

# “Government of da Peeps, for da Peeps, and by da Peeps”: Revisiting the Contact Zone

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*ABSTRACT: In this article, I review contact zone pedagogy from a perspective of discursive positioning and with attention to two assignments that ask basic writers to play with the conventions of academic language. The first requires them to translate a passage of academic prose into a slang of their choice; the second, to compose a parody of academic style. Their responses afford these basic writers new, unusually powerful subjectivities: as deflating formality and pretension, as mocking those in power, and as de-naturalizing everyday texts and discourses to render them newly problematic. And they serve as counterpoint to studies that present the contact zone as opening up the classroom to the appeals of all parties, sexist, racist, or homophobic as they may be. Ultimately, I challenge an unspoken assumption of much writing pedagogy—that teaching on current social issues will eventually bring students around to their instructor’s point of view—instead holding out the promise that in the contact zone, a teacher is just as likely to be moved and changed as a student.*

I dunno it was something like eighty seven years ago when these old guys brought here in dis country a new place that began bein free and were sayin all dis shit that all da people in dis fuckin country are all equal or some shit like dat. . . . But yo we cant dedicate, declare, or take away disground yo. . . . This speech aint gonna be remembered but all this dying shit aint gonna be forgot. . . . We take da courage of dese guys and say dat dese fuckas did not die in vain and dat dis nation we be in right now is where da freedom was born and that da government of da peeps, by da peeps and for da peeps will not go away from earth.

The above was produced by a student in a first-year writing class at a medium-sized state university. The class is a basic skills/first-year hybrid, a 4-credit course with the same completion requirements as the existing 3-credit first-semester course. The hybrid has all but replaced the not-for-credit basic skills course on campus, and accounts for more than one-fourth of all sections of first-semester writing there. Students are placed in the course

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based on their scores on the SAT II: those with 580 and above go to the 3-credit course; those with 510-570, to the hybrid; and those with 500 and below, to the non-credit basic skills course.

In the sections of the course I teach, I take the circumstances of students' placement there as an opportunity to focus the reading and writing on the difference between students' informal vernaculars and the formal languages of the academy. In class we talk about how academic culture privileges scientific ways of knowing, and how this leads to a peculiar kind of writing: full of discipline-specific jargon and concepts, hedging of statements (to pre-empt attacks from critics), statistical rather than anecdotal evidence, an almost obsessive documentation (ostensibly so that readers may arrive at the same conclusions as the writer), etc. And we discuss how this can militate against a reader's engagement with such texts, especially for those unaccustomed to such special features. Meanwhile, we read stories of linguistic dislocation and struggle from Gloria Anzaldúa, bell hooks, June Jordan, Min-Zhan Lu, Mary Louise Pratt, Richard Rodriguez, Mike Rose, and others. And in addition to translating from formal to vernacular languages as illustrated by the student quoted above, students explore the characteristics of formal and scientific language and arguments, comparing them with informal varieties; compose parodies of formal language; and tell the stories of their encounters with formal language and how they have or have not made places for themselves in settings where formal language is the norm.

These classroom practices are inspired by Pratt's "Arts of the Contact Zone," central to which is her example of Incan scribe Guaman Poma's 1,200-page letter to the Spanish king. In it, Guaman Poma draws on conventions of Spanish language and culture—e.g. systems of orthography and representational drawing—in order to express indigenous values and aspirations, ultimately condemning Spanish governance of the conquered.

For me, this is the most compelling insight of Pratt's work: that language users write (or talk) themselves into and through unfriendly language environments by combinations of assimilation and resistance. As I see it, a contact zone pedagogy should induce students to draw on resources from their home languages and cultures, combining these with resources from school languages and cultures, to perform a critique of the latter.

This focus on what could be called creative misuse foregrounds the material and discursive regimes which both constrain and enable people's speech and writing.

In what follows, I'll demonstrate how two contact zone assignments I've created can afford students new, more powerful, more critique-laden

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subjectivities. In fact, when students create texts that don't afford easy subjectivities for their instructors to inhabit, these texts challenge some of the notions we as teachers and as engaged citizens hold most dear. And they can open up spaces where instructors and students can be written into new configurations, reorientations of power and authority that can benefit both sides.

### **Soliciting Oppositional Discourse**

In the decade-plus since their introduction, contact zone approaches have come to complicate, and even supplant discourse community approaches within the field of composition (Harris, Horner). On the other hand, several studies demonstrate how contact zone approaches may open up clashes between teacher and student cultures, as students challenge their instructors' commitment to such progressive values as cultural diversity and gender equity. Representative is Miller's example of an essay written by a student in the class of an openly gay instructor that relates how the student and his comrades in a night on the town harass men they presume to be gay and beat a homeless person. Miller presents this and other examples as opening up "fault lines" in the contact zone: as points where "unsolicited oppositional discourse" (Pratt 39) treads uncomfortably close to hate speech. Peele and Ryder also address a student text that is anti-gay, though perhaps more troublingly so because of its author's ambiguous relationship to the ideas he puts forth. By attending to "belief spaces"—points at which a writer makes explicit his stance relative to the ideas he presents—Peele and Ryder are able to explain how this student hedges his affiliation to Eminem's "heteronormativity," though they are not successful at getting the student to revise the essay so as to make his own views more explicit. Finally, Murray describes a student essay culminating a study of diversity issues that re-codes white people's suffering under affirmative action programs in terms of racial discrimination. Murray calls the student Jean's effort a sort of perverse version of Guaman Poma's reappropriation, as calling on the conventions and discourses of civil rights to present an argument that upholds racist representations. These three studies can leave us wondering what sort of Pandora's box we open up when we commit to pedagogies of the contact zone.

