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#### Original Publication Information

Lu, Min-Zhan. "Professing Multiculturalism: The Politics of Style in the Contact Zone." 1994. *College Composition and Communication* 45(4): 442-458.

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*Min-Zhan Lu*

## Professing Multiculturalism: The Politics of Style in the Contact Zone

In her 1991 "Arts of the Contact Zone," Mary Louise Pratt points out that while colleges and universities have increasingly deployed a rhetoric of diversity in response to the insistence of non-mainstream groups for fuller participation, the "import" of "multiculturalism" remains "up for grabs across the ideological spectrum" (39). I begin with Pratt's reminder because I want to call attention to the images of "grabbing" and "import." These depict "multiculturalism" as a construct whose "import"—meanings, implications, and consequences—is available only to those willing to expend the energy to "grab" it: to search, envision, grasp, articulate, and enact it. And these images conjure up the act of importing—of bringing in—perspectives and methods formerly excluded by dominant institutions. I want to articulate one "import" of multiculturalism here by exploring the question of how to conceive and practice teaching methods which invite a multicultural approach to style, particularly those styles of student writing which appear to be ridden with "errors." And I situate this question in the context of English Studies, a discipline which, on the one hand, has often proclaimed its concern to profess multiculturalism but, on the other hand, has done little to combat the ghettoization of two of its own cultures, namely composition teaching and student writing.

My inquiry is motivated by two concerns which I believe I share with a significant number of composition teachers. The first results from a sense of division between the ways in which many of us approach style in theory and in our teaching practices. I have in mind teachers who are aligned in theory with a view of composition which contests the separation of form and meaning and which also argues against a conception of "academic

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CCC 45.4/December 1994

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discourse" as discrete, fixed, and unified. This alignment, while generating a critical perspective towards traditional methods of teaching style through drills in "correct usage," does not always result in any immediate revision of such methods in classroom practice. Some of us tend to resolve this gap between theory and practice in one of two ways: (1) We set aside a few weeks to teach "usage" or "copyediting" in the traditional way while spending the rest of the term helping students to revise their work on a more conceptual level; or (2) we send students who have "problems" with "usage" to the writing center. Such "resolutions" often leave the teacher frustrated. Because she recognizes the burden on those at the fringe of having to "prove" themselves to those at the center by meeting the standards set by the latter, she cannot but take seriously students' anxiety to master "correct" usage. Nevertheless, she is aware that instead of helping them to overcome such an anxiety, her teaching strategies risk increasing it, as they may reinforce students' sense of the discrepancy between their inability to produce "error-free" prose and their ability to come up with "good ideas," and they may confirm these students' impression that only those who make "errors" need to worry about issues of usage and editing. My second concern has to do with a division many of us feel between our role as composition teachers and the role we play as students, teachers, or scholars in other, supposedly more central areas of English Studies. As our interest in composition teaching, theory, and research evolves, we are increasingly interested in contesting the second-class status of work in composition. At the same time, we are often all too aware that we ourselves are guilty of perpetuating the divisions between composition and other areas of English Studies by approaching the writings of "beginners" or "outsiders" in a manner different from the approach we take to the writings of "experts."

Two stories, both of which took place around the turn of this century, illustrate part of the historical power of that kind of division. The first story comes from Gertrude Stein's *The Autobiography of Alice B. Toklas*. According to Stein, right after she had made arrangements to have her book *Three Lives* printed by Grafton Press of New York, "a very nice American young man" was sent by the press to Paris to check on her:

You see, [the young man] said slightly hesitant, the director of the Grafton Press is under the impression that perhaps your knowledge of english. But I am an american, said Gertrude Stein indignantly. Yes yes I understand that perfectly now, he said, but perhaps you have not had much experience in writing. I suppose, said [Stein] laughing, you were under the impression that I was imperfectly educated. He blushed, why no, he said, but you might not have had much experience in writing. Oh yes, she said, oh yes. . . . and you

might as well tell [the director] . . . that everything that is written in the manuscript is written with the intention of its being so written and all he has to do is to print it and I will take the responsibility. The young man bowed himself out. (68)

This exchange between an indignant Stein and an embarrassed “young man” reveals some of the criteria used by “educated america” when dealing with an idiosyncratic style. These criteria are (a) the writer’s “knowledge of english,” which is seen as somehow dependent on whether she is a native speaker, and (b) the writer’s “experience in writing,” which is seen as related to whether she has been “[im]perfectly educated.” Stein, an “American” bearing certification of a “perfect” education from Radcliffe and Johns Hopkins Medical School, knew she had the authority to maintain that everything in her manuscript was “written with the intention of its being so written.” Stein’s indignation and the embarrassment she elicited from the “young man” suggest that in the early 1900s, ethnic and educational backgrounds were two common denominators for determining whether style represented self-conscious and innovative experimentation or blundering “errors.”

