

## *Cross-Cultural Conferencing*

A LINE OF POETRY FROM ADRIENNE RICH BURNED ITSELF INTO BELL hooks's memory and life.

"This is the oppressor's language yet I need it to talk to you." Then, when I first read these words, and now, they make me think of standard English, of learning to speak against black vernacular, against the ruptured and broken speech of a dispossessed and displaced people. Standard English is not the speech of exile. It is the language of conquest and domination; in the United States, it is the mask which hides the loss of so many tongues, all those sounds of diverse, native communities we will never hear, the speech of the Gullah, Yiddish, and so many other unremembered tongues.

Reflecting on Adrienne Rich's words, I know that it is not the English language that hurts me, but what the oppressors do with it, how they shape it to become a territory that limits and defines, how they make it a weapon that can shame, humiliate, colonize. (1994, 168)

\* \* \* \* \*

Ben finished telling me about his plans for writing the upcoming paper. Then, before I could speak, he leaned forward and in a rush of words beginning with "because," he justified all that he had just told me, earnestly supporting each of his arguments. Perhaps I had drawn one of those breaths that said I would challenge him; maybe I squinted my eyes in one of those I'm-not-entirely-convinced-of-this looks. Or maybe Ben assumed that whatever he said would be challenged. He anticipated a Wh- question (Why? Who? What?) and didn't even wait for me to ask it.

I had begun to study my own conferences, and I noted as I transcribed my conference with Ben that neither of the other two males had anticipated any challenge to their ideas. The women had, however. Ben was the only African American in the study. Was his justification based on some cue from me? Or was it based on a personal history of challenges by teachers?

I couldn't answer that. And that made me uncomfortable, not just because as a new teacher I thought I needed to have all the answers, but because Ben's response to me (and perhaps mine to him) had highlighted for me how ethnocentric my training had been, how segregated my life experiences were. I grew up in southeastern Massachusetts at a time when the largest minority population was the Portuguese, who had come first to work on the fishing boats and later worked in the cranberry bogs. I'd gone to primarily white schools, lived in primarily white neighborhoods, though certainly some of them were working class or lower, and now taught at a university that was primarily white and middle- to upper-class. While my own working-poor cultural background had made me feel apart from the usually wealthy students I taught, I still felt I "knew" their culture and values. Nowhere in my life had I really thought much beyond socioeconomic class as culture. And certainly, nowhere in my three-week teacher training course or in the year-long mentorship that followed had the issue of cross-cultural communication been spoken of. We had been given advice on grading, book selection, paper assignments and writing a syllabus. I understand now that any training is a luxury most teaching assistants don't experience. I understand the focus on logistics, on "trench work." But choices indicate values and beliefs, and not only was talk between teachers and students considered unimportant, but talk between teachers and students from differing cultures was even less emphasized.

At a recent conference, a teacher from Kansas told us that in her school district, 42 different languages were spoken by the students. Along with those languages come cultures and sets of beliefs. Statistics on population growth and change predict that by 2020, whites will no longer be the majority population in the United States (Banks, 18). As our classrooms become more diverse, the chances for miscommunication become more frequent. Consider something as simple as the words "okay" and "yes." Deborah Tannen (1982) reminds us that when we hear a familiar word seemingly used in a familiar way, we will interpret it according to our culture. But in her

study of Greeks and Greek Americans, she found that while for Americans “okay” is an affirmative response, for Greeks and even Greek Americans, it is used as an unenthusiastic response, agreement without enjoyment. There are more, subtle differences that can be confusing. “Why” can be either a request for information (American perspective) or an “indirect way of stalling or resisting compliance with a perceived request (Greek perspective)” (223). Tannen tells us that Greeks value “enthusiasm and spontaneity,” while Americans value planning and organization. For Americans, brevity indicates “informality, casualness, and sincerity,” while for Greeks, it is “a sign of unwillingness to comply with another’s perceived preference” (228). It is easy to imagine a conference in which an American teacher makes a number of suggestions to a Greek student for planning and organizing an essay or revising an earlier one and receives an “okay” in response. The requests for planning or organization may run counter to the student’s cultural response to an assignment to write, and her response, seen as affirmative, is really unenthusiastic. What may result is an essay that does not meet the teacher’s expectations as the student instead approaches the task in a way that seems more “natural” to her; the teacher may feel as if the student has misled her, has not been fully honest about her unwillingness to follow the well-intentioned advice.

Experience will have taught a great deal to those of us work daily with large numbers of students for whom English is not a native language, speakers of Black English Vernacular (BEV, also called African American Vernacular English or AAVE), and students who are bilingual and/or perhaps come from a culture different from the mainstream. Some of us have our roots in those “non-mainstream” cultures. But a great many of us work with only a handful of such students at any given time or find ourselves suddenly in a situation where our culture and language are different from most of our students.

It is a sharing of conversational strategies that creates the feeling of satisfaction which accompanies and follows successful conversation: the sense of being understood, being “on the same wave length,” belonging, and therefore of sharing identity. Conversely, a lack of congruity in conversational strategies creates the opposite feeling: of dissonance, not being understood, not belonging and therefore of not sharing identity. This is the sense in which conversational style is a major component of what we have come to call ethnicity. (Tannen, 1982, 217)

It is this dissonance that many teachers mention when they speak of conferences with students who are, in some ways, “unlike” them. What happens when we don’t feel as if we belong? When we don’t have a sense of being understood? Or when we simply assume we are understood? What happens when it becomes clear that we are miscommunicating, but we are unable to understand why and seemingly unable not to keep talking at each other in the same ways? It’s like the old slapstick routine where a speaker, told a listener doesn’t speak his language, simply repeats himself but louder this time.

### Language and Culture

When we are in our culture, firmly a part of it, it is invisible to us. Only when I stepped out of my working-class culture into the upper-class culture of my undergraduate institution did I see how the ways that I spoke, dressed, and thought both made me a part of where I came from and set me apart from my new community. I was a silent student for years, reticent in the dorm conversations, quiet and obedient in my work-study jobs, a non-participant when floor mates talked about vacations, family jobs, career connections, and travel experiences. I read, I listened, and I studied how they spoke and acted. I learned in an English class that Huck Finn couldn’t imitate a woman successfully because he’d never had to study them, never had to respect their power and control. But, my teacher posited, a woman could have impersonated a man—the oppressed culture always studies the oppressor. I remember the males in the class laughing and shifting position to sit with their legs demurely crossed, speaking to each other in falsettos. We all laughed, but I realized that’s what I’d been doing—studying my college classmates so I could impersonate them. Clothes I could pick up at second-hand stores; I could make up stories about family or experiences or brush off such questions. But I was having difficulty with the speech. For a long time, silence was my only hope of disguise.

Until recently, the study of interethnic or cross-cultural communication has been largely the domain of anthropology, and certainly not a part of literature and composition. The canon has only now begun to shift to include writing by non-mainstream authors, and only in the last two decades has the shift to process-oriented approaches to composition allowed teachers to better understand the ways in which students from non-mainstream backgrounds must

shape their writing to produce the most desirable aspects of Standard Edited American English. And with the exception of Black English Vernacular, most of the research has focused on cultural differences in writing, not speech. But our experiences as teachers and students tell us that we judge and are judged on the basis of many characteristics, and when one group has the power to define, evaluate, and place—to control effectively for many years, sometimes for a lifetime—the academic and life-path of members of another group, serious consideration ought to be given to the criteria by which those judgements are made. One of the ways we judge is by speech.

