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A. Suresh Canagarajah

Safe Houses in the Contact Zone: Coping Strategies of African-American Students in the Academy

Minority communities possess traditions of cultural appropriation and resistance which have enabled them to engage in what Mary Louise Pratt calls the “literate arts of the contact zone.” Inspired by the “extraordinary intercultural tour de force” of a 17th century autoethnographic text from the non-literate Quechua community which expresses opposition against Spanish imperialism (34), Pratt celebrates the creative modes of text construction taking place in situations of cultural contact both inside and outside the academy. But, while acknowledging such fascinating examples of linguistic/literary resistance, we must remember that minority communities also inherit traditions of accommodation deriving from legacies of domination. Henry Giroux reminds us that “subordinate cultures are situated and recreated within relations of domination and resistance, and they bear the marks of both” (*Theory and Resistance* 229). How subordinate communities negotiate the conflicting impulses in their culture to engage in creative literacy practices needs careful exploration. Apart from this inner cultural struggle within the community, subordinate groups also need to cope with the power of the dominant codes and discourses out there in the contact zone where different communities interact. Although the inequalities of power stratifying the contact zone are acknowledged by contact zones theorists (see Pratt 34; Bizzell 166; R. Miller; Lu), we need more systematic and detailed observation of the complex ways in which subordinate groups negotiate power in intercultural commu-

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nication. Minority students can experience similar sources of conflict as they develop literacy in the academic contact zone. It is important therefore to become sensitive to the conflicting tendencies in their culture, which can motivate them to engage variously with the stratification of power in the classroom, and critically interrogate their classroom discourses and learning strategies.

Pratt points out that the threatening atmosphere in the contact zone makes everyone (especially marginalized groups) appreciate the importance of *safe houses*—which she defines in passing as “social and intellectual spaces where groups can constitute themselves as horizontal, homogeneous, sovereign communities with high degrees of trust, shared understandings, and temporary protection from legacies of oppression” (40). In a special writing course for predominantly African-American students, I discovered the complex ways in which they constructed and used safe houses to resolve the conflicts they faced. While the challenges in dealing with institutional and discursive power in the academy made them hunger for safe houses, some of the communally mandated and historically developed cultural practices further encouraged this coping strategy. Although safe houses posed certain problems in developing academic literacy among minority students, critical reflection after the course convinced me that they also held immense pedagogical possibilities. In order to tap the hidden resources of this academic underground for the practice of contact zone literacy, we need more information on life in the safe houses than Pratt is able to provide in the single paragraph she has devoted to this subject. At least the following issues need to be clarified:

What are the literate arts of safe houses? How do they relate to and compare with those of the contact zone?

What is the location of safe houses in relation to the contact zone? Are they outside or inside, linked to or separated from the contact zone?

What are the pedagogical and political implications of safe houses for the practice of contact zone literacy? Do they stifle/encourage, stymie/enhance such literate practices?

The Background

The writing course which I explore below was part of what is called the Preview Program at the University of Texas at Austin. This program is held each summer for first year ethnic minority students entering college the following Fall. The idea motivating the program is the need to induct such students gradually into the “academic culture” in order to improve their retention rate. Usually, mandatory courses like composition and math are

offered during this semester. Although these courses earn credit as in the regular courses, they are supposed to be conducted with a special sensitivity to the challenges confronting minority students. Besides taking classes, the students are expected to reside on campus and attend workshops conducted by the university to orientate them to academic culture. Of the twelve students in my class from this program, ten were African-American and two were Hispanic. Two Chinese-Americans (who stated that they spoke only English) and an Anglo-American student were also in the class to make up for failing a writing course in the previous semester. In order to develop a special analytical focus on the learning strategies of minority students, I observed and recorded the behavior and discourses of the African-American students in my class.¹ Since the course was organized primarily around argumentative academic writing, my discourse analysis focused on the strategies students displayed in oral and written communication at different levels of formality.

The safe houses of the African-American students were motivated by some of the peculiarities of the way my course (and research) was organized. Being a sizable body of students, they could develop a sense of "community" that was difficult for the students from other ethnicities in the class. Furthermore, though students could have constituted themselves in class or gender terms to form safe houses, the purpose of the Preview course and the curriculum I adopted heightened their ethnic consciousness at the cost of other identities. It is possible that as I set out to focus on African-American students, I may have overlooked the activity of safe houses defined according to other group affiliations. There is certainly nothing to preclude the formation of safe houses according to other social identities in a course organized along different lines, or with a different demography of students bringing into consciousness alternate senses of group affiliation.

The approach I adopted for my course called for a sensitivity to the vernacular discourses and communicative conventions minority students bring to the classroom, while enabling them to gradually cross discourse boundaries and get acquainted with the academic conventions. Although students are encouraged to employ their vernacular discourses in their own community (and possibly in informal contexts in the academy), they are expected to master academic discourse to communicate successfully in the college setting. Teaching in a networked classroom also helped me to conduct a student-centered, collaborative course. The many features for mailing, electronic conference, brainstorming, and revising offered by the computer program we used helped me construct a course that was less teacher-fronted than usual. Using the text *Critical Reading and Writing across the Disciplines* (Clegg), I encouraged students to explore the typical knowledge content and

writing conventions of selected disciplines in order to understand how these differed from their own discourses, so they could then address the academic community as writers who could use the academic knowledge and conventions effectively.

Literate Arts of Safe Houses

I will first explore the communicative strategies students employed in the safe houses in contrast to those they used in the public sites of the contact zone. Such a consideration shows not only the rich linguistic competence of minority students, but also the complex strategies they adopt to negotiate the competing discourses of the academy and the vernacular community. Their discourses show the shifting identities and community membership they linguistically construct to manage the conflicts they experience in the academy. Even more important for our purposes is the manner in which students construct and use safe houses to negotiate the discursive and ideological challenges of the academic contact zone.