In contrast, my "solicited oppositional discourse" has not evoked the sort of spectacular confrontations between teacher and student ideologies these studies report. My approach is more narrow in that rather than issues

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of racism, classism, sexism, or homophobia in the culture at large, it takes as its subject matter the situation of the writing classroom and its enforced formality of language. I find it's crucial to address the institutional conditions that place students in a class like my basic skills/first-year hybrid course. In such situations, a generative theme (Freire *Education, Pedagogy*) that's always in the air is what students are doing in such a class, what exactly about their language is not up to snuff, and what it is that makes academic English so great.

I'm referring to the generative themes that Freirean literacy educators in Third World settings sought to discover within the material conditions of the people they taught, and to re-present to them as the content of literacy lessons. A generative theme seeks to reveal a set of conditions which keep people in a position of submission to others. In the context of a writing class, the hegemony of formal language works as an aspect of racism and classism, making it more difficult for those who speak non-standard or non-prestige dialects to achieve success in education and careers, limiting their options in society. Further, it's the discourse of education (Brodkey, Brodkey and Henry) that classifies non-standard dialects as incorrect and that positions non-standard dialect speakers as not competent, uneducated, wrong, or even cognitively deficient. And this discourse is what employers and others rely on when making negative judgments of non-standard dialect speakers.

The devaluation of non-standard and the elevation of formal academic English thus becomes the subject matter of my pedagogy, as carried out particularly through two contact zone assignments, translation and parody.

### **Translation**

In this assignment, I have students translate a piece of particularly knotty academic prose into the variety of slang most familiar to them (for about a page), and then go on to reflect on the translation process and the benefits and drawbacks of each variety (for two more pages).

The assignment is based on our reading of June Jordan's "Nobody Mean More to Me than You and the Future Life of Willie Jordan," the story of a class of native speakers of African American Vernacular English studying how their language works, translating between standard and AAVE, and composing poetry and prose pieces in AAVE. In terms of the advantages of this variety, Jordan notes that it "devolves from a culture that abhors abstraction or anything tending to obscure or delete the fact of the human being who is here and now/the truth of the person who is speaking or lis-

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tening. Consequently *there is no passive voice construction possible*" (129) in AAVE, and further, "[y]ou cannot 'translate' instances of Standard English preoccupied with abstraction or with nothing/nobody evidently alive into Black English. That would warp the language into uses antithetical to the guiding perspective of its community of users" (130).

Like Jordan, I use the translation exercise to help students recognize the conciseness, the verve of their native variety, whether it is AAVE, Spanglish, or the language of *Bill and Ted's Excellent Adventure*. Jordan and her students go on to derive the rules of AAVE,<sup>1</sup> drawing on their own communicative competency in this variety. Likewise, I ask students in their reflective section to derive the rules they used to perform the translation (e.g., the rule governing *like*-insertion in a sentence—can it go anywhere, only before particular parts of speech, etc.?), to explain where and for what uses each variety is appropriate or inappropriate, and to note how others judge one who uses a variety in an inappropriate setting.

In response to this assignment, students submit, for example, the university course withdrawal policy translated into "North Jersey Italian Lingo," an excerpt from a biology text on natural selection rendered in the language of Instant Messenger, and the translation of the Gettysburg Address excerpted at the outset:

I dunno it was something like eighty seven years ago when these old guys brought here in dis country a new place that began bein free and were sayin all dis shit that all da people in dis fuckin country are all equal or some shit like dat. Now we be in dis civil war shit to see how long we can keep up dis fighting shit. Dis right here on dis grass where da fightin was is where we be today. We gonna give dis shit to be the fuckin cemetery for the stupid motha fuckas who were stupid enough to come out here with guns and shit and start killin each other like it was some kind of gang war or some shit like dat yo. I mean, What da dilly yo, who wants to go out and shoot at each other, you know what I'm sayin? Yeah it be a good idea to put these pieces of shit yo six feet under right here on dis field. But yo we cant dedicate, declare, or take away dis ground yo. Dese guys who were brave enough to do dis stupid shit, wheter they be dead or alive yo, are better than us so we cannot add or subtract or some shit like dat. This speech aint gonna be remembered but all this dying shit aint gonna be forgot. We da people dat are living have

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to finish what dese dead guys here started yo. We take da courage of dese guys and say dat dese fuckas did not die in vain and dat dis nation we be in right now is where da freedom was born and that da government of da peeps, by da peeps and for da peeps will not go away from earth.

This rendition, authored by Phil (all students have given permission to quote from their work; they are referred to by pseudonyms), is humorous because it upsets our expectation that the linguistic register of a message will correspond to its content. It's the same funny bone that gets nudged when in Monty Python's *Holy Grail*, a serf grubbing in the dirt points out to the passing King Arthur the injustice of the feudal system and the violence inherent in the monarchy. In Phil's composition, Lincoln's formality gets brought down a notch, and Phil's status is elevated in the economy of the classroom thanks to his transgression: his breaking the classroom rule that proscribes (written) language in this variety (and cursing, as well). It places Phil in the position of a class clown, more powerful than a goody-two-shoes with respect to his peers, who as speakers or at least frequent hearers of this variety, are likely to be impressed by Phil's ability.

Further, in terms of the subject positions the discourse creates for the writer, we can see how Phil is both pulled by the discourse and does some pulling of his own. You'll notice that Phil misrepresents Lincoln's intent in the middle of the speech:<sup>2</sup> Lincoln didn't consider those who died at Gettysburg to be stupid m.f.'s, but rather "those who here gave their lives that that nation might live." Yet Phil's version does present a commonplace within public discourse on gang violence—that gang fighters are only hurting themselves, that their rage is misplaced, etc. The commonplace, however, seems to pull Phil away from Lincoln's intent in a translation that is otherwise fairly faithful to it.