What do we predict for our students as we first meet them? As we read their essays? As we hear how they respond to a question? As we observe how they are dressed, how they seat themselves in the room? As we notice racial, ethnic, or cultural characteristics different from our own and all the beliefs we struggle with or against come into play? William Labov noted, as have many other linguists and sociolinguists, that speakers of non-standard dialects have an immediate strike against them, for listeners immediately and negatively judge their intelligence and sometimes their honesty (1972). Victor Villanueva (1993) writes passionately about the denigration of African Americans on the basis of their language, summarizing research and “findings” of cultural deprivation and low intelligence. “Round and ’round she goes. Since the question always is ‘What’s wrong with them,’ the answer gets repeated too: bad language equals insufficient cognitive development” (11). And he reminisces about his kindergarten teacher’s attempt to rid him of his accent; she urged his parents to speak to him in English, not realizing that he had learned his accent from his parents, who only spoke with an accent *because* they spoke English (32). She apparently did not misunderstand Villanueva, but his accent was a reminder of his otherness, something he could hide by speaking properly. The ridiculing of Black English Vernacular, of Ebonics, of all non-prestige dialects, the fear and fervor that fuels the English-only movement, continuing calls for separate nations, and characterizations of affirmative action as “reverse discrimination” are sonar images of the deep channels of racism and ethnocentrism that lie beneath shallow democratic waters. There is nothing special or extraordinary about Mainstream American English or Standard Edited American English. What’s special is the power, the status of those who speak and write it. They have the power to proclaim that it’s what must be spoken and written

or the social consequences will be devastating—imagine: people who *can't even* speak English will be running the world. It's a vicious cycle: if you can't learn to speak English you must be dumb; if you're that dumb or don't *want* to learn then you shouldn't be in a position of power and authority. Hell, you shouldn't even be in the country.

So much needs to be said, to be addressed, to be brought out into the open, to be discussed. But many teachers discover that when they try to create a dialogue in their classrooms about issues of race or ethnicity, about minority and immigrant experiences, about class, students are reluctant to discuss them. Some students believe so firmly that classrooms are places of absolute equality that they will not taint this safe place by having such a discussion. Other students discover that they do not have a vocabulary to discuss race and racism that is not racist. Some feel inequity doesn't exist—there is nothing to discuss. Some are so angry about the injustices they have suffered that they fear to give voice to that anger. And rightly, many don't understand why they must discuss what the teacher wants them to discuss, what the point of this all is. They know that it will be an “academic” discussion, that the directions they might wish to take it will be closed down, that it will result in nothing tangible. Unless action accompanies speech, unless learning and transformation are the outcomes of discussion, it is just another exercise in the name of multiculturalism. “Critique alone is an inadequate response to actual human suffering” (Bruch and Marback, 278). And those who are “other” than the academic mainstream often have suffered greatly. Cross-cultural teaching and communication is “messy” and that the traditions of education in this country don't allow for or “appreciate” such messiness. So we respond by “cleaning up” the mess. How many times I've heard teachers tell their students to “clean up” their writing, as if error—sometimes merely difference—was dirty.

When student writers bring with them different languages, discourses, cultures, and world views, the culture of the academy would leech out their cultural uniqueness, absorb them, assimilate them, graduate them uniform in their uniforms. Admittance requires conformity and the attendant cultural loss...as language can be the great equalizer, so can it be the great nullifier. (Okawa, 1997, 98)

Yes, yes, we tell students, your language is valuable. We are not so explicit in telling them: But I'm not going to learn it, you're going to learn mine. And until you do, your essays will be graded as poor and

your speech will mark you as a non-member of this community. And when you no longer exist as “other,” as what you are now, then we will embrace you. That’s suffering.

When issues of cultural difference and dominance remain muffled in the classroom, why should we expect it to be any different when we move to a conference? Lisa Delpit (1988) brings us the words of a Black woman, a doctoral student and school principal.

Then, when it’s time for class to be over, the professor tells me to come to his office to talk more. So I go. He asks for more examples of what I’m talking about, and he looks and nods while I give them. Then he says that that’s just my experiences. It doesn’t really apply to most Black people.

It becomes futile because they think they know everything about everybody. What you have to say about your life, your children, doesn’t mean anything. They don’t really want to hear what you have to say. They wear blinders and earplugs. They only want to go on research they’ve read that other White people have written.

It just doesn’t make any sense to keep talking to them. (281)

Delpit goes on to widen the scenario.

One of the tragedies in the field of education is that scenarios such as these are enacted daily around the country. The saddest element is that the individuals that the Black and Native American educators speak of in these statements are seldom aware that the dialogue *has* been silenced. Most likely the White educators believe that their colleagues of color did, in the end, agree with their logic. After all, they stopped disagreeing, didn’t they? (281)

I read Delpit’s article not long after I began to study my own conferences. It was given to me by a colleague who worked in the writing center, a place where student tutors, unlike teachers, spoke openly about the cross-cultural difficulties they’d experienced. The vast majority of tutors were white, middle- to upper-class students, usually female, and their clients were African American or international students. My colleague was educating herself about the politics of conferences, for the tutors believed that because she was a T.A., something closer to a teacher than they were, she must know some magic way of bridging those differences. How would she? This is not something we usually talk about, for it highlights the gulf between races in this country, and the dominance of one particular view, one set of standards. A Black teacher tells Delpit that she cannot talk with

her White colleagues, for “they listen, but they don’t *hear*.” From the classroom to the writing center to the individual conference, we are often speaking at odds when we speak in a multicultural setting. Without a set of shared assumptions or knowledge of each other’s cultures, both parties in a conference will feel dissatisfied, frustrated; we will have spent time in a place where we did not belong.

### Hearing and Not Hearing

As I considered and reconsidered what I was communicating in this book, I knew I wanted to write about cross-cultural differences. But in the tapes I had available to me, there was largely an astounding match, a similarity in race and class between students and teachers. As deeply imbedded as I was in this project, almost hyper-sensitive to language, I did not want to tape my own conferences with students whose cultural or racial backgrounds differed markedly from my own, knowing I would be more careful to shape my responses. So I recently asked colleagues for new tapes, and one offered me three. The first was with Uri, a male student from Ossetia, a small country in the Caucasian Mountains in Russia, where the native language has ties to Farsi but the official language is Russian. The other two conferences were with female students from Japan, Yoko and Miko. The teacher himself is not a native speaker of English; Hamid is from Iran but has lived for many years in the United States. And so in this chapter, we will not hear the words, the voices of many “others,” those students who are so often silenced in so many ways in our educational institutions. The irony of this is not lost on me. But I am uncomfortable speaking for them, and have in some ways lost my own voice in this chapter, deferring to those who have more experience in this particular aspect of teaching and conferencing. In my first draft of this book, this chapter didn’t exist. But I wrote in the introduction that I had given myself permission to ask questions that I had been afraid to ask before, and this chapter is the result. Many of us may be afraid to ask something like, “But how do you conference with Native Americans?” It’s too close to saying, “How do you conference with *them*?” It is frightening to admit to such ignorance and ethnocentrism. But to ask the question opens up the door for understanding how the structures of our culture encourage such isolation, even in a field where supposedly the goal is to make everyone equal and equally educated.

Hamid told me that his conference with Uri, the Ossetian, was not typical—it was too conversational and there were no difficulties. Uri’s understanding of English was excellent—he even extended an analogy made by Hamid. He was able to write humorously, and to understand another culture’s humor is to have a good grasp of the culture. So I chose not to use this conference in this chapter. But Hamid found his conference with Yoko a bit more typical. “Plagiarism is something I have to be constantly on guard about with ESL students. Writing is tough for [them] and sometimes they make it more difficult for themselves by being too concerned about getting it right in the first draft. Thus, the tendency is greater for ESL students to ‘borrow,’” he wrote on his response form. Certainly, plagiarism happens among all groups of students, but another cultural difference is the idea of “owning” ideas. We adhere rigidly in the United States to the divisions between “common knowledge” and individually “owned” knowledge. For students from many other cultures, if the material is printed and thus commonly available, then why shouldn’t it be used? Once they read it, it becomes part of their knowledge, in the same way that most of their ideas and beliefs have come initially from external sources—as have ours. It may also be a gesture of respect to embed the words of an authority in your own—respect for the writer whose work you felt was important enough to use and respect for a reader in the effort to provide the “best” information or text. But in the United States, we respect “originality” and mark the origins of work.