At the beginning of the semester, as in the case of most classes, the students were very formal and conscious of their behavior. They orientated themselves to the academic conventions quite scrupulously—as became evident in an online discussion on the second day of class on how writing under pressure exacerbates writer's block. The argumentative strategies students used here were quite different from those they would use later in their safe houses. Donnie Jones's comment that he "wrote better under pressure" challenged the position of the textbook and sparked off the debate. Dexter and David immediately offered their own positions, flagging their reasons with the discourse marker "because":²

Dexter: i tend to agree with author on pressure and disagree with Jones because i believe pressure clouds your ability to think.

David: I think that pressure is good for a person when he or she is writing because I think it causes that person to write better or put forward a better effort.

Andrew and Dexter are quite restrained as they move the argument to a balanced footing, stating that pressure could be good only under certain conditions (note their use of the discourse marker "but"):

Andrew: pressure can be good, BUT it can also cause you to overlook some important points.

Dexter: did everone fail to read in the book the passage that says pressure is good but also may earn you a few D's.

Dexter cites the text as the authority for his standpoint. To contest this evidence, students like Rhonda cite personal experience:

Rhonda: IT'S NOT THAT I DON'T HAVE THE TIME, I JUST PUT IT OFF WHEN NOTHING GOOD COMES TO MIND. SOMETIMES I PURPOSELY PUT MYSELF THERE BECAUSE I KNOW SOMETHING GOOD WILL COME OUT OF IT. IT HAD TO BECUASE THAT'S MY GRADE!!

As the debate proceeds, others negotiate more qualified positions within the original terms of the argument in order to reconcile the divergent claims. Sonny synthesizes the claims made and consciously carves out a personal position in the conflict, taking into consideration the views expressed by Dexter and Andrew.

Sonny: ON THE DEAL WITH PRESSURE; IT DOES HELP ME TO FIND SOMETHING TO WRITE ABOUT, BUT LIKE ANDY SAID, IT CAN CAUSE ONE TO LEAVE OUT IMPOTANT PARTS OF THE PAPER, AND LIKE DEXTER SAID, THAT CAN CAUSE A FEW D'S.

In the end, the positions are reconciled in a useful manner by a couple of students as they modify their own initial positions to a healthy and pragmatic relativism. The students thus achieve a closure by acknowledging that each person has his or her own way of dealing with writer's block:

Sonny: WRITING IS WRITING. WHATEVER YOU ARE USED TO DOING KANE WILL PROBABLY WORK. WHATEVER ALL OF YOU, KEEP DOING IT SINCE IT GOT YOU THIS FAR. YOU ALL GOT ACCEPTED AND MOST OF YOU ARE ON SCHOLARSHIP!!!

The claims of the students are carefully reasoned. They furnish clear explanations and relevant evidence, and show the connections between claims and evidence through subordinate sentences and discourse markers of logical relationships. Such syntactic devices serve to decontextualize their experience and foreground the reasoning with relevance to the argument. Furthermore, the students display a disciplined focus on the words in the text. Attending to the topic with much poise and detachment, they are able to make sharply qualified claims and arbitrate between the different positions expressed, sometimes self-critically. I will call such disputes *topic-centered* arguments to distinguish them from other kinds of arguments we will discuss below—those that are more implicit and context-bound (which I will call *topic-associated*) or personal and agonistic (labeled *person-centered*).

In these initial interactions the students all represent themselves in academically favorable identities. They are smart, pragmatic, discerning, reasonable, and balanced in the meticulous manner in which they debate the topic. Moreover, in their fairly overt claims of having scored good grades in writing and having won scholarships to come to the university, they are presenting themselves as successful scholars. In analyzing the tricks they consciously play with their minds and the unexpected consequences they derive, they show themselves to be psychologically complex, self-analytical, and self-aware. Students thus take measures to accommodate to the dominant discourse of the context. But while they show the capacity to recognize and use academic discourses, more important are their attitudes towards this discourse. To adopt Chomskyan terminology, while students display a general *competence* in academic discourses, their everyday social interactions suggest a tension and inhibition experienced in *performance*.

Their attitude towards the academy was amply displayed in the identities they adopted in the mailing system as the course progressed. Later messages contradicted the positive images students had displayed to the others in the contact zone. Contrary to the high sense of motivation and intellectual curiosity expressed at the beginning of the semester, they often seemed apathetic later. For instance, Diane openly discussed her boredom with the rhetoric-based exercises from the textbook, exchanging personal messages with Linda when both were supposed to be busy completing a task:

Howdy doody doo. I am so bored and you are the only person who will laugh at my dumb jokes. I can see that you may need little cheering up. I may be wrong, but I'm going to give you a little remedy. . . .

Students found many ways of distracting themselves, and among the topics usually discussed in the mail were romance, sex, music, friends, and family. Students were very playful as they quarreled over provocative messages, made up names for each other, or exchanged ritual insults.

There was also a heightened consciousness of their ethnic identity—which peaked in the final days of the course. This was caused by a gradual realization that academic writing involves “acting white.” Before these messages, a student had been called “acting white” by her peers for having scored a better grade in her essay. In the ensuing discussion, most students protested against the label or feigned ignorance on what it meant. But then pithy messages like the following began to appear sporadically:

Sonny: stay black, fight the power, support your people. PEACE HO!

Dexter: TO STRONG . . . TO BLACK . . . TO STRONG . . . TO BLACK . . .

FFFFF

F

FF

F

FIGHT THE POWER

Sonny: everybody, it was great knowing you. hope to see you all in the fall. to the PREVIEW posse; stay close to each other. we are all gonna need help to get through, and i'd like to say all of us minorities make it. do it for your family, community, and culture, but most of all do it for yourself.