But there's more going on here in terms of Phil's position in the text, including his reflective section. There Phil notes that this would be a good way of introducing a historical text to younger people, like those in high school, for whom "it would make the learning experience . . . more enjoyable." Interestingly, this statement positions the writer within a discourse of education on the effectiveness of particular teaching techniques, and ultimately of the ineffectiveness of techniques that are not congruent with the cultures—especially "youth culture"—of students. Further, he is posited as a mediator or broker between languages and cultures, rather than only as a student of, and aspirant to, the prestige dialect. This is quite

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a new position for a student, one that only some teachers can inhabit. The exercise has offered up an authoritative new subjectivity—one of cultural mediation, in Pratt’s terms—Phil can write himself into.

But if Phil is rehabilitating Abe Lincoln and revising the verities of American history instruction, then Lynette’s translation takes on nothing less than male privilege. Here’s the opening of her (450-word) translation of Romeo’s lines from the balcony scene of *Romeo and Juliet*:

Yo, Juliet Im peepin ya from da window and damn girl ya looking finer dan eva. You looking betta dan J-Lo and girl on da real you know you da shit! Juliet you know why Im here talkin to ya from da window, ma its just cause I’m feelin ya and wanna get to know what you bout. Girl, stop frontin on dat bullshit cause I know ya want dis irresistible papi. Juliet you a dime piece and I wish I wuz da durag that’s wrapped round ya head, so I could be on ya sexy ass all night! Mami is ya gonna speak cause I know ya got dat angelic voice. Please ma, let me hear whatcha gotta say cause you a bangin piece.

This is a significantly looser translation than Phil’s. The line about the “durag” (or doo-rag) corresponds to Shakespeare’s “O, were I a glove upon that hand, /That I might touch that cheek”; the following one is a translation of “She speaks. /O, speak again, bright angel.” But other than these, there are few literal parallels with the original. Like Phil’s translation, though, Lynette’s is quite authentic sounding and manages to make Shakespeare’s diction and syntax more accessible to a younger audience. As Lynette notes in her reflective section, “Modern Black English highlights and projects the voice, which is an advantage . . . when it comes to matters of the heart.” It presents the balcony scene, that chestnut of the language arts curriculum, in a new light.

The new light, though, is not just the light of currency within youth culture, but the light of gender politics. Lynette or her acquaintances have apparently been subjected to the discourse of seduction enough that she knows it well. In Pratt’s terms, Lynette’s approach is autoethnographic: she takes the terms in which the dominant gender represents women, and the aspects of women—physical appearance—which it focuses on, and has her way with them, exaggerating them for effect. This parodic move positions her as a critic of such persuasive efforts, pointing to their deceptiveness, their greed, and their casual freedom from accountability; she notes in her reflective section, “Rule 1: Modern Black English is about a whole lot of bullshitting, at least for males talking to females, as Romeo emphasizes to Juliet.”<sup>3</sup>

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In terms of its audience, the text constructs different positions for readers depending on their gender. Women are welcomed into the text as confidantes to a discussion of “skanky-ass” men. The male reader on the other hand is given two options: either he recognizes himself in the New Romeo, and feels shame, or he doesn’t identify with him and condemns him. For Lynette, this cross-gender performance posits her as a knowing critic in solidarity with others who have been subjectified by the texts of male seduction, and in opposition to the male privilege that supports men’s facile ability to “love ’em and leave ’em.”

Unlike Phil, Lynette does not invoke the discourse of educational effectiveness to justify the usefulness of her translation, nor does she grapple with Shakespeare’s canonicity or the relative class status of the New Romeo’s (and her own) language variety vs. the old Romeo’s. Still, her achievement is to bring critical issues of language and power into the work of the classroom, ones that she and other students have a felt understanding of and a felt need to explore. In this sense, she resembles Sirc and Reynolds’s basic writers insulting the quality (including the smell) of one another’s footwear in an online conference devoted to workshopping each other’s drafts:

What gives you the authority to criticize [my writing] when you wear those kind of shoes, Nick is asking. That’s the kind of question the upper division students [whose transcripts show them diligently “on-task”] would never dream of asking in one of their peer-response sessions, but it seems like one of the truest questions, one that strikes at the heart of cultural preconceptions inherent in interpretation, at the way ideology acts as the horizon against which language is articulated. Writing students should learn that readers often don’t like one’s text for a host of meta-textual reasons. (68)

Or in the present context, what is the writing classroom about if not to address issues of the power that language affords or disallows speakers and hearers? Unlike for Sirc and Reynolds’s writers, the relevant “meta-textual reasons” are (more prosaically) related to what Lynette is actually writing about: her knowledge of women being hit on by insincere men and the relatively powerless position they end up in if men do love them and leave them. But again, what more critical topics for classroom writing could there be?

Still, if our progressive sensibilities are soothed by Lynette’s and Phil’s anti-sexist and anti-racist textual moves (that is, anti-racist with respect to the prestige dialect), then Kim’s translation of Martin Luther King’s “I Have a Dream” speech,<sup>4</sup> offers a more difficult surface:



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Ok, like I know that some of you coming here today was like totally out of your way. But like I know a lot of you totally have been reaching for like freedom. Well Im telling ya to keep it up. Like don't give up now. Don't give up til like you finally get what u want.

Go back to Mississippi, go back to where you came from and like show em where you're from. You like gotta keep on believing. You gotta believe that you're like totally gonna win.