Hamid asks his students to read aloud several samples of their work when they conference with him. After Yoko reads a new journal entry on a recently opened computer lab on campus and receives praise, Hamid asks her to share with him the revisions she has made on an earlier piece of writing. I have tried, where possible, to transcribe exactly the pronunciation of student and teacher, because those are the “voices” that were present in the conference. Hamid’s accent is quite subtle, often just a change in vowel sounds, while Yoko’s is more pronounced. Because much of the conference involved the student reading her work, I transcribed only exchanges between the teacher and student. Thus, line numbers begin anew with each segment of interaction.

001 Hamid: Uhkay. Very good. Ahm this is the one from da last time?

002 Yoko: Yes. Aaaht-

003 Hamid: |Okay.

- 004 Yoko: I totry.. changed introduction? A:nd you say you don't understand dat  
 005 us and dem teory so I just gi- could add example?  
 006 Hamid: Okay.  
 007 Yoko: A:nd yeah pretty much I- completely changed introduction, and I-..  
 008 Hamid: Changed that part  
 009 Yoko: [Give more information about dis part and I jus-..  
 010 Hamid: Changed  
 011 Yoko: [Checked checked the gramma:r mistake and this kind of thing]  
 012 Hamid: [/uhm/ So you  
 013 make those minor s- those minor modifications.  
 014 Yoko: [Yuh.  
 015 Hamid: Okay. And wha: dese what are these, ah  
 016 Yoko: Oh. Dese were the fur- final ones.  
 017 Hamid: Ahkay.  
 018 Yoko: [I went to s- uh Writing Center?  
 019 Hamid: Uh ahkay.  
 020 Yoko: [To get the I needed help?  
 021 Hamid: Ah good! Well I'm glad you did that.  
 022 Yoko: (softly) Yeah.  
 023 Hamid: That's goodt.

After checking on some unfamiliar markings on her paper and discovering she has gone for sanctioned assistance, Hamid asks her to read her first two paragraphs (the second one is quite long) to him. She agrees, but warns him that “First, le- introduction is totary changed, so.” She goes on to read her first paragraph, which tells readers that the Japanese speak little and rarely express their feelings or opinions strongly or directly, but it doesn't mean they don't pay attention—it's simply a cultural difference. She expands on an earlier idea: the “us-and-them” theory. She reads her second paragraph, which explains in more detail how the culture has isolated and protected itself. The language in this paragraph is anthropological, and the syntax is graceful. She struggles to read parts of the essay.

- 001 Hamid: Okay good. Now dis is very nicely [done, it is definitely explains the idea of  
 002 Yoko: [(Softly) mm-hmm  
 003 Hamid: [us-and-them very clearly. Oo:, oowhat do you mean by “tacit?”  
 004 Yoko: [Mm-hmm Taʃ:  
 005 Hamid: [Tacit  
 006 understanding.  
 007 Yoko: Like... it's- there's a /common/ in between us.. like, there, uh, yeah.  
 008 Hamid: [Mmm

- 009 Yoko: (2.5 sec) Like you don't have to say a word. Like.]  
 010 Hamid: [Mmm  
 011 Did you get these ideas from a book or an article or something?  
 012 Yoko: I: get dis... from deh uh wait a minute. OH! I called my.. parents so I  
 013 went- fall--  
 014 Hamid: [Yeah. Yeah. Bwhen you talk to your parents you talk in Japanese,  
 015 /is dis/ right? But some of the sentence structure and vocabulary here, it  
 016 Yoko: [Yeah [Yeah  
 017 Hamid: right? But some of the sentence structure and vocabulary here, it does not  
 018 sound like your style. ]  
 019 Yoko: [O:h  
 020 Hamid: (2 sec) Eah, I'm just wondering you know whether you were influenced by  
 021 somebody's writing.  
 022 Yoko: [Ah, what de- de difficult words I think I get from the dictionally?  
 023 Hamid: [Yeah  
 024 Yoko: Like I know the Japanese difficult words and den when I look da dictionally  
 025 dat saying dis kind of difficult word look like--  
 026 Hamid: [But did did you read someting  
 027 before you wr- wrote this because, [THERE'S EVIDENCE that you were..  
 028 Yoko: [Yuh, I WROTE, I- wh-  
 029 Hamid: [irectly influenced.  
 030 Yoko: [Yes, I- read da uh aricle yah in Japanese.  
 031 Hamid: IN Japanese. ]  
 032 Yoko: [Yeah. ]  
 033 Hamid: [But, eh, how about in English.  
 034 Yoko: I don't have in Japanese so, some.. Japanese sentence I jus transrate to  
 035 English by myself, so..zer's no such uh aricle in English, but I HAVE some  
 036 Hamid: [Okay (softly) [Mbut there's lots  
 037 Yoko: [aricle--  
 038 Hamid: [in English, yuh. ]  
 039 Yoko: [in Japanese.  
 040 Hamid: (very softly) Mm-hmm  
 041 Yoko: Talk about us-and-dem teory?  
 042 Hamid: Ahkay. (2 sec) Aahright. (4 sec) Uhkay let's go on to the next essay  
 043 please?

The audiotape registers a tightness, a higher pitch in Hamid's voice in the final line of this excerpt. He is clearly concerned about plagiarism, and tests her ability to explain some terminology. Yoko repeats with some difficulty a definition in her paper, and when questioned about where she got material, she announces after some hesitation and almost as a discovery that it came from her parents. Hamid becomes more specific, and Yoko says that yes, she read articles in

Japanese and translated them. At no time does she say the ideas are her own; even as she attempts to answer Hamid's initial question, she begins with "I get dis from de uh..." She seems confused by Hamid's assertion that there are indeed articles about this theory in English, for she appears to be referring directly to the articles she claims she had in her possession when she wrote, none of which were in English. She has read and understood them, responding to his request that she explain more clearly a concept she had raised in an earlier draft.

Yoko explains to Hamid that she has changed her topic for her second essay from a doll festival to a discussion of New Year festivities in Japan. When Hamid asks her why she changed her topic, Yoko explains that she could not generate two pages of material. She has no freewriting to accompany the new draft, but Hamid asks her to read through her essay anyway. Again, this essay employs complex syntax and some sophisticated diction that the student stumbles over. After she reads, Hamid asks her to do some freewriting for 10-15 minutes. When the tape resumes, he asks her to read her new work. This time, there is a great deal of repetition in the syntax—Yoko uses the words "New Year" in almost every sentence, and while there are still some longer, more complex sentences, many more are short and choppy. Hamid asks her to describe the differences between the two drafts. Yoko points out that she had completely left out the introduction and written what she wanted to; given a chance, she'd go back and put an introduction in later.

This isn't the only paper Hamid has received this time about the Japanese New Year.

- 001 Hamid: And then a few things that you do on New Year's Eve such as eating this  
 002 special food and watching TV.  
 003 Yoko: [Food [Yuh  
 004 Hamid: Which are pretty much what each what's her name, uh Miko wrote [about,  
 005 Yoko: [Yes  
 006 Hamid: you remember? Yeah. So then it seems to me you were a little [influenced  
 007 Yoko: [Mm-hmm [I yeah I  
 008 Hamid: [by her.  
 009 Yoko: [totary forgot about her writing though.  
 010 Hamid: [Yeah.  
 011 Yoko: /Da bells?/  
 012 Hamid: Uhkay.  
 013 Yoko: And I- uh after I

- 014 Hamid: Yeah]
- 015 Yoko: [look/ I read her story. Yah. That also.
- 016 Hamid: [Yeah. [It seems to me that what you have
- 017 written here (referring to freewrite) is very different from what you gave
- 018 me at the beginning. Isn't it?
- 019 Yoko: Oh! The k- the beginning? Da first free write?
- 020 Hamid: [Yeah [Dis first di- this one [uh
- 021 Yoko: [Ah yes.]
- 022 Hamid: [Yeah.

