

## Embracing a Multicultural Rhetoric

*Bonnie Lisle and Sandra Mano*

Diversity is a hot topic in composition: conferences and journals are alive with talk about new canons, multiple discourse communities, social construction, intertextuality, multivocality, and heteroglossia; publishers advertise a new “multicultural” text in every issue of *College English*. Working as we do with an extremely diverse, multiethnic mix of students, we are delighted to see so much attention focused on issues that we encounter daily in our classrooms. But we detect a gap between professional talk and professional practice. A glance at current textbooks, which offer a rough measure of what goes on in most composition classrooms, suggests that, while the profession celebrates heteroglossia and difference, most rhetoric instruction remains monologic and ethnocentric. Publishers’ rush to get on the multicultural bandwagon has produced a welter of texts purporting to be multiethnic, but few show evidence of having thought through the implications of teaching writing to students from diverse linguistic and rhetorical traditions. We begin by reviewing some of the cultural limitations of current rhetoric instruction and continue by outlining our alternative vision of a genuinely multicultural rhetoric.

### Invisibility and Tokenism in Current Rhetoric Texts

Most rhetoric texts remain ethnocentric, ignoring the particular needs and interests—and sometimes even the existence—of culturally diverse students (see Jamieson, this volume). Some make unwarranted assumptions about students’ linguistic and cultural backgrounds. These words, from the introduction to one rhetoric, are clearly intended to reassure the novice writer:

Like all writers, you’re already a sophisticated user of your native language. When you speak, you don’t consciously think about words; you think about meaning, and the words tend to come

out correctly. Unless you are scared, subjects and verbs usually agree, sentence structures work, vocabulary is appropriate. In addition to that, you also react almost intuitively to your social situation. . . .  
(Elbow and Belanoff 6)

By suggesting that “you” are expected to have a native’s fluency and knowledge of social customs, such advice assumes a reader who is middle-class and fully assimilated into the dominant culture; it consigns other readers to invisibility. Far from being reassured, our students—most immigrant or bilingual, many working class—would read these words as irrelevant or alienating.

Perhaps the authors assumed that nonfluent speakers would all be placed in separate ESL courses. But as Guadalupe Valdés points out, the distinctions we typically make among bilingual students, speakers of nonstandard English, and basic writers are crude and inadequate; for instance, some monolingual students born in this country will nevertheless speak “a contact variety of English” containing many nonnative features because they have learned the language from their bilingual families and communities (103). Whatever courses we teach, we can’t afford to make assumptions about our students’ “intuitive” grasp of language and rhetorical effectiveness. The advice that rhetorics often give to listen for what sounds right or to rely on a felt sense of what works will backfire for many students, reinforcing the fear some have that there’s something wrong with them or leading them to suspect that the teacher who makes such suggestions doesn’t care about or understand them.

Some rhetorics contain nods to cultural diversity in the form of readings by writers of color or sample essays by students with Asian or Latino surnames. But the additive approach is merely a quick fix: multivocality demands much more than token representation. A few rhetorics now claim to offer a “cross-cultural” or “multicultural” approach to writing, but while they include more multiethnic reading materials, they uncritically endorse familiar Euro-American rhetorical conventions. Although they demonstrate a desire for fresh approaches, they seem trapped by tradition, failing to address the serious challenges that ethnic diversity poses to our assumptions about language and rhetoric.

### Cultural Constructions of Identity

While it is easy to assume that our values and rhetorical practices are natural or self-evident, studies of writing in other cultures indicate

that both content and form are based on principles that vary widely from country to country. An international study found that student essays written on the same topic differed considerably in focus and patterns of coherence, as well as the use of concrete detail, figurative language, and personal references. For example, students from Australia, Italy, and Thailand produced highly metaphoric, ornamented prose, while students from Finland, Nigeria, and Japan, like those from the United States, wrote in a much plainer style (Purves, "Rhetorical Communities" 42).