Im still totally believing and like I totally have a dream that everything is totally gonna come out perfectly fine. K?! I like have that American dream that like everyone talks about. I have that dream that, you know, slaves and like slave owners will like totally eat dinner together one day and like it will be totally cool. Yea and I like totally dream that Mississippi will totally give up separating people, you know segregation? Yea and I dream that my kids wont ever have to go through any of this. Im totally dreaming this. I dream that that Alabama guy will totally stop talking and just like totally let people be like totally equal. I dream today and like everyday. This is what I want, totally. I like dream that everything will be like the same and I like dream this to happen like all over the south. I like totally dream that like everyone will be happy and like no one will like never ever get hurt like ever again.

Im like totally looking forward to the day that like everyone is singing. I mean like come on, if America was as great as everyone like knows it to be then like they really should get rid of this segregation thing like for real. Like come on, let freedom ring already. Let freedom ring from like every corner of the world. Totally.

First, Kim's translation is quite an accomplishment. She's achieved fluency in this dialect as well as a high degree of faithfulness to the original. And she has created an exalted place for herself and her readers in the text, namely one from which we can laugh at the dippy Valley Girl and how she's reduced King's powerful turns of phrase to trivialities.

Still, there's more going on here. As in Phil's Gettysburg example, Kim's Valley Girl vernacular deflates the seriousness of King's speech. And as in the *Romeo and Juliet* example, there is a distance between the author of the translation and the voice of the Valley Girl speaker. That is, in her reflection on the translation, Kim notes that while King makes the contemporary situation of the listeners of the speech seem serious and "negative,"

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a Valley Girl tends to take things more lightly. Instead of “describ[ing] the negative aspects of what people were going through” (presumably, everyday life under racism) like King, a Valley Girl comes off as “uplifting and energetic,” as “happy and a little clueless,” or in other words, as smoothing over what’s problematic for King.

What’s different from the other translations, though, is that Kim levels no judgment here, either that King is too serious and negative or that the Valley Girl is too superficial. This seems not so much parody as postmodern pastiche:

Pastiche is, like parody, the imitation of a peculiar or unique style, the wearing of a stylistic mask, speech in a dead language: but it is a neutral practice of such mimicry, without parody’s ulterior motive, without the satirical impulse, without laughter, without that still latent feeling that there exists something *normal* compared to which what is being imitated is rather comic. (Jameson 114)

In fact these issues of parody and its political relevancy arise even more prominently in the consideration of the second assignment. Meanwhile, I would note here that at a minimum the translation assignment establishes students’ vernaculars as legitimate languages, participating fully in what Pratt calls the “redemption of the oral” (30). Whether this strengthens or enlivens students’ writing in Standard English, I can’t say. I don’t have evidence either way. But at best, it seems students can do what Lynette does, bringing matters of compelling, everyday import into the classroom, where they might not otherwise be heard or written about.

### **Parody**

In this assignment, I ask students to write a parody of academic language, blowing out of proportion those features that make it most difficult to decipher— specialized vocabulary and concepts, turns of phrase (e.g., “recent research has found . . .”), passive voice, hedging of claims, etc. In preparation, I show them several examples of parodies by professional writers. First, there’s one from the Web zine *Suck* in which the writer describes a childhood pact with her sister to toss their unfinished dinners in the trash and agree that “I won’t tell if you won’t tell” (Esther). This is presented in an elevated style unsuited to the subject matter, a combination of pseudo-scientific and pseudo-legal language. Another example is Horace Miner’s

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“Body Ritual Among the Nacirema,” a parody of an anthropological study describing the bizarre cleanliness habits of a culture, which it slowly dawns on the reader is North American (spell “Nacirema” backwards). I tell students to emulate these examples by taking an insignificant incident or process and write about it in high-flown style. And students compose pieces like one describing the preparation of the campfire treat s’mores in the language of a chemistry lab report, or of a day in the life of a college student (including a visit to a fraternity mixer) as observed by a travel writer/amateur anthropologist.

In another of these, James describes his own mythical/biblical quest to overcome the “Vortex of Boredom,” as he titles this composition:

I have cultivated a strong distaste for afternoon classes. Why? Because afternoon classes simply conflict with my diurnal siesta. And it seems like the professors gain some kind of sick or demented enjoyment from watching me struggle to comprehend their pretentious babble. Compelling myself to stay awake only vitalizes the hellish vortex sent to abolish my concentration!

The vortex is not bias, either. As I endeavor to keep my eyes open, I glance across the room. And what do I see? Myriad’s of eyes wondering around looking for relief from this abominable torture. . . . Striving to save my peers from an ill-suited fate, I beg the demon to leave us along. Yet, the vortex doesn’t care that it’s victims are young people in the bloom of their youth, and it continues to strike us all one by one. . . .

Then I look up, and like a beacon of light the teacher stand before me. . . . [I hope] he will notice me, thus breaking the siren’s destructive song. But alas, it is all a striving after the wind, all my attempts are in vain. He continues to speak nonsensical gibberish, and my hope starts to fade. . . . Then suddenly it comes to me.

. . . I hang my head low in the form of obeisance, and I start to approach the Heavenly Father in prayer until the vortex senses apparent danger. Then suddenly the teacher bellows, “Mr. [\_\_\_\_] are you sleeping?!” I hear the vortex wickedly laugh as my hopes to mollify my distress is annihilated.

. . . [Finally] something like sweet honey filtered my hears, “And that will be it for today’s class. I’ll see you all here Monday.” Tears of joy filled my eyes. . . . The illustrious words of Mr. Martin Luther King filled my head, “Free at last. Free at last. Thank God

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Almighty, free at last.” Before leaving I look toward the sinister creature, signaling that I had won the battle. . . . [But] the vortex had a putrid smile on it’s face signaling to me that I had won today, but there is always Monday.