The free-write includes information on the usual events of the Japanese New Year celebration, but it is missing the historical commentary that bracketed the draft she first presented Hamid. Yoko doesn't expand on any of the differences she sees, and Hamid doesn't ask her to. Instead, he asks her to write another draft, working directly from the free-write done in his office and forget completely about what she first presented. He asks her to provide him with a series of drafts showing exactly how she gets from the free-write to the finished essay he will see later. Yoko agrees, but returns to the historical material that she wants to include.

- 001 Yoko: But in this first write uh freewriting I don't have definition I don't have like
- 002 definition of da new ears, so when I wrote da first essay, I: got da definition
- 003 Hamid: [Uh-huh [(Very soft)okay
- 004 Yoko: of da new ear [what dey used to do? In.. like ancient like, [where I come from
- 005 Hamid: [Uh [Yeah
- 006 Yoko: wh why we start cerebrating the the new ears, and den I- got the
- 007 information about ancesnors? And like, we- but I didn't know dat before,
- 008 before I... [get da full information about our new ears. And I got it and den
- 009 Hamid: [Wrote dis
- 010 Yoko: jus transrate it (laughing) [by myself, like.. [I got da definition..
- 011 Hamid: [Mm-hmm [/? [So I'll I'll write
- 012 here then what you need to do. Develop- this is what you want to do,
- [fight? Write on this one.]
- 013 Yoko: [Mm-hmm [Yes.
- 014 Hamid: Develop this draft (Sounds of writing heard)
- 015 Yoko: Mm-hmm
- 016 Hamid: And then take it to the Writing Center.
- 017 Yoko: Okay.
- 018 Hamid: (2 sec, writing) and get feedback (3 sec, writing) Keep a record of
- 019 everything, uhkay?
- 020 Yoko: Okay.

- 021 Hamid: (writing) Keep a record (2.5 sec, writing) and then eahm, eahm, revise..  
 022 And te- show me all drafts... I'm gonna ke- make a: copy of this one, and  
 023 keep a copy of the first one you gave me and we have agreed that this will  
 024 be a completely different essay.  
 025 Yoko: Mm-hmm. Okay. ]  
 026 Hamid: [Uh-huh? Great. Thanks a lot. Do you have any  
 027 questions?  
 028 Yoko: No, I don't.

To any experienced teacher—and quite probably to most American students—Hamid's final instructions are clearly designed to prevent this student from plagiarizing and to support any case he may make in the future regarding her "misconduct" in using outside sources. Yoko seems somewhat aware of Hamid's concern, as she raises the topic herself, telling him that she translated some sources to provide information in her first draft. But she seems to have the concept that since *she* was the translator, the words are now hers. Her laughter and insistence that she got the definition may imply that she is proud of her work in developing a new essay.

Why didn't Hamid just talk with her about plagiarism? Why didn't he tell her directly about his concerns? Curious, I asked him. He told me, angry still that Yoko had plagiarized, that he didn't need to, it was "implied, it was understood." He wrote on his response sheet that this student was really a "capable writer" but she "wants to boost her grade with minimal effort." He makes it a rule to not talk about plagiarism with a specific student unless he is prepared to "go the whole route," following the university guidelines for dealing with plagiarism. He handles the issue delicately, not only because of the complicated institutional procedures he might put in motion but because "you don't want to say what you don't know." He pointed out that she didn't challenge his implication; had she done so, he would have had to be more forceful, more assertive. He didn't even believe, he said, that the journals she took the information from were Japanese, for she did not have the English skills to translate the Japanese into such graceful and lengthy English sentences.

Certainly, the change in style marks another "voice" in the two essays, and like Hamid, I am convinced that the writing is not her own. But Yoko's lack of challenge does not necessarily mean that she has understood the unspoken, her breach of one of the foundational tenets of western academic writing. She seems proud of her new

knowledge about her own culture and about her ability to develop her draft in such a way that her teacher more fully understands a concept she wants to explore, that, in fact, he asked her to say more about. Indeed, speaking in a way she herself says is rare in her culture, she asserts loudly and over Hamid's questioning that she DOES have these articles in Japanese. And she seems to want to restore to her essay the historical information Hamid wants her to forget about. She translated it herself, she got this information. She doesn't challenge Hamid enough to make him become more forceful in his charge, but little in her response indicates she understands exactly what lies behind his concerns. Her repetition of "I got the information" implies that, rather than concerns about plagiarism, she may think Hamid believes she is fabricating information. At the time this chapter was written, Yoko had not yet resubmitted her essays, but it would not be surprising to me to see the disputed material reappearing in the next version as well.

### Talking with Non-Native Speakers

Ulla Connor (1997) reminds us that "cultural mismatches manifest themselves in several classroom situations: conversation, collaborative groups, and student-teacher conferences" (206). Unfortunately, research on differences in writing skills—as opposed to speaking patterns—between non-native speakers of English and native speakers has received the most attention. Tony Silva (1997) summarizes the results of a number of such studies which included speakers of 17 different languages. On the whole, he reports, the writing of ESL students is judged to be "simpler and less effective" by NES (Native English Speakers); their essays are "shorter, contain more errors...and their orientation to readers was deemed less appropriate and acceptable." They were, overall, less "sophisticated" (215-216). Villanueva points out that studies on the written prose of Spanish speakers, including such diverse cultures as Ecuadorians, Puerto Ricans, and speakers of Mexican Spanish, found longer sentences, a tendency toward the abstract, stronger reader-writer interactions, and logical connections between sentences that weren't immediately apparent to native English speakers. There was also more repetition and "ornateness" in prose by these writers than prose by native speakers of standard English (85). Such differences mean that in collaborative groups, many peers spend time working

on surface features with the writer rather than ideas and issues. The same can happen in conferences. For example, when Hamid and Miko, another Japanese student, conferenced, Hamid asked a question about *osechi*, food cooked and stored in multi-leveled containers and eaten throughout the Japanese New Year celebrations. Miko responded by describing the container; again Hamid asked about the food and again Miko returned to the container. Hamid persisted, explicitly asking not about the container but the food, and she responded this time with some additional details: fish, eggs, vegetables in a sauce. Perhaps in her culture the two—food and container—are not separable? What might be only an aside in a conference with a native speaker becomes time-consuming, and time is usually in short supply for conferences. Curiosity, even niceties, may have to go by the wayside.

The differences in writing styles also mean that many ESL students spend significant time in writing centers and in conference with their teachers, being taught conventions they may not fully understand. Villanueva remembers the comment “Logic?” being written on paper after paper, even in graduate school. His Anglo friends could not explain to him how his thinking differed from theirs, and he would not ask the teacher. “To ask would be an admission of ignorance, ‘stupid spic’ still resounding within. This is his problem” (73). Does Yoko understand plagiarism? Hamid planned on a general discussion in class soon after his conference with her; he said that the one or two students who were plagiarizing would know it was directed toward them. Perhaps given the indirection that is part of Yoko’s culture, Hamid’s approach will both save face for students and teacher and help his class learn. But it is a difficult concept even to explain to American students.

How well do teachers and students understand each other’s cultures?

Japanese and Chinese tend to be more indirect than Americans; Finns and English speakers have different coherence conventions, the Finns leaving things unsaid that they consider obvious and the English speakers expecting them as clarification; and Korean students do not want to take strong positions in defending...decisions. (Connor, 207-208)

Muriel Harris (1997) reports that ESL students from various countries shared a common belief that it is a teacher’s job to lecture, while tutors discuss. It is the teacher’s job to evaluate, to point out problems, but a tutor’s job to offer specific help, to answer questions (223). For

many ESL students, then, the conference is an extension of their own classroom experiences, where they are passive learners; active learning takes place with peers only. Teachers who challenge that role may find themselves met with silence. And she reminds us of an Asian custom of making friends before getting down to business. In tutoring situations, that means some friendly “chat” before tackling the task at hand; such “chatting” was rare in conferences I listened to, and usually took place only *after* the task was completed. Lisle and Mano (1997) highlight a Vietnamese cultural tradition that interferes with communication in conferences. In this tradition, children, even those who are over 18, are expected to remain silent, for only adults can express opinions (14). Harris points out that European students as well as those from Pakistan are used to being formally addressed and may take offense at the teacher’s use of their first names only. At every turn, if we are paying attention and asking questions, we will see how the many assumptions we make about communication do not hold across cultures.