... good luck everyone

and remember, you on scholarshirp!!!!

Rhonda: Hello everyone, this is a reminder to everyone:

"STAY BLACK"

I LOVE YA'LL,

KELLI(MOOKY)

(The last two were farewell messages on the final day of classes.) These messages suggest a conception of the academy (or the public space of these contact zone) as an antagonistic site that threatens the identity of these students and their sense of community solidarity. The academy is presented as a locale where they have to struggle for success. The "stay Black" messages reveal students' awareness of the reproductive and hegemonic function of the academy. The mail forum served as a protected, trusted, safe house where they could express their frustrations, display resistance, and seek emotional sustenance and solidarity. In the midst of what was perceived to be an oppressive situation, students encouraged each other not to give up.

The safe house is, however, not an escape from pedagogical concerns. Even when students satirize or parody classroom matters, they are reframing these in their own terms with pedagogical value. For instance, a reading on male and female brain differences spawned a series of messages with claims to superiority based on physical or sexual prowess. The scientific research report was thus appropriated according to the values of street speech. Dexter formulated the sex chromosomes in mock-scientific terms: "XY > XX (except male feminists like Fab 5)." The parenthetical insult was aimed at Andrew, who insisted on advocating the equality of the sexes. Ironically, the interest in parodying pedagogical concerns demanded that they be attentive to classroom activities. Paradoxically, the safe house thus instilled a yet keener awareness of classroom concerns.

The mail system also functioned as a forum where students could engage in vernacular language/discourse forms to celebrate their ethnic solidarity and resist the hegemonic thrusts of academic discourses. Insult routines, playful verbal dueling, and “high siding” exchanges were frequently indulged in. These found more dramatic realization in face-to-face oral interactions in safe sites outside the networked classroom. It was evident that African-American students usually hung out together outside the classroom and rarely joined other student groups. Informal domains—such as residence halls, recreation centers, and student union rooms—functioned to build community solidarity among students. Consider, for example, how they argue as to who will win the boxing match between Tyson and Williams, which they were then watching on television in their dormitory:⁴

MM: Well, Tyson is finally gonna’ get his ass kicked!

KN: Hell ya!!

DCW: What izes ya, ignant! Mike Tyson will kick tha fuck out of that fool.

DH: Now that’s what I’m sayin’! Williams my boy and shit but goddamn he-

MB: Bullshit nigga! Williams gotta punch!

DH: Punch nigga? Tyson steady knockin’ mothafuckas out, so don’t come to me with that punch bullshit!

MB: You right about that, but who that nigga been fightin’? Spinks, Tubbs, Larry Holmes, why that ol’ assfool come back anyway?

MM: For tha money!

CZ: I heard that shit!

DCW: Hell yeah, for three million dollars I’d put my momma in tha ring! I ain’t bullshittin’!

Such agonistic interactions I term *person-centered* argumentation. They tend to have very strong oral character and a distinct spoken idiom, displayed by specifically Black English grammatical features: the use of “steady” as an intensifier, deletion of the auxiliary, deletion of the copula, and distinct phonological features such as deletion of word-final palatal nasals. The argument above proceeds swiftly with assertions and counter-assertions on the main claim of whether Tyson or Williams will beat the other. The focus is not on developing factual evidence to support the claims, but subverting the opponent’s claim in a rhetorically forceful manner. The rhetoric thus dramatizes the “capping” sequences explained as typical of vernacular discourse by Kochman (78), with the attempt of each

speaker being to perform a witty overturning (or rebuttal) of the opponent's claim.

Rhyme and rhythm are highly functional in this discourse. When IH asserts that Williams can take Tyson's punch, as the argument proceeds, DCW deals with this through a word play and rhyme—"Tyson fuck around / stomp a round / hole in his ass!" Though the relevance of DCW's rebuttal to IH's statement might be weak, what matters is the witty outsmarting of IH. The crowning move is when CZ and DCW cap MB's claim that if the fight goes on till the twelfth round Williams will win. DCW overturns MB's claim by saying that Williams will be lucky to see the "second half of the first round," while CZ improves that by saying "Yeah, he'll see the round from his damn back!" The difference of this discourse from the topic-centered interaction on writers' block is glaring. Students are not concerned here with the academic practice of making balanced claims with valid evidence in a detached tone to build a reasoned standpoint. They are instead switching to vernacular discourse forms in the security of their safe house.

It didn't take long for students to also turn the electronic conference forum into a safe house for in-group interaction. Although at the beginning of the semester the conferences were quite formal, gradually the students discovered the scope it had for holding sub-conferences. Although others can eavesdrop, there is no compulsion for them to participate in these small-group discussions. In the following interaction, the African-American students are discussing a reading on recent revisions in history text books (see Clegg 406–412). Though the writer presents many details on the manner in which specific information and modes of presentation have been changed to correct the biases in previous texts, she doesn't favor these changes. The students dramatically appropriate the text to read their own themes and perspectives, thus eventually subverting the writer's message:

David: I have noticed that in watchin tv that the indians are always considered the bad guys while the cowboys were considered the good guys.

Sonny: Weren't most of the people who started civilization from Africa? Are not most Africans black? This is the biggest misconception of them all in my view. When I was young I thought that Cleopatra and all of the Pharoahs were white.

Ray: That reminds me of the movie Moses, Sonny, that Pharoah was a Ram-seses (the character that was played by Yuhl Brenner) He definitely wasn't black.

Amos: i see too that they show all the egyptians as whites they do this because they won't get very vood reviews picturing them as they actually were "africans"

David: Yea you know it is weird how the people who write most of the history books we read in school are white. Why is that? And why does it seem that the white man in those history books are portrayed as being the better of the races?