James has written himself into a subject position like Phil’s when he offers advice to educators. Though not in a language usually associated with educational discourse, the text still posits James as a satirist and critic of his instructor’s pedagogy, particularly of the “pretentious babble” and “nonsensical gibberish” endemic to many college-level courses. And in comparison to Kim’s version of the “I Have a Dream” speech, this is clearly not a pastiche: James has a preference for straightforward, unpretentious language that he upholds. The position of satirist and critic is one he can occupy since I have sanctioned it through giving him such an assignment, and since, after all, the essay is written in fun. And it’s a position even more powerful relative to his professors than Phil’s effort, which simply makes a suggestion for good pedagogical practice that others might or might not pick up on. Instead James employs an authorizing strategy of critique, which empowers him and disempowers those instructors who babble on pretentiously.

Of course, this critique is uneven. James struggles with mechanical correctness in this first draft; he draws from a supermarket of styles and languages—biblical/sermonic, mythic, gothic horror, civil rights—in choppy juxtaposition; and while the professor is the one babbling on and on, he is strangely disconnected from the vortex that draws the student toward sleep. Yet for me these problems render what James achieves here all the more remarkable. He manages to gently, self-deprecatingly poke fun at the pretensions of his “betters.”

This is transgression, but of a playfully mild sort, especially compared to those Miller, Murray, and Peele and Ryder offer us. Apropos of this, Miller holds that in the contact zone classroom, “the teacher’s traditional claim to authority is . . . constantly undermined and reconfigured” (407). Paradoxically, though, this “enables the real work of learning how to negotiate and to place oneself in relation to different ways of knowing to commence” (407). Murray, drawing on Freire (Pedagogy) and Bizzell (“Power”), concludes that in the contact zone students’ consent to be taught is not a given and must be re-achieved in each new instance (162). Interestingly this assignment seems to sidestep such concerns. Here, James’s challenge to my authority, the relatively powerful position his writing places him in, does not detract

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from my authority, since my own ideology is not on the line. Instead, it is embedded in the assignment itself, so that his critique of pompous verbiage is my critique as well. Although I am complicit in the practice of using scholarly language in the classroom, his blows don't quite connect with my head, since I have devised the assignment to be critical in this way, and James's only resistance would be to fail to complete the assignment or to complete it half-heartedly, which would hurt his own grade more than it would resist my ideological position.

Jody's critique in the following parody, entitled "The Lost Sock Organization," is both subtler than James's and less clearly challenges classroom authority (though I will eventually return to it in this regard):

A tragic epidemic is happening to me and I'm sure it is happening to you too. Are your socks disappearing? Mine are. They seem to leave one at a time, regularly. . . . [S]omething has to be done about it. Therefore, after much consideration and thought, I have taken it upon myself to develop the Lost Sock Organization, otherwise known as the LSO. . . .

Our organization thinks the root of this problem begins in some household appliances known as "washers and dryers." . . . [Socks] must be cleaned . . . but in the process, we at the LSO believe these appliances sometimes keep the socks. . . . The organization just isn't quite sure yet [why socks disappear in these appliances].

If it's the sock choosing to leave, as opposed to the dryer keeping them from us, there must be a legitimate reason. You must ask yourself if you are abusing your socks or treating them unfairly. The LSO has developed some guidelines you can follow to make sure you are giving your socks the treatment and recognition they deserve.

First of all, make sure your hygiene is in check. . . .

We have given you many guidelines to help keep your socks happy so they will stay with you always. I have begun to treat my socks better and have already noticed an improvement. Please don't wait; act now before this problem gets out of control. . . . Please feel free to contact the Lost Sock Organization with any questions, comments, or concerns. We can conquer this epidemic together, one small step at a time.

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Here Jody lampoons popular reports of social crisis, e.g., the literacy, drug, or energy crises. And what must one do once the crisis has been declared, she asks, but start an organization—preferably one denoted by an acronym—to address it? She goes on in the fourth paragraph to satirize the rhetoric of special interest politics: even your socks have rights that must be respected.

It's not like these aren't important problems, Jody could (with only a little stretch) be saying, but the way that governmental bodies, together with the press, use calls of crisis to direct public attention and resources towards those who declare the crisis—this is suspect, a sort of power-grabbing at the expense of victims of the "crisis." And at the same time, Jody seems to be invoking popular accounts of scientific studies that serve to establish the intuitively obvious (for instance, that socks must be cleaned).

Looking further into such critique, Linda Hutcheon, citing Althusser, writes that postmodern parody "simultaneously destabilizes and inscribes the dominant ideology through its . . . interpellation of the spectator as subject in and of ideology" (108). In other words, readers are hailed by any text as particular types of writers or consumers of texts, of the items texts persuade us we need, or of the courses texts convince us to follow. Parody at least partially interrupts that positioning. So, in Jody's essay, the ideology that all "crises" are worthy of our concern, that all interest groups are equally deserving of accommodation, is critiqued, and the reader's inscription by earlier texts as prone to worrying over the state of the world is challenged. The parody points to reports of crisis which pander to our fears in vying for public attention and funding, much as Lynette's essay critiques the man who will say anything in order have his way with you. In terms of the writer's positioning, contrast her current stance with one she would occupy were the calls for action in earnest. Here she has written herself outside of and at a distance from this discourse, looking back on it with disdain.

Of course James's and Jody's parodies differ from the intentionally postmodern ones Hutcheon cites (e.g., Woody Allen's *Stardust Memories*, Cindy Sherman's elaborately staged self-portraits). They do little to foreground and undermine the conventions of artistic representation, the ideology of the unified subject, or the economics of text production. Still, these possibilities do bring us back to Kim's translation of the "I Have a Dream" speech.