Even the smallest words or gestures can be misunderstood. Susan Fiksdale (1990) studied “gatekeeping” interviews between foreign students and international advisors—professors who were charged with making sure both that students were making academic progress and had taken all the steps necessary to remain legally in the country. The term “gatekeeping interview” refers to situations where the interviewer “actually holds conflicting roles: acting as a guide as well as acting as a monitor of progress for an individual’s career” (4). Concerning herself with “timing”—the right word or gesture at the right time—she discovered that the Taiwanese students she was studying frequently offered backchanneling (*yeah, uh-huh*) without an accompanying nod. She points out that “saying *uh-huh* without nodding only occurs during uncomfortable moments for native speakers” (7). The disruption this caused in the timing of the advisor’s speech resulted in the advisor stopping to offer a hyperexplanation, assuming that the student was confused or had misunderstood him. When Fiksdale asked students about their use of words like *uh-huh, okay, yeah, and yes*, they reported some confusion about how to use them. One telling comment: “I don’t know the proper word to say in English so I just..try to find some word say-if I come out with say *yes* that’s no problem. I won’t say *no* ((laugh))(double parentheses Fiksdale’s) it keeps the communication going” (2). Whether he understood his advisor or not,

what was crucial was to keep the conference going. Both Fiksdale and Harris comment on the importance of “face” and “saving” or protecting face. In order to save face, Asian students may say they understand something even if they don’t; in face-to-face interaction of all kinds, not solely cross-cultural, the need for “orderly communication” and the preservation of everyone’s face takes precedence (Fiksdale, 57, citing Goffman, 19). When Hamid asks Yoko if there are any questions, she says no. She never asks why she must abandon a more fully developed draft for her freewrite, and Hamid does not elaborate. Perhaps, like me, she heard the anger in his voice; perhaps she understood that if she pushed him to explain, everyone’s face would be in danger of damage. After all, it is not his job to discuss but to lecture.

If we imagine (and some of us have experienced this) a mainstream teacher conferencing with a student from Taiwan, we might see the teacher speaking at even greater length than usual. Prompted by repeated positive backchanneling (*yes, uh-huh*), the teacher continues talking. When her student nods at a time that seems inappropriate, the teacher may stop, backtrack, and explain again. The student may respond positively when the teacher asks him if he understands now; he may or may not actually understand. When the teacher stops and asks the student why he wrote a particular sentence, she may receive, after much prompting, a response that seems indirect, that “begs the question.” Frustrated, she continues. The student asks some questions, but most of them are about lower-order concerns: punctuation, spelling. At some point, the student begins to speak a bit more, perhaps beginning his turn with *so*. What a teacher might see as summarization (*so*) would be a new topic for an ESL student; the misunderstanding may mean that the teacher does not take up the topic, instead framing it in her head as “sayback” of what she has already told the student. When the teacher does not respond “appropriately,” the student does not offer the topic again, for to do so would result in negative face for both participants. The teacher begins again, marking that with *now*. An ESL student may not realize that *now* is signaling a new topic for the teacher, and may continue to frame this new information under the umbrella of the earlier information, thus misunderstanding partially or entirely the new topic. Some misunderstandings may be worked out later in the writing center, where the student feels more comfortable asking questions, but many will remain unresolved.

## Black English Vernacular and Writing Conferences

Hamid heard an admission of guilt from Yoko. Without the anger of the teacher facing plagiarism, with the time to read and reread transcripts, I heard confusion. When I turn back toward my own conferences, I have to ask: was I hearing my student Ben or just listening? Was I making it clear to him in all sorts of ways I didn't realize that I wasn't hearing but was already judging, evaluating? What kind of damage do I do when I enter into a conference with a student and know nothing of her culture, her beliefs, don't attempt to understand the nuances of her language but impose mine instead? I thought back to Delpit's passionate article again when I began counting words in my research, listening for Lily in her conference with Nina—the woman who had worked in the writing center. Lily agreed with everything Nina said. She responded briefly but courteously, offering no more than “Okay” or “Yes.” Perhaps, as bell hooks writes, Lily is following the African American rule: “keep your stuff to yourself,” be “private...about your business” (*Talking Back*, 2) And yet, teachers sometimes encourage students to talk about themselves and their lives; they ask questions that deal with the student's town, home, family, academic experiences, and current situation in school. (They don't always share that information about themselves with the student, however.) But people who have lived lives under scrutiny, who have had to answer questions that violate their privacy, who are aware of how such information may be used against them or may be used to fill in blanks in a stereotype, may need to protect themselves, may see such questions as probing, aggressive, and unnecessary to accomplish the task at hand—improve a paper. And, if the shared cultural context between teacher and student is limited, how much of that information will be understood in the way the speaker wishes it to be?

Lily was religious, Nina told me, and was always quiet in class and conferences—she wished she spoke more. When person A says person B is religious, it often means that person B is more religious than A; a point of difference. Nina valued participation highly and defined a key aspect of participation as speaking up appropriately in class and conferences; Lily's level of participation disappointed her. Even though she did not see Lily's silence as belligerent or impolite, it was still a negative. She did not consider (at least in talking with me) that it might be deference to her authority as a teacher, or that it might represent Lily's accurate understanding of the great gulf that separated her from her

teacher. Perhaps Lily's speech, like her written text, included aspects of BEV, and she knew that such non-standard speech would be viewed negatively. Which is riskier: to speak and reveal something a teacher may respond to negatively or not to speak and have the teacher see that as a lack of enthusiasm? While the images of African Americans we see through the media are becoming increasingly more diverse, the emphasis on negative images for speakers of BEV is still present.

The characteristics of Black English have been well described. Most teachers are familiar with the way Black English Vernacular's use of the copula ("to be") and marking of plural differs from Standard English or, as some researchers prefer, Mainstream American English (MAE). The presence of these items alone in an essay are usually enough to have students placed in remedial classes, sent off to writing centers, or summoned to conference with a teacher. But there are other less immediately noticeable differences from Standard English. The rhetorical structure may also be problematic for teachers used to clearly stated thesis statements and linear development rather than circumlocution, and the clear acknowledgement of sources rather than the borrowing and weaving together of ideas. Bonnie Lisle and Sandra Mano (1997), summarizing cultural differences in rhetoric, note Geneva Smitherman's (1986) descriptions of several BEV features: "call and response," where listeners offer active vocal support for speakers; "signifying," when a speaker slyly and often humorously chastizes another person; and the ways in which indirection in speech and a pattern of circumlocution help the speaker "stalk" the issue and ultimately persuade listeners. Denise Troutman (1997) emphasizes the participatory nature of Black English, the ways in which the speaker attempts to involve the audience, "pulling it into the linguistic event" (29). Repetition is also an important part of BEV, perhaps an influence from African American preaching style. Verbal styling, playing with words and rhyme, the twisting and turning of ideas is highly admired. Kermit Campbell writes of BEV speakers' fondness for extended, deeply-layered metaphors (1997, 93). Marsha Stanback (1985) points out that the "braggadocio" of BEV speech is not limited to African American men. "Smart talk," or signifying, loud-talking, and braggadocio, is one of the most "outspoken" styles of speech for Black women; they are as proficient as men (182-183).

One of the values bell hooks finds in BEV is the way that historically it has served to shape a sense of community among African Americans.