Sonny: Exactly, Ray. Have you heard the song by BDP (I think) that talks about the black people of the Bible?

Dexter: i feel the reason for the distortion is because whites want to portray themselves as doing the right thing to their children since they are the majority

Andrew: as in the book "1984", whoever controls the present controls the past. Since the white man is in power he can belittle the role of hte Indian and black cowboys.

Ray: Yeah Sonny the Enemy is deep

Rhonda: History in school is very one-sided. It should be called "white" history because that's basically all that they talk about. They hardly ever mention history of other races, and at my school they didn't even offer a Black history class. I think one should have the option to learn their own history. We shouldn't be forced to learn only white history.

Donnie: Andy, keep your head out of them danm books

Ray: Like I said enough about BDP, PE is the one with the serious messages.

David: I wonder if the white race would be in the same shape that we are in if one of the minority races became the majority.

Amos: it's kind of funny the only Blacks mentioned in the history books are those that have been assassinated by the white man (malcolm x, and martin luther king jr.)

Sonny: I think minorities would write their history if they could. How many companies want to publish "History of the Negro(igga)"????

Linda: rhonda, do the people in your area recognize Black history month? Some of the local churches and elementary schools do in my hometown. I agree with you about not learning enough of our own cultural history, as well as other ethnic groups. If it wasn't for the few Black people that do recognize our history, I know that I certainly would not have learned about it in high school.

Sonny: Ray PE does tell the stuff. That is why they are looked at as militant- they tell the truth to the black man.

Donnie: You know that most of the past inventions were invented by Black slaves. Like the cotton gin, Now come on people, do you honestly think that a white man is going to invent some thing to make a slaves life easier? He

just took the claim because noone would have expected that a slave invented it

Ray: FIGHT THE

POWER!!

The *topic-associated* manner in which the students develop this argument is different from the topic-centered style of the academic discourse which they employed in the electronic conference cited earlier. This discourse does not have a tone of proving a point so much as exploring an issue collaboratively. The connection of their comments to the main issue being discussed is very much implied and might seem irrelevant at times. The narratives, anecdotes, and motifs from films, television, and rap music don't appear to be connected to the debate in a direct manner. But it is clearly implied that all these examples relate to racially distorted presentations of history and are, therefore, an indictment of the dominant groups and educational institutions. There is a strong sense of teamwork as the students interpret/amplify each other's statements, affirm each other's contributions, or ask for more information and opinions through knowing rhetorical questions. The students often used this topic-associated argumentation whenever they needed to take a common position against claims by opponents not directly present (authors of readings, famous theorists, or public figures), whereas the person-centered style we discussed above was employed for face-to-face arguments.

The difference in the sorts of evidence valued by the students further points to ideological differences from the academic community. For Andy, authority comes from published scholarship such as Orwell's book. This naturally invokes the insult of Donnie—"keep your head out of them damn books." But for majority of the Black students much of their evidence came from rap music, films, television, and other sources of popular culture. Note the uses made above of the politically radical rap groups PE (Public Enemy) and BDP. Ray's invocation, "Fight the Power," is a popular but controversial recording by PE. It is significant that Sonny should say, "PE does tell the stuff. That is why they are looked at as militant- they tell the *truth* to the Black man" (emphasis added). Sonny thus reveals whom the students consider as their authorities in vernacular discourse.

Since the topic-associated argument of Black students is influenced by a different discourse from that of the academic community, it is not surprising that the students overturn the thesis of the writer in their interpretation of the academic text. While the writer criticizes the changes in the texts and wants to control the rewritings, the students encourage such revision, though their opposition to the author is not conveyed explicitly, but in their characteristic implicit fashion. Furthermore, the students amplify

and explicate the text in their own terms: While the writer discusses biases only in general terms, the students discuss the subject specifically from the angle of racism against the African-American community. The students also make forays into the versions of history made available by vernacular texts (rap, films, etc.), embedding the author's text in a context relevant to their concerns.

Though their argument is context-bound and personal, this doesn't make their discussion static. The students explore many issues not raised by the reading and give additional depth to the subject. Starting from the what and how of distortions in history they go on to explore the why, and eventually probe the political-economy of textbook production that functions against minorities and sustains the hegemony of the majority group. The written word is thus creatively given new ramifications in reference to the larger social contexts and discourses of the students. Discussions such as this testify to the pedagogical richness and depth of the literate arts of the safe house. In enforcing linear, "objective," text-bound readings in the classroom, the academic contact zone sometimes loses a wealth of alternate readings and literacies brought by minority students. Such imposition can impoverish both the academy and the students.

Writing the Contact Zone

For their final writing project, I provided a subject that would enable students to reflect critically on their experience of the academy as a contact zone. They were asked to debate whether the academy is culturally biased against minority students, hampering their scholastic performance. In order to make the writing more relevant to their experience, I insisted that they include evidence other than the usual textual references: They were expected to interview two members of the ethnic group they were writing about and also to incorporate their own personal experiences and observations. The essays the students wrote allow us to explore how students treat a subject similar to that in the on-line conference above in an assigned writing for grading purposes.

Most students considered the topic in the light of their own experiences at the university. They articulated a clear sense of the academy as a site of social and ideological reproduction—as we can see from Donnie's essay below.

Culture Shock

The cultural orientation of the public school grew out of the anglicized social, political, and economic institutions established by the early colonists. One of the major social functions public schools acquired during the 1840's to the 1920's was acculturating the children of foreign-born parentage into the

mainstream social political, economic institutions of society. But after a while the schools' social function became that of acculturating the young into an anglicized, middle-class conception of "Americanism" (Pizzillo, p 10). This acculturating continues even today not only in public schools but also in our colleges and universities. Minority groups confront a culture which is often in direct conflict with the culture of their homes and community. The culturally biased institutions could alienate Blacks and other minority students and affect their performance.