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### **Authority, Discord, Commonality**

First, my—and I would assume others’—reaction of (bemused) shock at the Valley Girl’s trivialization of King’s solemnity points to our elevation of the original to the level of what Hutcheon calls *doxa* (Latin for “belief”). It is surprising to think of King’s speech in these terms, as it worked at the time of its delivery to dismantle the *doxa* of “separate but equal.” Yet since then, it has ascended to the point that we might regard it as a sacred text, as important not just for what it says, but for the manner in which it says it. And of course, representations of the civil rights movement play out on contested terrain, meaning the speech is held in higher regard by those who admire it than, say, the Gettysburg Address, the meaning of which is not a matter of current public debate. What Kim’s translation does is, as Hutcheon says of postmodern parody, to “‘de-doxify’ our assumptions about our representations of [the] past” (98), thanks to Kim’s “unseemly comparison between elite and vernacular cultural forms” (Pratt 40).

But Kim is doing more than just offending our sensibilities. You’ll recall her move toward pastiche—leveling no judgment, either that King is too “negative” or that the Valley Girl is too energetic and uplifting. Hutcheon, however, takes issue with Jameson’s characterization of postmodern parody as pastiche; instead

postmodern parody does not disregard the context of the past representation it cites, but uses irony to acknowledge the fact that we are inevitably separated from that past today. . . . Not only is there no resolution (false or otherwise) of contradictory forms in postmodern parody, but there is a foregrounding of those very contradictions. . . . [W]hat is called to our attention is the entire representational process . . . and the impossibility of finding any totalizing model to resolve the resulting postmodern contradictions. (94-95)

Again, the Valley Girl rendition of King’s speech interrupts our unproblematic identification with it, reminding us that it belongs to another time and context, rather than ours. Further, it brings home to its (politically progressive) readers the indeterminacy of any author’s intentions, the impossibility of locating a unified Kim who holds a particular view that is expressed here. In denying this univocal reading, it does “evoke what reception theorists call the horizon of expectations of the spectator, a horizon formed by recognizable conventions of genre, style or form of representation. This is then destabilized and dismantled step by step”

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(Hutcheon 114). Among our expectations for the King text are that it will contain features of African American preacher style—repetition, biblical reference, and especially a formal, even archaic, register—expectations that Kim’s piece destabilizes. In other words, if we are not afforded the comfortable position of laughing at the Valley Girl, we are left in an uncomfortable position, or no position at all. And this puts Kim in an authoritative position, challenging as she does the preconceptions of people normally considered more thoughtful and educated than her.

I’d contrast this denial of an easy subjectivity for the reader to inhabit with examples from Miller, Murray, and Peele and Ryder. Miller recognizes two possible responses to the anti-gay student narrative he describes. The instructor might take it at face value, and then find herself compelled to inform the appropriate authorities of the writer’s alleged behavior. Or the instructor might read the essay as a fictional account, and recommend revisions as with any other essay. This however leads to the absurd scenario in which the student is encouraged to produce “an excellent gay-bashing paper, one worthy of an A” (394). In either case, the instructor’s subjectivity as one who critiques student writing—a subjectivity that is afforded by the institutional setting—is interrupted by a text that seems to insist that it not be read conventionally, to be critiqued and set aside. Instead, it calls us to respond from our political orientation, as upholders of gay and homeless rights, and from our humanity, as protecting those unable to protect themselves. Strangely, this places us on equal footing with the writer rather than as superior to him, although with deep differences. In this light, those favoring the first response, that the instructor should inform the police and/or campus counseling unit about the content of the paper, seek ways of reinscribing the writer in a new sort of subservient subjectivity, either of law, as deviant, or psychology, as insane.

Current best practice, of course, entails responding to student writing as an attentive reader, establishing that equal footing on the ground of shared interest in the subject matter of the student piece. Yet how can we reach this sort of commonality between student and teacher orientations when our assignments highlight our political differences?

Take, for example, Murray’s student Jean, who presents white people’s suffering under affirmative action programs as an instance of racial discrimination. Murray calls Jean’s effort “reconstitution”—a reverse version of Guaman Poma’s creative misuse of resources from Spanish culture—which calls on the conventions and discourses of civil rights to present an argument that upholds racist representations. So, like Kim, Jean challenges



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orthodoxies of her instructor and of progressive observers such as us. The difference, though, is that Jean is put in a position where she must either support or refute the teacher's position on this issue. Her views on diversity (a text woven by her upbringing and experience) do not fit within the authoritative ones in the classroom; instead, and quite reasonably given her less powerful position vis-à-vis her teacher, her essay aligns her with an arguably more powerful one from outside the classroom. In Kim's case, her point of view is not on the line, so she's able to be equivocal: the Valley Girl may be superficial or pleasantly cheery; King may be forceful and convincing, or he may be going a little overboard, especially on the negativity.

It's unfortunate that Jean finds herself in such a position, where she feels she has to defend her own point of view. Helpful here is Bizzell's ("Beyond") position that teacher authority should develop out of persuasion. Teachers and students must begin at some readily acceptable common ground, for instance that everyone in society should be treated fairly and equally. From there, the teacher/rhetor's task is to reveal to students the internal contradiction in their reasoning when they also accept, for example, sexist beliefs: "Don't believe in both equality and sexism [she must persuade them], give up the sexism" (673). In Jean's case, the assignment she was given not only has little provision for establishing common ground among unfriendly audience positions, but encourages agonistic struggle between competing points of view.