The rupture of standard English enabled and enables rebellion and resistance....The power of this speech is not simply that it enables resistance to white supremacy, but that it also forges a space for alternative cultural production and alternative epistemologies—different ways of thinking and knowing that were crucial to creating a counterhegemonic worldview. (171)

Despite hooks's joy in the promise of BEV to challenge white, upper class control, this rich linguistic heritage finds little space in most classrooms. In traditional classrooms, teachers are not "brought into" a student's speech. Students respond, they do not perform. Students answer directly, not with indirection. Play with words in speech is often seen as "showing off" and wasting valuable time. Many teachers do not see how this indirection, this verbal turning of ideas parallels the ways in which traditional essays turn and twist and consider an issue from many perspectives. Teachers may hear BEV directed to classmates as the speaker involves them in his answer to a teacher's question, or they may hear it as a student complains about a grade, comment, or assignment, not to the teacher but within her hearing distance ("sounding off").

But many teachers will not hear this verbal style spoken directly to them; speakers of BEV are much less likely to use their vernacular in institutional situations and with white speaking partners. Rebecca Moore Howard (1996) asserts that "AAVE (African American Vernacular English) has no public life in American society. It is a private language of one group" (270). In a course about language, race, ethnicity and history, the largely African American class voted to have an AAVE day, where all would speak in that language. But when the time came, of 28 students, only two and Howard herself actually used AAVE. White European students felt to do so would be to "mock" their African American classmates, and African Americans feared that they would "appear ignorant." She argues that "AAVE [is] a private code sometimes witnessed but never spoken by outsiders, a private code never spoken out of context. Code switching *to* AAVE is profoundly constrained" (270).

Knowing that BEV has no prestige and conveys a negative image, most African American students will "code switch" when conferencing with teachers. That takes some concentration, especially when a student is also being asked to use a new, disciplinary language as well. Rather than "slip" and begin speaking in a way that is comfortable

and familiar, rather than further set themselves apart as “other,” one strategy is to respond minimally. In doing so, the student can focus on what the teacher is saying—it’s a wise learning strategy. But in not responding as “fully” as the teacher may expect, the student is also not doing all those things that teachers are looking for: engaging themselves with the material (and the teacher!); demonstrating by repeating back to the teacher that they have been listening and understand this new information; indicating a willingness to develop the writing using their own ideas. It is a double bind.

But even listening closely may not be of much help. Lisa Delpit highlights the differences between middle-class, mainstream teachers’ style in giving directives and the way directives are given in African American culture. Indirection—“Do you want to open your books now please?”—and statements phrased as student desires, not teacher demands—“You want to avoid doing that”—contrast with “Open your books now” and “Don’t do that.” Delpit informs us that

Black people view issues of power and authority differently than people from mainstream middle-class backgrounds. Many people of color expect authority to be earned by personal efforts and exhibited by personal characteristics....Some members of middle-class cultures, by contrast, expect one to achieve authority by the acquisition of an authoritative role. (289)

Members of the Black community respect a teacher who exhibits personal power, believes in all students, reaches out to students to create close personal relationships, and “pushes” students to learn (Delpit, 290). They are explicit about their power and they use it explicitly to help their students. Michelle Foster (1995) studied the ways in which an African American teacher wove elements of BEV into her class and responded to student expectations for teacherly authority. Her students, largely African American, respected her. “She’s a damn good teacher because she gets to the point of the conversation, is direct, and aggressive, which are signs of leadership and is why I take her seriously” (133). The teacher was also aggressive in exploring with her students the kinds of oppression, the social and economic structures that had so often negatively affected their lives. Lisa Delpit quotes white teachers who shake their heads about the authoritarian teaching style of an African American colleague, while not realizing that their own style conflicts with those same students. Many mainstream teachers hide their power; they do not display it

openly but expect students to understand their “suggestions” as orders because a suggestion from a person with power IS an order. This difference can lead African American students to misunderstand the desires of mainstream teachers, to see suggestions as options, not demands, to believe that the teacher who does not “run” a class lacks the knowledge, skill, or desire to do so. This lack of respect in the classroom can translate into a reluctance to follow the teacher’s suggestions in a conference. It can also lead to confusion as mainstream teachers “suggest” ways of revising or hint that a sentence construction or an interpretation is “problematic.” If a mainstream teacher speaking Standard English tells a BEV speaking student “You might want to change your approach to this issue,” for the teacher it clearly means, “Change it.” The student may or may not hear that command. If she asks, looking for clear direction, “Does that mean you want me to change this? How?,” the teacher may become very uncomfortable: she has been asked to make explicit the power she has tried to mitigate. Such cultural and language differences mar the often “seamless” surface of conferences and remind participants that things are not always as they seem.

### Class is Culture, Too

We don’t like to think about it this way in the United States, the “classless society.” My students say fiercely, regardless of class, “Some people have more money than others, so they can have more things. But that doesn’t mean they are any better than a poor person.” The bootstrap doctrine, the belief in equality is so strong that many people have difficulty seeing how culture and economics play out in a country that Martin Luther King Jr. pointed out was founded not on democracy but capitalism. Not until college did I begin to understand it myself. It took awhile for me to realize how many activities I couldn’t participate in because I worked on weekends and some evenings in the library; how many clubs I couldn’t join because of activity fees; how many relationships I would never have because I couldn’t afford to share the same experiences as many of my classmates. I remember feeling desperate and singled out when a teacher commented with disdain on my use of onion-skin paper, the only thing I could afford. I borrowed typewriters and could type only when one was available, since I couldn’t afford one of my own. I’ve already described the ways in which those class differences played out

in conferences. From the sting I still feel as I list these differences, I remember how hard it was to lose those cherished beliefs that had sustained me as I grew up. And I fought hard to keep them.

Twenty years later, I watched as an elementary school teacher in a southern Ohio classroom wrote on the board a sentence that resonated with the Appalachian dialect of many of the children. This sentence was “clearly wrong,” she told them, and asked how it might be made “right.” A student whose clothing and speech marked her as middle class and less “provincial” corrected it on the board with the teacher’s repeated approval while my niece turned to me and whispered in anger and some fear, “Mamaw talks like that!”

Our students feel those class differences. They are acutely aware of how we signal our class, from clothing to gesture to language. But for lower- and working-class students, what seems so valuable and important to them at home is worthless in a school environment. Lisa Delpit puts it this way:

I have frequently heard schools call poor parents “uncaring” when parents respond to the school’s urging, that they change their home life in order to facilitate their children’s learning, by saying, “But that’s the school’s job.” What the school personnel fail to understand is that if the parents were members of the culture of power and lived by its rules and codes, then they would transmit those codes to their children. In fact, they transmit another culture that children must learn at home in order to survive in their communities. (286)

Shirley Brice Heath’s (1983) work on language use in two communities highlights how class differences in language cut across racial boundaries. Children, both black and white, from the working class and working poor misunderstood the language of their middle-class teachers. Coming from households where clear directives were the norm, they responded slowly or not at all to the implied directives of their teachers. They brought a rich oral tradition, a joy in community speech that conflicted with the traditional classrooms. Their parents, too, had difficulty understanding what teachers wanted from their children. People in these two working-class/working-poor communities saw the world holistically, learned in context, not by separating out objects from one another. Much of what we do in school is to separate something from its context—an idea, a word, an object, an issue—and examine it, compare or contrast it to something else. In mainstream academic culture, understanding something discretely

rather than holistically has been the norm. When asked to separate, to distinguish one thing from another or to make analogies, children either did not respond or did not respond “appropriately.” The fragmentation of knowledge modeled in the mainstream, middle-class classroom was foreign to them. The clash between “home language” and “school language” is also a clash between cultures, values, and ways of seeing the world.