The second story took place a few years prior to the Stein event, when the style of another writer, Theodore Dreiser, was also questioned by a publisher to whom he had submitted his first novel, *Sister Carrie*. The rejection letter from Harper faults Dreiser for his “uneven” style which, according to the editors, was “disfigured by . . . colloquialisms” (*Sister Carrie*, 519). Existing manuscripts of the book’s revision indicate that Dreiser did not defend his style with the kind of authority Stein exhibited. Instead he sought editorial help from his wife Jug and friend Henry because he deemed both to have been better educated than himself. There is evidence in the revised manuscript that Dreiser adopted nearly all of Jug’s corrections of grammar and Henry’s rewording of his Germanic rhythms and cumulative sentence structures (*Sister Carrie* 580–81). Read in the context of Stein’s story, Dreiser’s willingness to have all aspects of his style “corrected” might be attributed in part to his acute awareness of the criteria used by “educated america” when dealing with the writing of the son of an impoverished German immigrant with extremely sporadic formal education. The early reception of *Sister Carrie* proves the validity of Dreiser’s concern, as even its defenders attributed its “crude” style to his ethnic background and lack of formal education.<sup>1</sup>

Almost a century after these events, more and more English courses are now informed by a view of language as a site of struggle among conflicting discourses with unequal socio-political power. Students in these courses are beginning to approach the style of what they call “real” writers like

Stein and Dreiser very differently. Interest in multiculturalism has also shifted the attention of some teachers to writers' success at what Bakhtin calls "dialogically coordinating" a varied and profound "heteroglossia" (295–96). Analysis of style in these classrooms often centers on the politics of the writer's stylistic decisions: (a) mapping the "heteroglossia" on the internal and external scenes of writing, (b) attending to the writer's effort to look at one discourse through the eyes of another, and (c) considering the writer's willingness to resist the centripetal forces of "official" discourses. Viewed from this multicultural perspective on style, the writings of both Dreiser and Stein could be considered in terms of the efforts of each to dialogically coordinate the profound heteroglossia within and outside official "educated" discourses. For readers adopting this perspective, neither Dreiser's ethnic background nor his "imperfect" educational background would be used to dismiss his "uneven" style solely as evidence of "error"—that is, to conclude that his style merely reflects his lack of knowledge or experience in writing. In fact, given the frequency with which writings from what Gloria Anzaldúa has called the "borderlands" are being currently assigned in some English courses and the praise this type of writing receives for its hybridization of "official" discourses, Dreiser's readiness to yield to the authority of the "better educated" now appears conservative—indicating a passive stance towards the hegemony of ethnocentrism and linguistic imperialism. In fact, the publication of the Pennsylvania edition of *Sister Carrie* in 1987 indicates that such a critical view privileging resistance was in operation when the editors decided to delete many of the changes made by the "better educated" Jug and Henry in the hope of preserving the "power and forcefulness" of Dreiser's original prose (*Sister Carrie* 581).

However, Dreiser's reaction still haunts me, especially when I move from teaching students to analyze the idiosyncratic style of "real" writers to helping them to work on their own styles. In my "literature" courses for junior- or senior-level college students or "writing" courses for first-year students, students learn to talk with considerable eloquence about the politics of stylistic decisions made by "real" writers, especially those writing from the borderlands by choice or necessity. Most of the readings I assign for these classes call attention to writers' need and right to contest the unifying force of hegemonic discourses, and thus make Dreiser's submission to the authority of the "better educated" appear dated and passive. Yet the meaning of Dreiser's submissiveness changes for me and most of my students as soon as we move to work on the style of a student writer, especially when we tinker with what we call the writer's "discursive voice"—that is, when dealing with deviations in diction, tone, voice, structure and so on (which we loosely call the "rhetorical register"), or

with punctuation, syntax, sentence structure and so on (which we refer to as the "grammatical register"). On those occasions, how to sound "right" suddenly becomes a "real" concern for my students: pervasive, immediate, and difficult for me to dismiss. My students' apparent anxiety to reproduce the conventions of "educated" English poses a challenge for my teaching and research. Why is it that in spite of our developing ability to acknowledge the political need and right of "real" writers to experiment with "style," we continue to cling to the belief that such a need and right does not belong to "student writers"? Another way of putting the question would be, why do we assume—as Dreiser did—that until one can prove one's ability to produce "error-free" prose, one has not earned the right to innovative "style"?