A far more basic difference among rhetorics concerns the construction of the writer's identity within the larger culture. Many United States rhetoric texts emphasize personal voice or begin with personal writing on the assumption that students find it easy and engaging to write about themselves. But assuming that expressive and personal writing is natural reflects a peculiarly American emphasis on individualism as the basis of identity—an idea not shared by all cultures. Fan Shen, a Chinese writer who attended college in the United States, recalls that his instructors' repeated directions to "be yourself" and "write what you think" were more confusing than helpful, for

the image or meaning that I attached to the word "I" or "myself" was, as I found out, different from that of my English teacher. In China, "I" is always subordinated to "We"—be it the working class, the Party, the country, or some other collective body. Both political pressure and literary tradition require that "I" be somewhat hidden or buried in writings and speeches; presenting the "self" too obviously would give people the impression of being disrespectful. . . . (460)

Although changes in China's political climate have eased such rigid prohibitions of individual expression, Carolyn Matalene, an American teacher living in China, found that, for many of her students, keeping journals of personal reflections was difficult and foreign, not the liberating activity that many textbooks assume it is (791). Some of our American students echo the discomfort with personal writing described by Shen and Matalene. Even writing a personal-opinion essay can run counter to some students' cultural training. One Vietnamese immigrant student, writing about the cultural clashes he experienced in the United States, described his difficulty reconciling his teachers' demands that he speak up and express his ideas with his family's insistence that "children" (even eighteen-year-olds) remain silent—that only adults may express opinions.

For some students, personal writing is difficult not because individualistic constructions of self are foreign but because such writing is fraught with risk. In a society that overtly or tacitly condones bigotry, students from nonprivileged groups may resist sharing their experiences as a matter of pride or self-preservation. In a collection of autobiographical essays, bell hooks explains that initially it was hard for her to write about herself because

so many black folks have been raised to believe that there is just so much that you should not talk about. . . . One of the jokes we used to have about the "got everything" white people is how they just tell all their business, just put their stuff right out there. One point of blackness then became—like how you keep your stuff to yourself, how private you could be about your business.

*(Talking Back 2)*

Reticence may serve as a necessary shield: an African American student in one of our classes fabricated an entire family history to avoid sharing his painful past. Likewise, lesbian, gay, and bisexual students often feel constrained about expressing themselves, given the homophobia and heterosexism that pervade the larger culture and, too often, the classroom itself. (Virginia Uribe and Karen M. Harbeck document the personal and institutional bigotry that such students encounter in school.) One gay student who was just coming out wrote eloquently about the joy of daring to speak in an uncensored voice after years of hiding behind a "safe" but colorless classroom persona.

While the imbalance of power in the classroom can make it risky for any student to open up, the potential danger is compounded when students see the teacher as representing an unjust or hostile social order. To shun self-revelation within an oppressive dominant culture is a reasonable response to what Molefi Asante calls the rhetorical condition—"the structure and power pattern, assumed or imposed, during a rhetorical situation by society" (*Afrocentric Idea* 22). Although the rhetorical condition powerfully shapes a writer's self-definition as well as her or his public reception, textbooks ignore or greatly oversimplify the social and political complexities inherent in the writer's task.

We don't mean to suggest that all, or even most, students from a particular cultural background or social group will resist personal writing. In fact, personal writing plays a central role in our own rhetorical approach. However, we do not assume that such writing will come easily or spontaneously to all students, we explicitly acknowledge

cultural differences in rhetorical style, we encourage students to analyze the rhetorical condition in which they write, and we try to offer options to accommodate those who feel uncomfortable or awkward with personal disclosure.

### Challenging Ethnocentric Models of Persuasion

Because textbooks do not acknowledge or teach cultural variation in rhetorical strategies, they tend to represent persuasive writing as necessarily thesis-driven and linear. This approach, holding up the propositional model as the only appropriate form for academic writing, excludes the wide range of styles and rhetorical strategies many students bring with them. Moreover, a survey of persuasive strategies in other cultures suggests that as a measure of rhetorical effectiveness the logocentrism of Western tradition is the exception rather than the rule; both oral and literate traditions of non-European cultures challenge the straight-edged geometry of Western rhetoric. While few of our students may be familiar with the formal rhetorical traditions of any particular culture, Shirley Brice Heath's *Ways with Words* reminds us that students' families and communities may teach them to express their ideas in ways that make our academic conventions seem alien. If we as teachers fail to acknowledge such ways of writing, we effectively silence such students. It's vital, then, to counter our ethnocentric biases by learning about as wide a range of rhetorical models as possible.

Matalene and Shen identify one traditional form of academic essay in China as *ba gu*, or the "eight-legged essay," whose hallmarks are indirection, repetition, and associative rather than hierarchical development. In direct contrast to the front-loaded organization Western academics prefer, the logic and structure of *ba gu* resembles an onion that must be peeled layer by layer "until the reader finally arrives at the central point, the core" (Shen 463). Although *ba gu* has been dismissed by other scholars as "a minor and poorly regarded form" not taught in modern Chinese schools (Mohan and Lo 519), at least one of its features persists—the onion-like organization. Indeed, immigrant Chinese students in our classes have told us that they were taught to devote the opening paragraph of an essay to statements of universal truth; only after that was it appropriate to broach the topic of the paper.