The criteria for being educated today is acceptance of the dominant middle-class culture of the school and rejection of those ways of seeing the world of feeling, valuing, and acting in the world that characterize the lower-class and/or minority group's personal and communal experiences (Pizzillo, p 10). Blacks must retire their culture so that they may be accepted by the majority. The most striking characteristic of the campuses to which minority students are now coming in is their essential whiteness. According to John Egerton, staff writer for the Race Relations Information Center, in both its makeup and its mindset, the whole of higher education is "... like a jug of milk—rich, white, and homogenized" (Altman, p 33).

Blacks are also having to remake the social and even physical environment that they left behind with their culture. They are having to work out their future in a curriculum which did not originally take them into account and which many white students find unsatisfactory even to themselves (Altman, p 50).

In order to survive, these students must band into their own social groups on the campus; thereby alienating themselves from the university which in turn looks upon these groups as outcasts to their society. Instead, universities should help build these support groups and assist the students within them. From my personal experience, I believe that most black families do not encourage their young to get a college education. They are satisfied that their children walked across a high school stage receiving their diploma. Lynell Tippen, a senior here at UT who has been here all four years, points out in an interview how most black parents never finished high school and would only expect their young to achieve just a little bit more than they did. Where as white families encourage their children to follow in their footsteps by attending college in order to succeed in life.

Two paragraphs follow here: one contains quotations from Altman on biases in the curriculum, the other discusses how students' native culture is affected.

Some people argue that Blacks alienate themselves from the rest of the community or even say that these problems are too small to deal with on such a large scale. Lynell Tippen later in the interview states that most white people

treat her better than then the Blacks around campus. Others could argue that it is not the schools that are biased but the Black students being bias against the school. Here again Lynell agrees. While these things are still being debated on today, I myself agree that this problem is too small to deal with but too large to ignore.

In comparison with the verbal disputes conducted in the safe houses, the argument in this and many other of the essays lacked conviction and force. Although students rightly shift to topic-centered argumentation in recognition of the demands of academic discourse, the development of their theses seemed to lack involvement. Their personal testimony was uneasily integrated into their essays. There is an unreconciled tension, for instance, between Donnie's personal statements and scholarly material. Curiously, in this, the most personal of all the essays written in the semester, the students seemed to hide behind their textual sources. In fact, they chose to speak about their own discrimination in institutions which they claim to have an Anglo-American bias through the very voices of middle-class white educators certified as authorities by the institution. The students readily quoted academic scholars who are supposed to carry the burden of proof for the claims made in their essays. For example, in his second paragraph, Donnie claims that Black students have to give up their culture in order to become educated. Rather than substantiating the cause-effect connection implicit behind this claim with support (perhaps from personal observation/experience), Donnie merely provides us with the appropriate page numbers for Altman and Pizzillo. He goes on to claim that in order to cope with such problems Black students have to recreate social networks on campus for cultural and psychological support. Again, it is Altman who is supposed to do the explaining or provide the necessary data and warrants for this claim. We thus find an excessive dependence on scholarly authorities, in contrast to the electronic discussion above where students built their cases more thoughtfully and independently by marshaling evidence from rap music, films, and popular culture.

We must also examine the polemical strategies in Donnie's writing. He raises the counter-argument that Black students are to blame for their own biases against the institution and that it is inefficient to treat the problems of a few minority students when there are other problems to solve in a large institution. This does give Donnie's writing an objective and balanced footing. But his rebuttal is weak. He fails to answer the first criticism and tenders a hasty resolution for the second: "While these things are still being debated on today, I myself agree that this problem is too small to deal with but too large to ignore." Several other students failed to sustain the debate or rebut the opposing views forcefully, as they did in the person-

centered arguments in the safe houses. Counter-arguments were instead introduced to give a perfunctory sense of balance in accordance with academic objectivity. Students who were experts of the “capping” speech act in oral interactions inside their safe house, allowed this rhetorical skill to become muted in their formal writing.

However, some other rhetorical strategies at work beneath the textual surface suggested a different reading of these essays. For example, while their writings displayed the stereotypical conventions of an academic essay, their content was radically anti-academic. Donnie is in unqualified agreement with the statement that the academic institutions are biased against minority students—especially Black students. The bland outer shell of the essay could lull us into overlooking the explosively radical content that is being developed. Since it is risky to articulate such an anti-institutional perspective in a graded essay, the deployment of the stereotypical conventions could have been intended as a concession to academic discourse or an attempt to provide a sense of balance and restraint to the writing. Thus, although some of the tensions in his writing may have resulted from a lack of confidence or uncertainty of direction, others seem to have been strategically employed for subtler communicative purposes.

There is a similar tension in the scholarly citations and the messages they are made to endorse. Donnie gets away with making some extreme accusations against the academy by carefully choosing his citations. Note the claims he contrives his authorities to make for him: “in both its make-up and its mindset, the whole of higher education is ‘. . . like a jug of milk—rich, white, and homogenized’ (Altman, p 33); “the schools’ social function became that of acculturating the young into an anglicized, middle-class conception of ‘Americanism’ (Pizzillo, p 10).” One can imagine Donnie chuckling to himself as he wrote these lines—since they are precisely the sort of pungent, expressive statements that vernacular discourse revels in. Perhaps in these instances Donnie was simply attempting to translate into the conventions and structures of academic discourse the claims he would like to make against the academy. But having to critique the academy by using its very rhetorical conventions and authorities creates some understandable uneasiness.