Again, I believe Dreiser's account of his own educational experience might shed some light on the question. In *Dawn*, Dreiser writes about his opportunity to attend the University of Indiana, Bloomington for two short terms. A former teacher made arrangements to exempt Dreiser from the preliminary examinations because, Dreiser points out, these exams would have quickly "debarred" him (342). Life as what we might today call an open admissions student at Indiana made Dreiser feel "reduced." He "grieved" at his "inability to grasp . . . such a commonplace as grammar" (378). Even though he knew he was able to apprehend many things and to demonstrate his apprehensions "quite satisfactorily" to himself, he found the curriculum "oppressive," leaving him "mute" with "a feeling of inadequacy" (425). The events surrounding the efforts of Dreiser and Stein to publish their first books indicate that the common approach of the editors, publishers, and critics to their idiosyncratic styles was not coincidental. Dreiser's experience at Indiana, his willingness to have his "uneven" style "corrected," and Stein's quick rebuttal to the "young man" all point to the institutional source of this approach. A common view of "style" as belonging only to those who are beyond "error," and a certain type of college curriculum treating matters of grammar or usage as the prerequisites to higher education, seem mutually reinforcing. It is this belief that pushes students identified as having "problems" to meet such "prerequisites" and assigns teachers trained to deal with such "problems" to the periphery or borderlands of higher education.

Dreiser's memories of Indiana seem symptomatic of the feelings of a significant number of college students I encounter. I have in mind particularly students who seem quick to admit that they are "not good" at writing because they have been identified at some point in their education as needing special—remedial, laboratory, or intensive—instruction in the "basics." Like Dreiser, they are frustrated at their inability to grasp "grammar" because they have been encouraged to view it as "such a common-

place”—something everyone who aspires to become anyone ought to be able to master. And they feel muted and reduced by the curriculum because it does not seem to recognize that they are quite able to grasp subjects other than “grammar” and demonstrate their understanding of such subjects satisfactorily to themselves, if perhaps not in writing to others. It seems to me that one way of helping students to deal with this frustration would be to connect their “difficulties” with the refusal of “real” writers to reproduce the hegemonic conventions of written English. And it seems to me that this will not take place until teachers like myself contest the distinction between “real” and “student” writers and stop treating the idiosyncratic style of the not yet “perfectly educated” solely in terms of “error.” One form of contestation could be to apply to student writing the same multicultural approach we have been promoting when analyzing the work of “real” writers. Susan Miller has argued in *Textual Carnivals* that the tendency to treat student writers as “emerging, or as failed, but never as actually responsible ‘authors’” has served to maintain the low status of composition studies in its relations to those “outside it, and its self-images and ways of working out its new professionalization” (195–96). An approach to student writing that treats students as real writers would undo such binaries and thus assert the right and ability of writing teachers and students to fully participate in a truly multicultural curriculum.

My aim here is to discuss a teaching method formulated out of my attempt to apply a multicultural approach to student writing: an approach which views the classroom as a potential “contact zone”—which Pratt describes as a space where various cultures “clash, and grapple with each other, often in contexts of highly asymmetrical relations of power” (34). In arguing for a multicultural approach to styles traditionally displaced to the realm of “error,” I align my teaching with a tradition in “error” analysis which views even “error-ridden” student writings as texts relevant to critical approaches available to English Studies. I am particularly interested in explicitly foregrounding the category of “resistance” and “change” when helping students to conceptualize the processes of producing and interpreting an idiosyncratic style in students’ own writings. In the classroom I envision, the notion of “intention” is presented as the decision of a writer who understands not only the “central role of human agency” but also that such agency is often “enacted under circumstances not of one’s choosing” (West 31). I define the writer’s attempt to “reproduce” the norms of academic discourses as necessarily involving the re-production—approximating, negotiating, and revising—of these norms. And I do so by asking students to explore the full range of choices and options, including those excluded by the conventions of academic discourses.