Other Asian rhetorical traditions value what we would dismiss as digressions in the body of an essay. John Hinds reports that a highly regarded form in Japan, *ki-shoo-ten-ketsu*, mandates that the third sec-

tion of the essay (*ten*) consist of at least one tangentially related subtopic "brought up with few overt transition markers" ("Reader" 150). Another study suggests that "a Korean preferred rhetorical structure, *ki-sung-chon-kyul*, appears to follow the same pattern" (Eggington 156). Since both studies focus on essays written in the native language, we cannot assume that such features would carry over in the work of Japanese or Korean speakers writing in English. Nevertheless, the widespread use of such forms reminds us that our own conceptions of effective organization and coherence are culture-specific.

The rhetoric of American Indian storytelling provides another alternative to linear, thesis-centered writing. Leslie Marmon Silko, describing Pueblo tradition, explains that "the structure of Pueblo expression resembles something like a spider's web—with many little threads radiating from a center, criss-crossing each other" (54). In contrast to the Western analytic model, which emphasizes distinction and division, Pueblo discourse emphasizes connections and inclusiveness: one story leads to another, and even individual words within a narrative may have their own stories that also must be told. Thus "one story is only the beginning of many stories" (56), and what would appear irrelevant or digressive to Euro-American eyes is meaningful and integral to the Pueblo sensibility.

In Arabic rhetoric, the Koran serves as the ultimate rhetorical guide; thus "the power of words [lies] not in their ability to reflect human experience, but in their ability to transcend it, to reach toward . . . the divine" (Janice Anderson 98). Verbal artistry and emotional impact are the primary measures of persuasive power: rhythm, sound, repetition, and emphatic assertion carry more weight than factual evidence, and organization may depend more on metaphor and association than on linear logic. Indeed, among educated Arabs, poetry "frequently functions in a political context to motivate action, and, as such, it is accorded as much weight as a scholarly dissertation" (97). We know a student who began her first paper in graduate school with a poem to enhance and strengthen her argument; she was crushed when her professor refused to accept the paper until she changed the opening. Studies of Arabic-speaking students writing in English suggest that, while these students' rhetorical strategies do not always differ this dramatically from those of native English speakers, their texts do show demonstrable differences in content, discourse style, sentence structure, and narrative pattern (Ostler; Soter).

African rhetorical traditions like *Nommo* (the power of the word) and *Kuntu* (the unity of sound and sense, of word and action) also

value sound and rhythm as highly as logical analysis (Asante, *Afrocentric Idea* 49–51). Although the languages and cultures of Africa are tremendously diverse, many scholars argue that African communication styles share certain deep-structure similarities—characteristics that sharply contrast with the conventions of European rhetoric (see, e.g., Smitherman, *Talkin* 74–75; Asante, *Afrocentric Idea* 59–63). Moreover, certain African rhetorical patterns have been preserved and adapted through black American oral traditions like call and response and signifying. According to Geneva Smitherman, “Indirection and circumlocutory rhetoric are also a part of African discourse strategy, and Afro-Americans have simply transformed this art to accommodate the English language” (*Talkin* 99). Indirection thus became a persuasive device in some African American speech communities: “By ‘stalk-ing’ the issues, the speaker demonstrates skill and arouses hearers’ interest. The person who goes directly to the issues is said to have little imagination and even less flair for rhetorical style” (Asante, *Afrocentric Idea* 51). The persistence of this tradition is at least tentatively reaffirmed by a recent study in which African American high school students, when asked to choose among different organizational strategies, consistently chose nonlinear forms like circumlocution, narrative interspersion, and recursion in preference to conventional “academic-based patterns” (Ball 519). While younger African American respondents in Ball’s study did not show this marked preference for nonlinear organization and while we certainly cannot assume that every African American student will be conversant with the oral traditions described by Smitherman and Asante, the existence of alternative rhetorical styles, even among American-born students, compels us to revise ethnocentric conceptions of organization, logic, and persuasion.