Bell hooks asserts that, after a dozen years of being prepared for college, “students in public institutions, mostly from working-class backgrounds, come to college assuming that professors see them as having nothing of value to say, no valuable contribution to make to a dialectical exchange of ideas” (149). Those “twelve years of preparation” separate children into those who may speak and those who ultimately may not—and sometimes cannot. In a several year study of minority children, Ray Rist (1970) observed how class differences, even at the kindergarten level, translated into an impoverished academic life. He followed a group of African American children through the second grade, making formal and informal observations, interviewing the teachers, talking with the children, and visiting their homes. He gathered data on their families, activities, and expectations, and charted the interaction between students and between students and their teachers, all African American. The results of his study, though two decades old, remain very disturbing. Within eight days of the start of kindergarten, the teacher, with no standardized test results but with access to her students’ personal files, organized her students into three groups, each of which sat at a single large table. The first group, comprised of children she expected to succeed, were seated at the table in the front of the class. These children met “prestige” standards: they spoke easily with the teacher, using standard English more often than not; they were more likely to come from homes with two parents with at least high school and possibly college education; they had a low number of siblings; they were less likely to be receiving government assistance; their clothes, even if not expensive or new, were clean and mended; they arrived with their hair brushed, and had no offensive odors. The remaining two groups were organized by how closely they fit these characteristics, with children demonstrating the fewest number of them at the last table, table three.

As Rist followed the children throughout the first year, he noted that the children’s involvement in classroom activities was directly related to their placement. The teacher provided information mostly

to the first table, directing commands and orders for behavior more often to the other two tables. She chose students to speak more often from the first table, selected students from that table for coveted “jobs” in the classroom like leading the pledge of allegiance, and put them in positions of authority over the other children (appointing one “sheriff” during an outing).

The children from table one clearly understood their higher status, for they often called the other children “dumb” or “stupid,” and chided them for their inability to do some of the assigned tasks (although the children at table one had received direct instruction in those tasks, unlike the other children). Even students who sat at those two rear tables labeled themselves negatively, and began to show hostility toward each other, though they didn’t show it with the higher status children. Visiting the children in their homes, Rist saw that children from tables two and three *were* learning, though they had little chance to prove it in class. They learned from listening to other children actively participate in lessons; they studied their classroom materials at home.

At the end of the school year, “objective” standardized tests “proved right” the teacher’s initial evaluation of her children’s skills: students scored well largely in direct relationship to the tables they’d been assigned to. Children from tables two and three were labeled “at risk” and again put at tables where they received less instruction, more control, and more criticism. Rist followed this group of children for two more years. A few students originally placed at the second table moved up to the status of those at the first table, but by and large, that first judgment of the children’s abilities, based solely on markers of class, held firm in the school system.

Rist describes a situation where the effects of language and class are potentially devastating; that is, he describes a classroom. But in a classroom, at least, misery has company. In a conference, the individual student may feel on trial, even if the teacher doesn’t realize it. How does class play itself out in a conference? To be “wrong” when you open your mouth is a frightening thing. I’ve written of my own silence; because it remains so close to me I’ve worked, through making a personal connection, to create a safe place for my “lower class” students to speak with me. I remember an office partner turning to me after such a conference and saying, “You’d think by now he’d have learned not to say ‘ain’t.’ That drives me crazy.” In a system based on ranking, on evaluation, students who are already low-ranked societally

fear that their failings will be magnified in open interaction with a teacher. All of us misunderstand sometimes or find ourselves confused by terminology or ideas. But if you have been placed at the third table for most of your academic life, if you have not had a chance to use the language you heard addressed to others or have had little assistance in applying techniques or gaining skills that are necessary for advancement in status, you may well need more time to process rarely used or unfamiliar vocabulary or suggestions for improving an essay. Unless a student in this situation gives the teacher some indication of confusion (and unless the teacher creates such an opportunity for the student to speak!), the teacher may think the student is a lot of things—sullen, withdrawn, quiet, shy—but will probably also assume she understands what is being asked of her. Why ask the teacher, if doing so will underscore your stupidity? Your low status? When the paper comes back, the teacher will know anyway, but why invite such an evaluation now? Moving between classes is not easy; there are still times when I must search to translate what I really want to say into a language that will be accepted and understood by my faculty or administrative colleagues.

### Native American Cultures

While most Native Americans are native speakers of English, many may be bilingual, and many have grown up in a culture that differs from the mainstream in significant ways. Their language patterns reflect those cultural differences. My husband was interviewed by telephone for a position as an archivist for the Dakota Sioux. He was very qualified, he felt, and approached the interview with enthusiasm. I left the house during the interview to give him the space and quiet he needed. When I returned, he was depressed, not sure what he had done wrong. He said it was the most awkward interview he had ever done. There were long silences, and the interviewers said little to him. Rather than blather on, he said, he had fallen silent himself, and nothing but static passed across the phone lines. He was sure he'd lost the position. Later, after he was hired and had lived on the reservation for some time, he learned that silence after a speaker's turn indicated respect. After all, the person may have something more to say, for not all our thoughts come out at once. It was linguistic space, an opportunity for the speaker to move the talk to a deeper level. There was plenty of time for other speakers

to join in as they wished, and perhaps they must gather their thoughts together, changed now by what had been spoken previously. He learned that his decision to be silent himself had played a positive role in his being hired.

Michelle Grijalva, addressing the oral tradition of many Native American tribes, encouraged her Native American students who felt ashamed of their speech

to understand silence as an effective rhetorical tool that gives shape to sound and meaning—not to confuse it with the inarticulate and illiterate or with the inchoate place of nonbeing, a void that lends itself to shame and insecurity. Rather, the silence of storytellers can remind us that there is such a thing as the unspeakable, something we might call the silence of the sacred, or it can simply signal an inappropriate time to speak. Storytellers teach us that silence is the beat and pulse, the rhythm keeper of the oral tradition. Storytellers who are not afraid of silence can hold their audiences; they are the survivors. (1997, 48)

The oral tradition of the Native American Pueblo culture has similarities to BEV in that communication is considered to be a communal act, where the speaker draws the story out of the listeners. It is a language of connectedness and inclusiveness, with stories leading to each other in a weblike fashion. The traditional thesis and support structure, the linearity of mainstream narrative would not allow for such exploration, such connection (Lisle and Mano, 17, 19).

Often, in writing assignments or conferences, we invite or ask students to write or speak about their personal experiences. Judith Villa (1996) points out, however, that for many Native Americans, such a topic is taboo or inappropriate (246). The personal experience is always part of and less important than the communal experience. In her experience teaching, tutoring, and conferencing with Native Americans, she found that her students would not come to conferences or tutoring sessions if they were set up by her. Instead, they followed a pattern described by Roland Tharp, Stephanie Dalton, and Lois Yamauchi (1994), who argue that “most native students are more comfortable and more inclined to participate in activities that they generate, organize, or direct” (37, quoted in Villa, 256). Villa found that her students would come around if she was available; that they would “hang around” for a long time to see if she was equally committed to communication, and finally begin to talk with her, though always indirectly about whatever was the issue. The need to

establish connections, to see academic material as part of a larger context, was fundamental to success for the students.

Not understanding Native American culture (and of course it is not monolithic; there can be significant tribal differences) can lead teachers to ask students to write on topics or in a way that clashes with cultural beliefs. Villa recounts two stories which are illustrative. A Native American student was asked to critique a student art show, but instead wrote mostly about his own art. It was not part of his cultural beliefs to criticize others in the way the teacher suggested. While he felt he fulfilled the assignment by critiquing his own work and then comparing it to what he saw in the art show, this more subtle approach earned him a "D." Another Native American student, a Navajo woman, struggled with an assignment to write about "A Rose for Emily." Traditionally, the Navajo do not speak of the dead. It would be easy for a teacher, even in conference, to miss the reasons behind the "failure" of these two students. Remember Mary asking Rick about his dead grandfather? To question the Navajo student about the text, about dead relatives, or about issues in the same domain that are part of this piece of "American" literature would be offensive, and the student response would be as silent, as noncommittal as the paper this student eventually wrote. All the parties understand the words, but they attach different meanings to them. Breaches of important cultural beliefs and unfamiliarity with cultural speech patterns doom conferences to time spend in a mire of cross-cultural misunderstanding.