Take Jody's "Lost Sock" essay; though more mildly than Jean's, it does challenge convictions many of us hold dear. While her first knock—at declarations of crisis—could be seen as politically neutral, her second concerning interest group politics could not. This argument goes that special interest groups are all maneuvering to have their parochial issues heard and acted upon, at the expense of the interest of the whole. The problem here is that the whole is pictured as an undifferentiated mass with a shared common interest, which just so happens to correspond to the interests of the culturally dominant. In other words, this is a way of denying the rights of democratic representation to those whose interests aren't served by mainstream laws and institutions.

Still, this critique embedded in Jody's parody does not cancel out the linguistic work the composition accomplishes. At issue is not her political beliefs, but her praxis as a user of written language. This may seem evasive next to the classroom contact zones seen in recent research; after all, where is the potential that Jody may come into contact with a contrary view—especially from someone or ones who see their interests served by "special

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interest” politics—and be transformed? This vision must be honored for its very utopian promise; but it doesn’t tell me where to intervene as Jody’s teacher. Instead, my instinct (and Bizzell) tell me to approach Jody on the same level her parody appeals to me and where we do hold common views: our frustration with bureaucratic machinations and with those who use big words to puff themselves up at others’ expense.

And while my being less than forward about my own political views on gay rights, reverse racism, etc., may preclude a set of contact zone interactions, it may also help to avoid confrontations like those raised by Miller, Murray, and Peele and Ryder describe. It may be that the writers of such essays bridle at the power teachers with such alien political views have over them, so they strike out at what they see as misplaced authority on the grounds that are available to them, getting under the skin of the person in power by attacking their political beliefs. To paraphrase Sirc and Reynolds paraphrasing their students, "What gives you the authority to criticize my writing when you have those wacky political views?" And contention may make sense for students in a sort of classroom cost-benefit analysis, when as with Jean’s above, students’ more conservative views may be a part of a dominant ideology that holds a great deal more sway than their instructors’ more progressive ones.

Indeed, how do instructors avoid retrenchment when confronted with students’ seemingly reactionary positions? How do we avoid regarding them as reactionary?

### **Conflict Avoidance?**

Our assumptions about the rightness of our own political positions are deeply ingrained, as Miller illustrates. Referring to how the teacher’s authority must be constantly achieved in the contact zone classroom, he notes:

This can be strangely disorienting work, requiring, as it does, the recognition that in many places what passes as reason or rationality in the academy functions not as something separate from rhetoric, but rather as one of many rhetorical devices. This, in turn, quickly leads to the corollary concession that, in certain situations, reason exercises little or no persuasive force when vying against the combined powers of rage, fear, and prejudice, which together forge innumerable hateful ways of knowing the world that have their own internalized systems, self-sustaining logics, and justifications. (407-408)

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I wonder, though, why the academy should be immune from the use of reason and rationality as a rhetorical device. Don't we generally accept that scientific objectivity is just as problematic as its journalistic counterpart? More troubling, reason here seems very nearly equated with progressive politics, and rage, fear, and prejudice with conservatism. I'll admit that particularly among talk-radio conservatives this is often the case; yet I'm not willing to deny that a great deal of left-leaning rhetoric is likewise full of rage, originates from fear, and might even be seen as prejudiced (in terms of an individual predilection, as opposed to the social, structural, and cultural formations of racism, classism, sexism, and homophobia). Instead, it's more productive to see all positions as both contingent and interested. They are not irrational in any way, but make a good deal of sense in terms of maintaining existing structures of privilege. Miller acknowledges this, but only backhandedly in the last lines above. After all, don't left liberal ideologies also "have their own internalized systems, self-sustaining logics and justifications"? Clearly Miller sees some points of view as beyond the pale, as not worth the effort of trying to establish the sort of common ground from which Bizzell's ("Beyond") persuasive project begins.

I have to admit that my actions regularly betray prejudices just as troubling as Miller's, if not more so. But that doesn't stop me from wanting something more, something better than this. After all, isn't this the promise of contact zone pedagogy: that we all will not remain isolated, aligned with our own language/culture/interest groups? Instead, now that we understand how language encounters are almost always fraught with differential power relations attributable to race, class, gender, sexual preference, and other differences, now that we can see these lines of authority and their extension outside of the immediate context of the contact zone, there's a real chance that we may be able to realign ourselves—textually and physically, materially—in new configurations. First, this might mean that we learn something from our students, as Kim gets us to re-examine our attachment to a revered text. More ambitiously, it might mean that we'll be able to identify with students' struggles, join with them, however briefly and contingently, and help them to create powerful positions for themselves—in their texts and in the world as well. In the context of the translation and parody assignments, this could mean that they, and we, can take this chance to challenge notions about language that are keeping them from having as many options as others more oriented to the language expectations of the academy.

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It's true these assignments ask students to traffic in stereotypes. This sort of caricature reduces broad variations in, say, Valley Girl to those most commonly perceived by outsiders, it ignores the differences among individual "Valley Girls," and it tends to associate less flattering characteristics with this variety. Likewise the parodies stereotype academic language as unnecessarily complicated and its users as pompous and pretentious—which of course is not uniformly the case. Still, it is the grain of truth here that resonates with students' experience and which can take students a long way toward understanding the arbitrariness of the elevation or denigration of particular language varieties, and the value inherent in those traditionally put down.