These aspects in the classroom I envision inevitably distance it from classrooms influenced by one belief prevalent in ESL courses or courses in "Basic Writing": namely, that a monolingual environment is the most conducive to the learning of "beginners" or "outsiders." This belief overlooks the dialogical nature of students' "inner voices" as well as the multicultural context of students' lives. The classroom I envision also differs from approaches to students' ambivalence towards the effects of education exemplified by Mina Shaughnessy's *Errors and Expectations*. Shaughnessy convincingly shows the relevance to error analysis of a range of feelings common to students likely to be identified as basic writers: their anxiety to "sound academic" and to self-consciously emulate the formal style (194), their low self-esteem as learners and writers, and their sense of ambivalence towards academic discourse. But as I have argued in "Conflict and Struggle," Shaughnessy's goal in acknowledging students' ambivalence is only to help them dissolve it (904-06). Because this ambivalence arises from sources well beyond the classroom—coming from the unequal power relationships pervading the history, culture, and society my students live in—not all students can or even want to get rid of all types of ambivalence. On the contrary, the experiences of writers like Gloria Anzaldúa, bell hooks, and Mike Rose suggest that, appropriately mobilized, a sense of ambivalence might be put to constructive uses in writing.

To foreground the concepts of "resistance" and "change" when analyzing the styles of a student or "real" writer, I ask students to read deviations from the official codes of academic discourses not only in relation to the writer's knowledge of these codes but also in terms of her efforts to negotiate and modify them. Aside from increasing the student's knowledge of and experience in reproducing these official forms, I am most interested in doing three things: (1) enabling students to hear discursive voices which conflict with and struggle against the voices of academic authority; (2) urging them to negotiate a position in response to these colliding voices; and (3) asking them to consider their choice of position in the context of the socio-political power relationships within and among diverse discourses and in the context of their personal life, history, culture, and society.

Because of the tendency in English Studies to ghettoize the culture of composition, I will use some student writing produced in writing courses for first-year students to illustrate how I would actually go about teaching a multicultural approach to style. And I am going to focus on features of writing styles which are commonly displaced to the realm of "error" and thus viewed as peripheral to college English teaching. In using these rather than other types of examples, I hope to illustrate as well the need to view composition as a site which might inform as well as be informed by our



effort to profess multiculturalism in other, supposedly more “advanced” and “central” areas of English Studies. David Bartholomae has recently reminded us that there is no need “to import ‘multiple cultures’ [into the classroom, via anthologies]. They are there, in the classroom, once the institution becomes willing to pay that kind of attention to student writing” (14–15). Such attention, he explains, could produce composition courses in multiculturalism “that worked with the various cultures represented in the practice of its students” (14). My second reason for using these examples is related to the ways in which conflict and struggle have been perceived by teachers specializing in error analysis. These teachers tend to hear arguments foregrounding conflict and struggle in the classroom as sloganeering “the students’ right to their own language” in order to eliminate attention to error, or as evidence of a “PC” attack on the “back to basics” movement (see, for example, Traub). The examples I use here, I hope, will demonstrate a way of teaching which neither overlooks the students’ potential lack of knowledge and experience in reproducing the dominant codes of academic discourses *nor* dismisses the writer’s potential social, political and linguistic interest in modifying these codes, with emphasis on the word “potential.”

When teaching first-year writing classes, I usually introduce the multicultural approach to student writing style around the mid-point of the term, when I feel that students are beginning to apply to their actual practices a view of writing as a process of re-seeing. To present the writer’s experimentation with style (including what is generally called “copy-editing” or the “correction of error”) as an integral part of the revision process, I look for sample student writings with two characteristics. First, I am interested in writings with the kinds of “error” a majority of the class would feel they can easily “spot” and “fix.” This type of writing allows me to acknowledge some potential causes of non-conventional styles and effective methods of revising them which are more widely disseminated in traditional writing classrooms and familiar to most students. Second, I look for styles which are also more conducive to my attempt to help the writer to negotiate a new position in relation to the colliding voices active in the scenes of writing.<sup>2</sup>

Following is a handout I have used when teaching first-year composition classes. The two segments on the handout are from the papers one student wrote in response to two assignments, one asking her to discuss an essay, “From a Native Daughter,” by Haunani-Kay Trask, and another asking her to comment on the kind of “critical thinking” defined in the “Introduction” to an anthology called *Rereading America*. For the convenience of discussion in this essay, I have added emphasis to the handout:

## Segment One:

As a Hawaiian native historian, Trask *can able to* argue for her people. As a Hawaiian native, she was exposed to two totally different viewpoints about her people. She was brought up in Hawaii. During this time, she heard the stories about her people from her parents. Later on she was send to America mainland to pursue higher education, in which she learnt a different stories about her people. Therefore, she understood that the interpretation of land was different between the "haole" and the native. To prove that the "haole" were wrong, she went back to Hawaii and work on the land with other native, so she *can* feel the strong bond with land her people have which the "haole" *could* not feel. The "haole" historians never bother to do so as they were more interested in looking for written evidence. That was why Trask, as a native Hawaiian historian, argued that these "haole" historians were being ignorant and ethnocentric. That is also why Trask suggested the "haole" historians learn the native tongue.