### What We Can Do

It will take more than simply "celebrating diversity" to make the fundamental changes needed to truly respect the languages that each of us is competent in. When we tell students that their home languages are valuable but make no space in the academy for those languages, we force them "to move back and forth between a privatized dignity of difference and a public dignity of sameness and assimilation" (Bruch and Marbach, 275). We cannot "know" all cultures, but we can begin by educating ourselves in two directions, which will eventually cross paths: we can acknowledge and respect the diverse cultures around us and we can study (not just live in) our own. For many of us who teach, school IS our life. But it is not, by and large, our students' lives.

To study ourselves, we need to consider those moments when we have experienced “otherness.” For many of those in the mainstream, those are painful moments, experiences we have tried to bury—lives unmarked by otherness is the norm. My sense of otherness when I entered college has stayed painfully close to the surface; like many of those from the working class or the working-poor levels, I sometimes feel like an imposter in academe. I remain convinced that one stupid comment, one naive response to a colleague will be enough to blow my cover. But usually I am in control of academic language, if not academic knowledge. Being thrust into another, foreign language culture can remind us what it feels like to not belong on a most fundamental level—speech. On a trip to Miami to speak at a conference, I found myself surrounded by Spanish speakers, and stood silent, unable to enter the conversation. When hotel clerks spoke in “asides” in Spanish, I felt momentarily angered, as if somehow I was *entitled* to know what they were saying, entitled to the respect they would show by speaking my language at all times. A little disoriented, trying to figure out my reactions, I went to the beach to sit and read. A man came up to me, smiled, pointed at the sea shells I’d collected, and made a comment in Spanish. I shook my head. He stared at me in amazement. I managed to stutter out some version in Spanish of “I don’t speak/understand Spanish” (which I’m pretty sure I picked up from a police drama where the officer was responding to the Hispanic “perp”!) and he shook his head and walked away with a little smile. I felt and was dumb.

I have felt otherness when I sat as a graduate student in a committee meeting of all male tenured faculty members. And I have felt otherness as I simply walked through a largely Black urban neighborhood. But all of these have been fleeting experiences, and I could always retreat to the privilege of my whiteness, or my status as teacher, or as a member of *at least* the lower middle class. I have not experienced many of the kinds of otherness I’ve written about in this chapter. Simply acknowledging that is a start. And another small step—admitting that when I did feel some sense of that otherness, I wanted not to be like those who seemed so different from me but instead wanted them to be like me, or at least not try to make me be like them. To understand the need to retain culture, heritage, and language in the face of pressure to assimilate can provide a teacher with compassion and understanding.

To be not just critically self-reflective but also self-revelatory is also crucial. Educator after educator who works extensively in

cross-cultural situations stresses the power of narrative to bridge gaps, to create connections. Stories can be compared, contrasted, interrogated, and retold without attacking or questioning the teller. There are, after all, multiple narratives for every event. We accept all the stories of eye-witnesses as true in some way, shaped by their point of view, their past experiences, their relationship to the teller, the event—their historical, cultural, and institutional positions. My experiences with schooling will be different from my students. Why? Critical analysis of stories begins to clarify the constraints and privileges of our individual lives. We learn from stories—if we listen to them, if we encourage them to be told.

I have already discussed elsewhere the authority of the storyteller. It is a power that can be shared. And as students find themselves telling their stories, sometimes in their own language or at least partially in their languages, as they find themselves teaching others and see the merging of private and academic language, they begin to question what is so prestigious about Standard English, how it came to be the “standard” by which they are judged now.

Many minority educators argue that we must be explicit about power and codes of the powerful, about what is expected and what the outcome of not meeting those expectations are. When we articulate those expectations, there is at least the possibility that they can be questioned, that we ourselves will begin to question and examine them. And when we ask, “How are these expectations different from what you do/think/believe” then we begin a dialogue on culture that can potentially create the conditions necessary for students to empower themselves, to make choices with knowledge and awareness, to effect some change. What if Hamid had asked Yoko about her use of sources, about her beliefs and then shared with her his own? What Hamid does do, however, is to summarize the main points of the conference and write down for each of his students explicitly what he expects them to do before they meet again. As he lists each process or change, he speaks with a questioning tone not indicated in the transcripts, inviting students to ask for any additional clarification.

Everywhere in this book, I’ve argued that classrooms and conferences are closely connected, that whatever we hope to accomplish in our conferences is dependent upon how we shape our classrooms. If real exploration of culture and cultural difference is not part of our classrooms, then culture will become an undercurrent in conferences, sucking in the unwary. Just as research on gender differences

can become part of a classroom, so can research on cultural difference. In writing classrooms, studying what students choose to write about or how they approach a topic helps us understand different rhetorical traditions and can help both peers and teachers understand how to respond to writing. Teaching our students and ourselves to ask why a student chose a particular approach or a construction, not simply rushing to point out that it doesn't follow standard English conventions or sometimes even the assignment, is far more instructive and opens up spaces for dialogue. Sharing with a writer our honest responses to writing that is not mainstream helps writers understand the effect of their work on others, and, if we examine our responses, helps us understand our own cultural beliefs and values. Encouraging students to speak in their home languages as much as possible and to clarify or translate what is not clear to listeners can help create a classroom where language is freely shared and issues of competency are highlighted: if listeners cannot understand a person speaking fluently in her own language, who then is competent and who isn't?

Most of us have the power to select the texts that our students will read, and our choices will reflect what we feel is most important, most valuable to our classrooms. Teachers know that students learn best when we present new information in ways that relate to their experiences. Yet the texts we choose and the ways in which we present them are often distant from the lives and knowledge of non-mainstream students. I remember struggling through long novels that took place in parlors; not a single novel moved me until I read *McTeague*. Then I dove into the literature of Realism and Naturalism—books that featured characters familiar to me (but often in ways I could authoritatively criticize). Only then could I go back to those earlier parlor novels with some ability to analyze. Additionally, texts that offer students alternative rhetorical patterns to the mainstream ones that so often fill classrooms also provide the opportunity for non-mainstream students to see their language and culture centrally and positively positioned. Black educators have written of the struggle to teach African Americans to value BEV in texts; Michelle Grijalva writes of the sense of shame and resistance she initially encountered when she brought Native American texts into her class of Hopi and Navajo students. “American” literature, narrowly and Eurocentrically conceived of for generations in academe, can be studied from many ways of

speaking and seeing. This means using whole texts, not simply readers. Many students are completely put off by the complex messages being sent by the “multicultural” readers that are part of so many well-intentioned liberal classrooms. Sandra Jamieson (1997) points out that the selections in such readers continue to support the status quo, continue to position women and people of color as “other” and as victims even as they propose to “celebrate” diversity. Standards for writing are clearly delineated, yet when the writing of women and people of color are held up against these standards, they fail. Texts by writers from a variety of cultures and languages which examine the same issues or events are particularly helpful in bringing to the forefront the ways in which language and power are connected.

In conferences, students from such a classroom would not only be able to speak with authority about the texts they are reading, but would be able to speak fluently, using their home language as much as possible. Instead of minimal responses, instead of face saving, teachers and students would be more likely to engage in a dialogue. Here, in the conference, where most students receive the only individual help the teacher can offer, discussions of how their language use differs from the standard would be informed by a more mutual understanding of the cultures that give rise to difference and the power structure that turns difference into issues of dominance.

Sociolinguists assume that all communication is meaningful. As teachers, we need to learn to ask not just ourselves but our students “Why?” Mina Shaughnessey (1977) gave us this lesson again and again as she studied the writing of her “remedial” students, those “Others” the university had been forced to admit. With each choice of a word, each selection of a piece of punctuation, a student writer is constructing writing that is purposeful, is revealing knowledge both common and idiosyncratic. And we are lucky that we do not have to figure out this sometimes-puzzle alone—we have the student, the writer herself to ask.