To repeat, these assignments differ significantly from Miller's, Murray's, and Peele and Ryder's, which encourage students to place themselves in relation to matters of public policy rather than in relation to the more narrow concern of the language used in academic settings. The contact zone my students enact through these assignments entails contest not within the classroom, but with the whole educational project, or at least that part of this project which dictates what variety of language one uses in its pursuit. As noted above, this critique is embedded in the translation and parody assignments, so that students are practically left without the alternative of challenge or resistance of the teacher's ideological orientation that these confrontational student examples exhibit. This is not to say that my students are not sullen and cantankerous, at times from early in the term to the very end, perhaps over just this issue: they disagree with the ideology implicit in the assignments, but to resist means to lose points for not having completed the course requirements. This puts them in a double bind that neither they nor I have successfully overcome. Still, throughout the fifteen sections of this course I have taught, I had not encountered a student who overtly contradicted the premise of the course until recently. Annelise believed, like Richard Rodriguez, that students not brought up conversant with Standard English need to abandon their home varieties and achieve mastery in the standard as quickly as possible. Still Annelise performed well on the assignments, producing a clever parody of a travelogue, a sarcastic account of the pleasures of driving on New Jersey's thoroughfares. This can be said of my students more generally as well, that despite their lack of engagement or alliance with the goals of the course, they have fun with the assignments. And especially on the final essay, a synthesis of the readings with their own lives, they discover striking parallels between their educational experience and that of Rodriguez, hooks, Lu, and others.

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Again I'd note that this vision presents the contact zone classroom as domesticated—as sidestepping the more treacherous ground of competing discourses among students, or between students and teacher. Likewise the teacher's role is tricky, on the one hand encouraging alternative forms of writing, and on the other enforcing department and disciplinary standards of competence in academic expression. Yet, as I tell my colleagues when they review my students' portfolios, determining whether they should pass or fail, these assignments represent legitimate intellectual work, stretching students' abilities in directions they don't normally go. Nor, I believe, do they challenge the teacher's authority or the academic project except in ways that they ought to be challenged. Miller appears to disagree: "Reimagining the classroom as a contact zone is a potentially powerful pedagogical intervention only so long as it involves resisting the temptation to silence or to celebrate the voices that seek to oppose, critique, and/or parody the work of constructing knowledge in the classroom" (407). Yet in the contact zone classroom I've outlined, the voices that parody the work of constructing knowledge in the classroom (e.g., James's as well as the others') may in fact lead to further knowledge construction worthy of celebrating. After all, critiquing the modes of representation entailed by academic ways of knowing is valued within rhetorical studies, sociology of science, etc., at least when performed by credentialed scholars. So why isn't this a valid intellectual pursuit for basic writing students? And after all, isn't that the implication of the contact zone as well, that in order that our students gain, we and those of our station, might lose? We have to be ready to risk all to venture into contact zone exchanges. Because what are such exchanges worth after all, if they merely maintain our existing status and point of view?

## **Conclusion**

In all of these compositions, we see students "strik[ing] at the heart of cultural preconceptions inherent in interpretation" (Sirc and Reynolds 68), working their way among layers of linguistic meaning to steal into authoritative stances. They open up new possibilities for students writing and being written into discursive spaces. They allow students to flex their discursive muscles, trying out their positioning among shifting and complicated domains of literacy.

Both these assignments are set up to invite students into the work of the contact zone: to draw on resources of academic English and various vernaculars to critique the standard. Indeed, the point of the parodies in the

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first place is to critique the “pretentious babblers,” as James would have it, who use language that’s inappropriate to the subject matter just because it sounds impressive. Likewise, the translations challenge our reverence for the form of a text over its content, polluting the high with the low, calling into question even good liberals’ consent to the process of canon formation.

Yet the student texts more than fulfill any promise inherent in the assignments. They show students gaining flexibility, moving in and out of linguistic registers, weighing the social freight they carry. (To echo Sirc and Reynolds, what more critical work is there in a writing classroom?) In them, students are seen to have consistently written themselves into authoritative subject positions. Their texts variously poise them as deflators of formality (and pretension), as mocking those in power over them (dead presidents, men, their instructors, etc.), and as de-naturalizing everyday texts and discourses to render them newly problematic. These compositions challenge the notion that only one linguistic register is appropriate in first-year writing classes, and that only one attitude towards that register—reverence—is appropriate, as well. And their writers critique the positioning of themselves within formal academic English texts as unproblematic readers of these texts, as people who have (magically) acquired the wherewithal to decode academic idiolects. They are saying this is not the case, that they, at least at times, have to struggle with them, and that here are alternatives that are more accommodating. They ultimately critique an ideology prevalent in school (and non-school) settings that the prestige form is easily acquired, or acquired as easily by non-native speakers or by non-standard dialect speakers as by those speaking the standard dialect from birth.

Finally, these texts at their farthest out there confront our own orthodoxies, challenging the idea that teaching on current social issues will eventually bring our students around to what we see as the most logical point of view. At the very least, they suggest that change has to start at a very fundamental place of commonality and move ever so gently from there. When this happens, a teacher is just as likely to be moved and changed as a student. Oughtn’t this to be the promise of a principled pedagogical endeavor in the first place?

### Notes

1. For students who resist the idea that AAVE has rules, I point to the example of the wannabe rapper from the suburbs, who speaks AAVE incorrectly, as those who have grown up speaking it can attest.

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2. I tell students beforehand that their translation will be evaluated along two criteria: 1) how faithfully it presents the meaning of the original, and 2) how authentic it sounds (“like something that come out somebody mouth” [128], as Jordan and her students have it). Students who are native speakers of AAVE say that Phil’s translation meets the second criterion fairly well, though at five years old now, it’s sounding pretty dated.

3. The rule itself echoes Jordan’s class’s guideline, arrived at in response to one member’s assertion that AAVE inevitably entails cursing: “Rule 1: Black English is about a whole lot more than mothafuckin” (128).

4. I’ve chosen these examples of translations of well-known speeches because the originals will be familiar to the reader. Just as likely, a student might choose to translate a passage from a reading I’ve assigned, from a text for another class, or a chapter from the Bible.

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