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## Segment Two:

Elements like perceiving things from different perspective, finding and validating each alternative solutions, questioning the unknown and breaking the nutshell of cultural norms are important for developing the ability of "critical thinking." . . . Most of the new universities' students are facing new challenges like staying away from family, peer pressure, culture shock, heavy college work etc. I *can* say that these are the "obstacles" to success. If a student *can able to* approach each situation with different perspectives than the one he brought from high school, I *may* conclude that this particular student has climbed his first step to become a "critical thinker." . . . However, there is one particular obstacle that is really difficult for almost everyone to overcome, that is the cultural rules. From the textbook, I found that cultural rules are deep rooted in our mind and cause us to view things from our respective cultural viewpoint. Even though cultural values lead the way of life of a particular group of people, they blind us as well. I relate to this because I truly believe that the cultural rules of my country, Malaysia, make my life here difficult. In order to achieve a "critical mind," one should try to break from his own cultural rules.

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## "can," verb:

1. to be able to; have the ability, power, or skill to. 2. to know how to. 3. to have the power or means to. 4. to have the right or qualifications to. 5. *may*; *have permission to.* (*The Random House Dictionary*)

“able,” adjective:

1. having necessary power, skill, resources, or qualifications; qualified; able to lift a trunk; . . . able to vote (*The Random House Dictionary*).

When using this handout, I usually begin by asking students what particularly about the two segments might be said to make the voice of the writer idiosyncratic. My students in both writing and literature classes have been fairly quick in tracing it to the “can able to” structure in the two segments. Then I ask the class to speculate on potential causes of that idiosyncrasy. Students’ responses to this question usually go something like this: Here is a “foreign” speaker, a student from Malaysia, trying to use the English idiom “to be able to” and ending up with an “error.” So we usually talk a little bit about the difference in grammatical function between the verb “can” and the verb “to be” in relation to the adjective “able.” And I describe the writer’s own initial interpretation of the cause of this “error”: her native language is Chinese. With the help of a tutor, she had realized that the Chinese translation for both “can” and “be able to” is the same. When using the expression “be able to,” she would be thinking in Chinese. As a result, she often ended up writing “can able to.” I would refer to her own initial reading because I am interested in complicating but not denying the relationship between style and the writer’s knowledge of and experience with the conventions of written English. So I try to acknowledge first that exposure to and practice in reproducing the “be able to” structure could be one of the ways to revise these segments.

I then go on to complicate this approach by also calling attention to the relationship between form and meaning. What might be the difference in meaning between “can,” “be able to,” and “can able to”? Most of the students I have encountered tend to see “can” as interchangeable with “be able to.” To them, “can able to” appears redundant, like a double negative. To problematize this reading, I usually call attention to the two dictionary entries included in the handout, especially to definition 5 under “can.” Definition 5 opens up a new reading by presenting the word “can” as having one more meaning than “to be able to.” Rather than approaching the issue of ability from the perspective of what an individual possesses, definition 5 approaches it from the perspective of the external forces *permitting* something, as in the verb “may.”

Most native English speakers among my students tend to argue that in actual usage, only grandmas and schoolteachers make the distinction between “can” and “may.” *Everyone* uses “can” and “be able to” interchangeably nowadays. In response, I tell them the writer’s position on the issue. She was aware of the distinction—she was the one who first called

my attention to definition 5. At this point, a “contact zone” would begin to take shape with three conflicting positions on the meanings of “can” and “able to”: the position of a speaker of idiomatic English, the position of the dictionary, and the position of a “foreign” student writer. Since the “foreign” student writer is here being cast as that of someone lacking knowledge and expertise in formal and idiomatic English and thus the least powerful of the three, I am most interested in furthering the students’ existing construction of that position so it is not so easily silenced.