We should also not fail to hear the voices from the vernacular rhetorical tradition submerged in his text. The casual borrowing of sources and quotations in Donnie’s writing, for example, resembles the “voice merging” that has been highlighted in the rhetoric of Martin Luther King (see Keith Miller). The oral community’s practice of freely drawing from the communal stock of knowledge can sound plagiaristic when featured in the literate context. In the academic community, this communicative practice is considered a slavish dependence on others’ views and words. However, there

is a difference between masterful “voice merging”—which Howard calls “positive plagiarism” (796)—and non-imaginative, over-reliant pastiche. Donnie’s writing may at moments fall short of rhetorically effective voice merging. But his struggle for an appropriate use of this vernacular practice may explain some of the tensions in the essay.

We might consider also whether the students’ seemingly mechanical use of academic discourse conventions and identities could have served as a display of opposition through mimicry. What if their formulaic essays were a tongue-in-cheek parody of academic conventions? Parody requires a complex discursive competence. Students must understand the typical conventions of a discourse in order to mimic it. They must also be able to adopt an ideological distance from this discourse to resist it even as they use it. Parody can be a double-edged strategy that appears to satisfy the requirements of the instructors on the one hand while communicating to in-group members that the writer is simply indulging in play acting. A writer can indirectly say to his or her peers: “I have to indulge in this kind of writing because they expect us to do this for a grade; but you and I know that we don’t believe in any of this—in fact, this is the silliest, blandest rhetoric on the face of the earth.” Such a satiric attitude may function as an effective way for students to disarm the hegemonic thrusts of academic discourse. If these hidden messages can be found in Donnie’s writing (and I will provide further ethnographic evidence to support it below) we might call this strategy a realization of the safe house phenomenon in the practice of academic writing. Not only can the safe house keep alive the vernacular or oppositional discourses that get encoded in the writing, it can also help develop certain complex strategies of negotiating competing discourses. Much as in safe houses students can express solidarity, retain vernacular discourses, and indulge in oppositional practices while outwardly conforming to the pedagogical requirements of the academy, in more formal writings they can also achieve a hidden textual space where they secretly communicate oppositional solidarity while “fronting” academic conventions.

The Art of Fronting

Thomas Kochman defines *fronting* as a seeming conformism that masks deeper oppositional tendencies, and argues that this practice has been historically developed by African-Americans in the face of pressure from mainstream society. Kochman describes fronting as “those anxious mental adjustments that are made in deference to the mode of oppression” (125). Ethnographer James Scott labels such forms of dissembling as the “weapons of the weak” (in his book of that title). Because overt and wholesale

rebellion is often impractical, marginalized communities have often displayed surreptitious forms of everyday resistance through feigned ignorance, false compliance, foot dragging, and mimicry. Safe houses in the academic context allow minority students to practice similar forms of fronting. This strategy is calculated to having it both ways—on the one hand, students perfunctorily satisfy the academic requirements and vie for a good grade in the course by producing the typical academic communicative conventions; on the other hand, they oppose the academic culture and shield themselves from threats to their preferred identity, values, and group solidarity.

At the end of my course, in a highly charged discussion where everybody complained against the biases and injustices they experienced in college that semester, the students eventually rejected any interest in reforming the university or mobilizing collective actions of protest. At the climax of the discussion when I asked what should be done about the evils they perceived in the academy, the dominant response was neatly formulated by Sonny and Rhonda:

Sonny: (...) our experience at the university is what we make it, to a certain extent. We don't have to take in everything, and believe it. Just remember it, put it down as the correct answer, and go on with the good grade. Not everything that is heard has to be believed, just recalled for a good grade.

Rhonda: I really don't have much to say because I'm here and I know what it takes to make it. Things haven't changed and it's not likely that they will be soon, so instead of trying to fight the system, I'll just go along with it and perform as expected. It will make my college life a lot more peaceful and enjoyable. Suresh, imagine what kind of people and what kind of attitudes we would have if we went around holding grudges toward this university. Do you think they really care? They probably feel the fewer minorities, the better.

Certain paradoxical positions get articulated here. Although students are aware that the use of academic discourses would lead to deracination and domination, they are strongly motivated by academic success to still acknowledge the necessity of these discourses; although they are pessimistic about changes towards pluralism and equality in the academy and thus distance themselves from the academic community, they still choose to conform to its discursive practices (at least outwardly) in order to satisfy the requirements for educational success; although they confirm the oppositional attitudes towards the academy which we noted earlier, they also display a pragmatic recognition of the limits to which they can openly rebel against the academy. Fronting provides a temporary reconciliation for their conflict: nursing hidden forms of opposition, they go through the

motions of college career, refraining from closer personal involvement in the learning process.

The practice of “fronting” offers further insight into the dynamics of safe house communication. Although they are supposed to be off limits to out-group members, including instructors, the fact that safe houses exist within the academy and often inside the same classroom provides certain indirect channels of access to others. The students in my class, for instance, were aware that in addition to the in-group, intended audience, there was an out-group, unintended audience that sometimes eavesdropped on their conversations. They therefore strategically exploited this additional level of communication to convey certain subtle messages to those outsiders—with their complaints about classroom boredom, protests against cultural alienation, and celebrations of socially stigmatized vernacular discourses. However, the students were also able to maintain the facade that these messages were not intended for out-group auditors. A similar strategy could be seen when under the guise of conforming to academic conventions students communicated oppositional perspectives in their writings. Through such safe houses students are able to challenge without retaliation, reject without punishment, resist without suppression.

Pedagogical Arts of Safe Houses

To say that the safe house can be a site of opposition to the academy is not to suggest that it influences students to turn their backs on learning. As we noted earlier, the safe house serves certain useful pedagogical functions. Paradoxically, in order to periodically gripe about curricular and pedagogical matters, students have to keep an eye on classroom happenings—perhaps more so than usual. Safe houses provide a parallel but safe site to respond to, reflect on, and comment about classroom concerns. The safety of this site, in fact, allows students to adopt alternate perspectives on classroom concerns, as they are able to reconsider classroom activities with a personal and community relevance. Robert Brooke, in his analysis of the “underlife” in writing classrooms, similarly brings out the pedagogical value of seemingly irrelevant and disruptive student behavior. Safe house activities can thus serve to develop meta-pedagogical awareness and reflective learning. The safe house is not a site of all play and no learning.

