyway. I was in gang fights too you know."
- "Where's the scar then?"
- "You don't have to have one."
- "Yes you do. If you was in one you have to have a scar. If you was in a *real* one."
- 65 I knew I scored heavily with that tale, so did he, and we had set up a pretty good basis for a friendship. Neither one of us was going to be bullied..

QUESTIONS FOR DISCUSSION

1. When Gilyard writes about Keith's development and his budding friendship with Lonnie Blair, how is the language different from the language used by Gilyard, the author of the book, and Raymond, the student in school? Consider how your own language changes in different contexts.
2. The passage omitted at the end of paragraph 22 begins: "Where I punched Susan Goldberg straight in her eye." It fills four pages. What do you imagine happens in these pages? What do you imagine Susan Goldberg's story is?
3. What does Gilyard mean when he says, "The point was to have a plot" (paragraph 7)? What is the plot, and why does he think it is necessary? What does it say about the society he lives in and the way he perceives it?
4. Explore what you see as the answer to the question Raymond is asked about the difference between a house and a home. Is your response different from Raymond's? What is your reaction to Raymond's response?

WRITING ASSIGNMENT

Respond to Gilyard's essay by writing a response to the issue of having different names represent different identities. Here are some questions to consider: Have you ever felt you have two different identities, one inside school and one outside school? If so, what was the difference, and what caused you to form the separate identities? How do you respond to Gilyard's two names, Keith and Raymond? What different identities do they represent? What do you make of the fact that as an academic and author he now calls himself Keith?