To that end, I pose the question of whether, read in the context of the two segments in the handout, one might argue that the “can” in the two “can able to” structures does not take on the same meaning as the other uses of “can” in the rest of the segments. This line of inquiry usually leads us to compare the meaning of the “can” in the first sentence in Segment One to the two “can’s” in the seventh sentence and to the meaning of the “can” in the “can able to” in Segment Two as well as the “can” in the previous sentence or the “may” in the second half of the same sentence. My aim here is to get students to re-construct the voice of the writer by focusing on the various uses of the word “can” in the two segments. When exploring the question, I also try to direct attention to the passive voice (Trask was “brought up in Hawaii” and “send to America mainland to pursue higher education”) in the sentences following the statement “Trask can able to argue for her people.” I explore with the class how and why this passive voice might be read as indicating that the student writer is approaching Trask’s ability from the perspective of the external circumstances of Trask’s life—using “can” in the sense of her having the “permission to” become a native Hawaiian historian—as well as from the perspective of her having the qualifications to argue as an historian. The two uses of “can” in sentence seven, however, present Trask’s and the “haole” historians’ (in)ability to “feel” the Hawaiian’s bond with the land as more related to a person’s will and attitude rather than to whether each “may”—has the permission to—learn the Hawaiian language or work with the people. (“The ‘haole’ historians never bother to do so.”) Similarly, in the second segment, the “can” in “a student can able to adopt different perspectives,” when read in the context of the writer’s discussion of the difficulties for “everyone to overcome” the “obstacle” of cultural rules and of her own experience of that difficulty, again foregrounds the role of external conditions and their effect on one’s ability to do something. In that sense, this “can” is closer in meaning to the “may” in “I may conclude,” a conclusion presented as depending more on the action of someone else than on the ability of the “I” drawing the conclusion. At the same time, this “can” is different from the “can” in the “I can say . . .” since the latter seems to depend on the ability of the speaker to name the situations as

“obstacles” rather than on whether or not the speaker has permission to so name them.

In getting the class to enact a “close reading” of the two segments, I aim to shift attention to the relationship between a discursive form, “can able to,” and the particular meanings it might be said to create in particular contexts. As a result, a new question often surfaces: What kind of approach to “ability” is enacted by a speaker of idiomatic English who sees “can” and “be able to” as completely interchangeable in meaning? In exploring this question, students have mentioned popular sayings such as “if there is a will, there is a way”; TV shows such as *Mr. Rogers’ Neighborhood* which teach viewers to believe “everyone is special,” possessing unique qualities; and various discourses promoting the power of positive thinking. Students begin to perceive the way in which a common treatment of “can” and “to be able to” as interchangeable in meaning might be seen as contributing to a popular American attitude towards the transcendental power of the individual. Once we locate these conflicting approaches to the notion of ability, it becomes clear that the revision or “correction” of the “can able to” in these two segments can no longer take place simply at the level of linguistic form. It must also involve a writer’s negotiating a position in relation to value systems with unequal social power in the U.S.: one “popular” and the others “alien,” “dated,” or “formal” but critical. Once this structural “error” is contextualized in conflicting attitudes towards a belief in the transcendental power of the individual, the issue can no longer be merely one’s knowledge of or respect for the authorities of a dictionary English versus colloquial English, or one’s competency in a particular language, but also one’s alignment with competing discursive positions.

At this point, we will have mapped a contact zone with a range of choices and options both among linguistic forms and discursive alignments. As we move on to the question of how each of us might revise these two segments, I would make sure that each student further enlarges this contact zone by taking into consideration the specific conditions of her or his life. I would have already introduced my definition of the “conditions of life” in previous assignments and class discussions, a definition that includes a whole range of discursive sites, including that of race, ethnicity, gender, sex, economic class, education, religion, region, recreation, and work. I also encourage each student to think about “life” in terms of the life she has lived in the past, is living in the present, and envisions for the future. Furthermore, I stress that decisions on how to revise should also be related to each student’s interpretation(s) of the two texts discussed in the segments. To summarize, the contact zone in which the revision takes place would encompass the collision of at least the following voices: the

voice of a "foreign" student writer (as constructed by the class at the beginning of the discussion), the voice(s) of the writer of the two segments (as constructed by the class discussion resulting from a "close reading" of the various uses of "can"), the voice of a dictionary, of a speaker of idiomatic English, the voices important to the specific conditions of each student's life, the voice of a teacher, and the voice emerging from each student's interpretation of the two texts discussed in the two segments.