### Redefining the Writer’s Role

Like linear organization, the classic rhetorical triangle is an inadequate representation of discourse in most cultures. Isolating speaker, message, and audience makes little sense to people from cultures in which the oral tradition remains strong. Asante points out that because public expression in African tribal cultures is often communal and participatory, “traditional African philosophy cannot make the distinction of ‘speaker’ and ‘audience’ to the same degree found in rhetorical traditions of Euro-American society. . . . *Nommo* must be

a collective activity” (*Afrocentric Idea* 66). Pueblo tradition collapses the triangle even further, seeing words as inseparable from the speaker and blurring the boundary between message and audience: “a great deal of the story is believed to be inside the listener, and the storyteller’s role is to draw the story out of the listeners” (Silko 57).

Even where literate culture is well established, writers often bear an entirely different relation to their audiences and subject matter than we typically assume. Hinds distinguishes between rhetorical traditions like ours that stress the writer’s responsibility to make meaning clear and other traditions, like Japan’s, that place the burden of understanding primarily on the reader. The assumption of reader responsibility in Japan means that writers may seldom revise, may use fewer and more subtle transition markers than Western writers use, and may favor ambiguous or imprecise language in literary and some expository prose: “Japanese authors do not like to give clarifications or full explanations of their views. They like to give dark hints and to leave them behind nuances. . . . It is exactly this type of prose which gets the highest praise from readers” (Hinds, “Reader” 145).

While Americans see rhetoric as “an avenue for the individual to achieve control by saying something new in a new way,” in China “the primary function of rhetoric is to preserve the general harmony and to promote social cohesion; and therefore, its appeal is always to history and to tradition” (C. Matalene 795). The use of set phrases—primarily from classical literature—is a central element of effective Chinese rhetoric: “the Chinese writer or speaker who can use them frequently is not only ensuring that his message will be understood, he is also revealing his own superior education, his own knowledge of the literary tradition” (792). The common (to us) textbook admonitions to develop “original ideas,” to use “fresh language” and shun clichés directly contradict this rhetorical wisdom. Shen remembers resorting to what he calls “reversed plagiarism” in writing papers for his classes in China; when he couldn’t find a respectable authority to quote, he attributed some of his own ideas to other sources to make his argument more powerful (460). Conversely, some of Matalene’s students imitated models so assiduously (a virtue according to their prior training) that she initially accused them of plagiarism.

The assumption underlying Western academic views of plagiarism—that ideas are the property of individuals—is foreign to many cultural groups. Some American colleges experienced conflict during the 1970s when a large influx of students from Iran brought with them accepted practices of working together on exams as well as on assign-

ments. Likewise, scholars editing the papers of Martin Luther King, Jr., generated tremendous public controversy several years ago when they announced their discovery that King had “plagiarized” extensively in his sermons and writings. But in a recent study of King’s rhetoric Keith D. Miller argues that King was in fact practicing “voice merging”—an established tradition in black folk preaching. In this rhetorical tradition, ministers

borrow partly because their culture fails to define the word as a commodity and instead assumes that everyone creates language and no one owns it. . . . Borrowing also enhances a preacher’s status with an audience that demands authority, not originality; appropriateness, not personal expression, the gospel of Jesus Christ, not the views of an individual speaker. (26)

The Western academic tradition’s insistence on individual achievement and originality thus runs afoul of established practices within United States culture as well as abroad.

We’re not suggesting that college writing courses suddenly begin teaching students the intricacies of *ki-shoo-ten-ketsu* or encouraging them to borrow freely without citing their sources. Nor do we mean to imply that students’ cultural backgrounds automatically determine their linguistic habits and rhetorical patterns. Many other variables also shape student writing: the length of time in the United States, the degree of assimilation, prior schooling, home and community culture, and personality. Given the complexity of such influences, it would be foolhardy to make hasty assumptions about any student’s rhetorical knowledge. We do argue, though, that diverse rhetorical practices demand that teachers develop new sensitivities and skills: (1) we as teachers need to acknowledge the many rhetorical styles students may be familiar with; (2) we need to help students understand academic habits of mind and language in relation to their own cultural and rhetorical knowledge, whether that knowledge has been shaped by Pueblo storytelling, MTV, or both; (3) we need to provide opportunities for students to wrestle with the cultural conflicts that are raised by their immersion in academic culture—the changes it demands of them, the ways it may threaten to silence or censor them, and the ways it may separate them from their home communities and families—as well as the new voices and communities it may open to them; (4) we need to make clear to students that the rhetorical practices we’re teaching them are culturally constructed and subject to change, not fixed and absolute; (5) we need to examine the rhetorical condition in

which writers write—to help students recognize patterns of exclusion and power within dominant discourses and resist or challenge those patterns when they are disabling.