Safe houses provide a forum within the classroom where minority students can keep alive, practice, and develop their own vernacular discourse. To do so while acquiring academic discourses can generate spontaneous and ongoing comparisons between the two. The students in my course made partial but significant insights into a wide variety of discursive issues: contrasting rhetorical conventions, linguistic features, ideologies, socio-political

ramifications, and implications for identity and group solidarity. Understanding such differences can help students develop greater appreciation of their own discourses and generate critical perspectives to reconstruct and further enrich the vernacular. In enabling minority students to keep alive their community-based discourses, knowledge, and values, safe houses can counteract the academy's history of suppressing minority discourses and reproducing dominant social relations and ideologies.

More relevant to the concerns of developing multivocal literacy is the function of safe houses as an experimental site where students can interrogate, negotiate, and appropriate new rhetorical and discursive forms without fear of institutional penalties. Ironically, in the safe houses of my class there was a more complex negotiation of discourses and mediation of cultures than in the public sites of the contact zone. In their discussion of biases in history textbooks, for example, students displayed subtle ways of appropriating readings to explore issues that concern them. They displayed the wise interpretive practice of situating the text in their own socio-cultural context to critique it, developed relevant themes in their own terms, and explored their own oral historical traditions to complement the text. The range of discourses in the safe houses was also dazzling. Moving from the academically preferred topic-centered argumentation of the first electronic conference cited, students moved to vernacular-based, person-centered and topic-associated modes in oral and written forms, showing an ability to negotiate a variety of discourses to suit the shifting topics, addressees, and contexts. The range of voices they were able to employ show immense creativity. Such linguistic creativity and heterogeneity are often absent in classrooms where minority students fear the imposition of a univocal discourse.

Considered from this perspective, safe houses make positive contributions for the process of knowledge construction in the academy. Safe houses ensure the survival and growth of alternate forms of knowledge that can challenge and redefine dominant discourses in the academy. They can reflect the situation of marginalized and emergent disciplinary groups, like the ethnic and women's studies circles. Such groups exist initially as alternate, informal bodies as they struggle for acceptance or dominance in the academy. From operating as small study circles and discussion groups inside or outside the institution, meeting on the members' own initiative in the beginning, they gradually move to direct confrontation and negotiation with hegemonic disciplinary groups. Safe houses can nurture such marginalized groups by providing a sanctuary for members of each community to interact among themselves and develop their discourses. Situated within the very institution they seek to change, safe houses can function as a strategic "underground" for conscientization, mobilization, and organization.

But apart from enabling the often complicated and protracted stage of struggle for parity with other groups, in hosting alternative or oppositional discourses the safe houses also ensure the heterogeneity and diversity of the contact zone. They assure the healthy friction, challenge, and debate that can contribute to the vitality of academic discourses. A contact zone true to its definition—one that accommodates struggle between discourses and groups for ongoing negotiation of power and difference—will of necessity house safe sites, since no institution is so egalitarian as to permit equal status for all marginalized groups all the time. The success of the academy as a contact zone is, in other words, predicated on the existence of safe houses.

In the light of these larger considerations, what pedagogical functions would safe houses play in the development of academic literacy? A variety of thinkers ranging from poststructural discourse theorists (Foucault; Bakhtin), feminists (hooks; Gilligan), rhetoric scholars (Berthoff; Flower), Educational theorists (Giroux; Grossberg) and, more relevant for our purposes, Black scholars (Gates; Ogbu, "Understanding") have articulated that simply acquiring the established academic/institutional discourses is not to speak but to be silenced. Safe houses can play a significant role in providing the critical distance, the oppositional stance, and the personal space needed to help students find a voice for themselves in academic discourse. The effects of the safe house are, for example, evident in Donnie's writing as he attempts various indirect strategies of finding an appropriate footing in this discourse. The hesitant, tentative, half-realized gestures he makes towards negotiating the dominant discourses to develop a voice need to be pedagogically encouraged and nurtured.

Towards the Pedagogical Arts of Contact Zones

But the positive potential of the safe houses needs to be transferred to the public sites of the contact zone before its promise gets fully realized. For this purpose, students must be encouraged to come out of the safe houses to negotiate the competing discourses in the academy. What teaching methods can we employ to help them make this transition? Richard Miller has recently argued, "The classroom does not . . . automatically function as a contact zone in the positive ways Pratt discovered in the Stanford course. . . . [There] is still a great deal of work to be done in constructing the "pedagogical arts of the contact zone'" (399). However, while much attention has been given to matters of curriculum and teaching materials (see Bizzell), pedagogy has so far received insufficient consideration.

The pedagogical value of safe houses lies in the fact that teachers don't have to impose unilaterally developed or self conceived teaching methods and tasks for students. The learning strategies, insights, skills, and discours-

es students spontaneously develop in the safe houses simply need to be tapped into. Safe houses show the steps students take to gain insights into the conventions and values of the academic discourse. Students critique the hegemonic and reproductive agenda of the dominant discourses. They negotiate the differences between the academic and vernacular modes of argumentation. They even go some way towards the construction of culturally appropriated, multivocal texts. Teachers can take advantage of the ground students themselves intuitively cover, to make these processes more conscious. After all, the secret of successful teaching is to make students more self-directed and autonomous in their learning by encouraging critical awareness, reflective learning, and strategic thinking. Encouraging the steps students themselves take in this direction in the safe houses can lead to a highly responsive, learner-centered pedagogy.