Since decisions on how to revise the "can able to" structure depend on who is present, the particular ways in which the discussion unfolds, and who is doing the revision, such decisions vary from class to class and student to student. To illustrate the unpredictability of the outcome, let me use two decisions made in two different courses, one by the original writer of the two segments and one by another student whose native language is also Chinese. Like all other students in my class, during the process of a "close reading" of the uses of "can" in these two segments, the original writer encountered a construction of her "voices" which she may not have fully considered before the discussion. Therefore, when revising the two segments, she too had to negotiate with these forms of reading and constructions of voices. Upon reflecting on the conditions of her life, she reviewed the attitude towards "ability" promoted in the particular neighborhood in Malaysia where she grew up. In view of that as well as of her own experience as a daughter (especially her difficulties persuading her parents to let her rather than only their sons go abroad for college), her current difficulty in adjusting to the kind of "critical thinking" promoted in my classroom (which she felt was the direct opposite of what she was told to do in her schooling back home), and her admiration of Trask's courage to "argue for her people," the writer decided to foreground the relationship between individual ability and the conditions in which that ability "may" be realized. With the help of her classmates, she came up with several options. One was to add an "if" clause to a sentence using "be able to." Another was to change "can able to" to "may be able to." One student suggested that she use "can able to" and then tag a sentence to explain her reasoning—her view of "ability." Among the suggestions, the writer picked "may be able to" because, as she put it, it was clearly "grammatically correct" and "says what I want to say." As the term progressed, one of the students in the class used "can able to" playfully in a class discussion, and others caught on. It became a newly coined phrase we shared throughout the term.

However, a Vietnamese-American student whose home language is also Chinese took a very different stance towards the hegemonic attitude toward "ability" and for a quite different reason from what led some of my American-born students to identify with the voice of an idiomatic speaker.

Using examples from his immigrant community, he argued for the importance of believing in the capacity of the individual. He pointed out that the emphasis on external conditions had made some people in his community fatalistic and afraid to take up the responsibility to make changes. According to him, there is a saying in classic Chinese similar to “if there is a will, there is a way.” His parents used it repeatedly when lecturing him. So he was all for using “can” and “be able to” interchangeably to foreground the power of the individual. He hoped more people in his community would adopt this outlook. Accordingly, his revision changed “can able to” to “be able to.” At the same time, he also changed the passive voice in the sentences referring to Trask’s childhood and education in the first segment to the active voice, arguing that there is enough basis in the essays to sustain that reading.

Given the frequency with which students opt for the voices of academic authority, I used to wonder if this kind of teaching is driven more by my view of language as a site of struggle than by the needs of students eager to internalize and reproduce the conventions of academic discourse. My conclusion is: No, this process of negotiation is particularly meaningful for students anxious to master the codes of academic discourse, especially because their discursive practices are most likely to have to take place in the kind of postmodern capitalist world critics such as Fredric Jameson have characterized. Although the product, their decision to reproduce the code, might remain the same whether it is made with or without a process of negotiation, the activities leading to that decision, and thus its significance, are completely different. Without the negotiation, their choice would be resulting from an attempt to passively absorb and automatically reproduce a predetermined form. In such cases, the student would perceive different discourses, to borrow from Bakhtin, as belonging to different, fixed, and indisputable “chambers” in her consciousness and in society. And she would evaluate her progress by the automatism with which she was able to move in and out of these “chambers.” If and when this student experienced some difficulty mastering a particular code, she would view it as a sign of her failure as a learner and writer.

On the other hand, if the student’s decision to reproduce a code results from a process of negotiation, then she would have examined the conflict between the codes of Standard English and other discourses. And she would have deliberated not only on the social power of these colliding discourses but also on who she was, is, and aspires to be when making this decision. If the occasion arises in the future when she experiences difficulty in reproducing a particular code, as it very likely will, her reaction may be much more positive and constructive. Learning to work on style in the contact zone is also useful for those students interested in exploring ways

of resisting the unifying force of "official" discourse. First, it can help students hear a range of choices and options beyond the confines of their immediate life. Second, negotiating as a group gives them the distance they need but might not have when dealing with their own writing in isolation. Therefore, devoting a few class periods to familiarizing students with this approach to style can be fruitful, especially if students are asked to theorize their action afterwards by reflecting on its strengths and limitations.

Obviously, one of the challenges for such a teaching method is that one can only project but not predict a class discussion on the basis of the chosen sample. In fact, life in the contact zone is by definition dynamic, heterogeneous, and volatile. Bewilderment and suffering as well as revelation and exhilaration are experienced by everyone, teacher and students, at different moments. No one is excluded, no one is safe (Pratt 39). Therefore, learning to become comfortable in making blunders is central to this type of teaching. In fact, there is no better way to teach students the importance of negotiation than by allowing them the opportunity to watch a teacher work her way through a chancy and volatile dialogue. Seemingly simple markers such as skin color, native tongue, ethnic heritage or nationality can neither prescribe nor pre-script the range of voices likely to surface. How to voice and talk to rather than speaking for or about the voices of the "other" within and among cultures is thus not a question which can be resolved prior to or outside of the process of negotiation. Rather, it must remain a concern guiding our action as we take part in it.

Needless to say, this type of teaching would work better when students are also asked to try the same method when analyzing the style of "real" writers so they understand that the "problems" they have with style are shared by all writers. For example, when students in a first-year writing course were reading Trask's essay "From a Native Daughter," I asked them to discuss or write about aspects of her style which seemed to deviate from the style of other historians they had encountered. Several students observed that the paragraphs in Trask's essay are shorter, including a series of one-sentence paragraphs with parallel structures of "And when they wrote. . . they meant . . ." (123-24). Others were struck by the opening of Trask's essay, where she addresses her audience directly and asks that they "greet each other in friendship and love." She tells many more personal stories and uses fewer references for support, and she uses the imagery of a lover to depict the role of language. I urged them to examine these stylistic features in relation to the particular stance Trask seems to have taken towards the conflict between "haole" (white) culture and the native Hawaiian culture. Having approached the writing of a "real" writer from the perspective of the relationship between meaning, form, and social



identifications, students are likely to be more motivated in applying this perspective to their own style and its revision.

At the same time, using a student paper to enact a negotiation in the contact zone can create a sense of immediacy and a new level of meaningfulness about abstract concepts discussed or enacted in the assigned readings for students in "literature" and "critical theory" classes. For example, I have used the handout with the "can able to" construction in senior-level critical theory courses when discussing Bakhtin's notion of "internal dialogism," Raymond Williams' concept of "structures of feeling," Cornel West's "prophetic critics and artists of color," and "dense" critiques of colonial discourse by such writers as Edward Said or Homi K. Bhabha. In the process of revising the "can able to" structure in the handout, in actively negotiating conflict in a contact zone, students in literature and cultural critical theory courses can gain a concrete opportunity to test the theories of various critics against their own practice. This type of activity reduces the "alienation" students often experience when asked to "do" theory. Testing theories against their own writing practices can also enable students to become more aware of the specific challenges such theories pose as well as the possibilities they open up for the individual writers committed to practicing these viewpoints. And I have used this method in upper-level literature courses when teaching such "borderland" literature as Sandra Cisneros's short story "Little Miracle, Kept Promises" or *Breaking Bread* by Cornel West and bell hooks. Reading and revising a student text, students can become more sensitive to the ways in which a "real" writer negotiates her way through contending discourses. At the same time, such reading and revision of their own writing allows students to enter into dialogue with "real" writers as "fellow travellers," active learners eager to compare and contrast one another's trials and triumphs.

One reaction to teaching style on the contact zone is fear that it will keep students from wanting to learn the conventions of academic discourse. My experience so far suggests that the unequal sociopolitical power of diverse discourses exerts real pressures on students' stylistic choices. After all, students choose to come to college, the choice of which speaks volumes on that power. The need to write for professors who grade with red pens circling all "errors" is also real for a majority of our students in most classrooms outside English departments. Therefore, although the process of negotiation encourages students to struggle with such unifying forces, it does not and cannot lead them to ignore and forget them. It acknowledges the writer's right and ability to experiment with innovative ways of deploying the codes taught in the classroom. It broadens students' sense of the range of options and choices facing a writer. But it does not

choose for the students. Rather, it leaves them to choose in the context of the history, culture, and society in which they live.

*Acknowledgments:* Earlier versions of this paper were delivered at the 1993 CCCC and at the University of Washington. My thanks go to the respondents in the audiences at both occasions. I am also grateful for comments on drafts of this piece from Elizabeth Robertson, Ira Shor, Anne Herrington, and James Seitz. Work on this essay was supported by a grant from the Drake University Center for the Humanities. And I offer special thanks to Bruce Horner for his contributions to the conception and revisions of this essay.

## Notes

1. See Anderson, "An Apology for Crudity"; Kazin, *On Native Grounds*; and Mencken, "The Dreiser Bugaboo."

2. For an extended discussion of teaching editing that informs my own, see Horner, "Rethinking," especially pages 188–96.

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