A way to promote such learning strategies is to use the texts constructed in the safe houses for discussion and analysis in the classroom. Transcripts of electronic conferences, verbal disputes in the mail, and drafts of essays can be used to non-threateningly analyze the ways in which the students' texts differ from the academic discourses, as well as the strengths and limitations of both discourses. Such strategies convey to students that their vernacular discourses are valued academically and that they don't have to be practiced in the secret of their safe houses. Similarly, the attempts students make to appropriate dominant discourses and construct hybrid texts is immensely useful. What students like Donnie might need is simply the encouragement to continue their experimentation with more confidence.

But it is of course dangerous simply to romanticize the texts and discourses of the students. As I noted earlier, students' behavior and discourses often show a mixture of oppositional and accommodative tendencies which need to be critically unpacked for their hidden values and implications. Students must be encouraged, therefore, to adopt a critical attitude not only towards the "alien" discourses, but towards their own—as we are reminded often by critical pedagogues (see Freire 30–35; Giroux, *Teachers* 183–185; *Border* 29; hooks 98–104; Willis). It is also important to show them how minority writers recognized in mainstream circles have themselves appropriated and vernacularized dominant discourses and used them with ideological clarity and linguistic creativity. Both literary figures like Toni Morrison and academic writers like bell hooks can be introduced to the students for the manner in which they masterfully grapple with the competing discourses to develop their voice.

We have to also consider how the safe house can itself be further utilized for pedagogical purposes. Realizing the "pedagogically safe and socially nurturing" atmosphere necessary for students "to cross ideological and political borders as a way of furthering the limits of their own understanding,"

Giroux urges us to provide what he calls “safe spaces” for students. Developing his own “border” pedagogy (which is motivated by principles not dissimilar from contact zones pedagogy), he articulates “the need to provide safe spaces for students to critically engage teachers, other students, as well as the limits of their own positions as border-crossers who do not have to put their identities on trial each time they address social and political issues” (*Border Crossings* 33). While networked classes like mine provide immense possibilities for students to develop safe houses by themselves, teachers can consider other ways to nurture such sites in their classrooms. Small group discussions, peer reviews and interactions, collaborative writing, and paired work assignments are simple ways in which safe houses can be constructed inside the classroom. Collaborative projects, guided fieldwork, and research activities (in libraries, dormitories, or outside the campus) can also help students set up and make use of safe houses outside classrooms. We must also become sensitive to what is typically regarded as disruptive behavior during class time—such as the ubiquitous whispers, secret notes, and digressive comments Brooke reports in his analysis of classroom underlife—for what they show about incipient oppositional discourses and critical learning strategies.

In order to understand and exploit safe houses for pedagogical purposes, then, teachers have to become ethnographers who are prepared to unravel the hidden cultures of their classrooms and students. This need compels teachers to creatively devise ways of participating in the different discursive interactions in their classrooms. Apart from the institutional boundaries and cultural borders we have to cross to discern the many literacies practiced in our classrooms, we have to also transcend ideological barriers to see apparently atypical forms of behavior as loaded with meaning and significance for students. To consider safe house or oppositional behavior as not educationally disruptive but pedagogically engaging requires ideological shifts in teachers’ perspectives (see Giroux, *Border* 34–35). Safe houses therefore compel us as teachers to critically examine our own locations in the matrix of dominant and subordinate discourses in the society and the academy.

Safe houses also have significant implications for current debates on the place of sheltered courses for minority students. It is a testimony to the agency of our students that even if they are mainstreamed (as political and bureaucratic wisdom dictates these days) they will still construct safe houses within the existing structures of oppressive institutions to collaboratively work through the conflicts and challenges they face. It is certainly advisable for writing programs to provide institutional support for nurturing safe houses (without appropriating their subversive edge). But it is more important to remember that such sheltering is for the eventual purpose of negotiating with mainstream discourses and institutions for the

empowerment of minority students and pluralization of dominant discourses, rather than being an end in itself.

We can now move to a more complex understanding of safe houses. Although safe houses can exist outside the contact zone for some time (as certain special interest groups, for example, have first mobilized outside the academy before moving with mustered strength for protracted engagement with it), they are typically situated *within* the contact zone and are linked to it. Thus while safe houses offer a measure of protection from the tense inter-cultural engagement of the contact zone, they are not cut off from it altogether. Furthermore, the safe house is not a passive site that simply provides psychological relief for marginalized groups; it is a radically active site that generates strategies and resources to transform the dominant discourses in the contact zone. It is not a politically-free or neutral site that helps marginalized groups take leave of struggles over power and difference; it is a subversive site that nurtures oppositional perspectives, demystifies dominant ideologies, and breeds constant friction with established discourses for their democratization. The safe house is integral to the contact zone—not only for its success as a site of multivocal text production and emergent discourses, but for its self-definition as a meeting point of heterogeneous cultures and ideologies. These two sites are then interactive and interdependent, while being antagonistic. Though each site influences life in the other, the influence of the dominant structures in the contact zone is hegemonic while that of safe houses is potentially resistant. Hence the pedagogical significance of safe houses. If knowledge construction in the academic contact zone is to be democratized/pluralized, then we need to visit the safe houses of our students to tap the resources, discourses, and strategies being developed there.

Notes

1. Among the subjects, seven were males. All students claimed to be from the middle or upper middle-class. Though it is possible to make a fine distinction between the discourse of middle class and working-class Blacks, I am treating both classes here as sharing many features of a common discourse (as also supported by Smitherman 114).

2. The data is cited with the spelling and grammatical errors as they originally appear.

All names are pseudonyms, although students signed release forms to use all forms of their speech/writing during the course.

3. Since this data was transcribed by a student as the interaction occurred (when I was not present), it is stylized to some extent. The student also used the initials of the participants rather than the pseudonyms I used.

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