## Envisioning a Multicultural Rhetoric

To implement these goals in our own courses, we have been developing an approach that highlights the languages and cultural knowledge students bring with them to the university. As Gloria Anzaldúa poignantly writes, “Ethnic identity is twin skin to linguistic identity—I am my language. Until I can take pride in my language, I cannot take pride in myself” (*Borderlands* 59). Many of our students have echoed these feelings. School experience has taught some that their home language is somehow deficient or incorrect; these students often worry that gaining proficiency in academic English constitutes a betrayal of family and community. Others are eager to learn the “language of power” but fear that they will lose (or are already losing) their native tongue. For these students, as well as for many who belong to the language majority, linguistic issues can interfere with success at the university. We have found that openly discussing these topics and exploring students’ many cultural and language communities enhances learning.

We begin with storytelling. Stories, because they occur among all groups, cut across cultural boundaries, yet since types of stories and storytelling patterns can vary radically, they also clearly illustrate cultural differences. First, we read a range of narratives by writers from various ethnic groups; then we ask students to tell their own stories. Those who are comfortable with personal narrative may write about a moment of crisis or change in their lives. Those whose cultural or personal bent is to shy away from self-revelation can recount traditional stories from their cultures or describe important customs and ceremonies in their families and communities. Because stories are appealing and familiar to students, they can help bridge home and academic cultures. As Terry Dean points out, “Most often, it is not the home culture that causes problems, but a fear on the part of students that elements of that culture will not be accepted in the university environment” (36). Our experience, like Dean’s, suggests that giving students the opportunity to talk and write about their cultural heritages, identities, and conflicts can diminish that fear and help ease their transition. We move on to investigating the influence of culture on the development of texts. We read essays, like Silko’s “Language and

Literature from a Pueblo Indian Perspective," that place storytelling styles in their cultural contexts. Then, as students continue to work on their own stories, we encourage them to begin thinking analytically about the personal and cultural values their narratives reflect. Greg Sarris has observed that in his own classes such assignments were particularly useful for students outside the dominant culture, "bridging the chasm between life experience and classroom activity and personal anecdote and critical thinking" (182).

By using storytelling to examine the cultural basis of values and assumptions, students can also learn to understand more fully the sources of their differences. Unlike those traditionalists who warn that multiculturalism will doom us to balkanization, we believe that exploring the roots of our differences through stories opens communication rather than reinforces barriers. Reading the stories of marginalized groups can, as Henry Giroux explains, "help privileged groups listen seriously to the multiple narratives that constitute the complexity of Others historically defined through reifications and stereotypes" ("Postmodernism" 244). Indeed, storytelling can help combat stereotypical thinking among all groups. Sarris recounts that when a class discussion of sexism led to a shouting match between a feminist Jewish American student and a conservative Arab student, the class asked the disputants to tell stories about what had shaped their attitudes toward women. He concludes:

While these stories did not solve the differences between these two students, they allowed them, and the rest of us in the classroom, the opportunity to explore mutual prejudices in a broader historical and political framework. After class, the Jewish woman approached the Arab and said, "I do not agree with you, but I understand you better." (183)

Explorations of difference thus become a central part of our classes. One assignment, for example, asks students to interview someone whose background is significantly different from their own and to write a profile of that person, discussing how the subject's experiences or opinions challenge, complicate, or confirm the writer's own views. When our students share their stories in class through peer response groups, reading aloud, and class publications, they are brought together "despite great distances between cultures" (Silko 69).

Next, students extend the range of their writing to examine the intellectual habits and formal conventions of the discourse communities

they are entering. Lisa Delpit argues that this process is particularly essential for students of color, for if we neglect to teach them the codes of the "culture of power," at best we reinforce their marginalization within the academy and at worst we ensure their failure. But she does not advocate unquestioning assimilation: "even while students are assisted in learning the culture of power, they must also be helped to learn about the arbitrariness of those codes and about the power relationships they represent" (296). We invite our students to explore how their membership in different language communities and cultural groups influences their interpretation of the world and as a result their development as writers. Students read selections that discuss the many ways in which cultural influences—whether from home, school, or the larger society—can censor and nurture the writer. Writing assignments include descriptions and comparisons of two language communities or social groups the students belong to, discussions of the ways the students must alter language and behavior as they move between these groups, and analyses of how the values of each community reinforce or conflict with each other and contribute to the students' identities. An alternative assignment asks students to write two versions of a brief editorial, one appealing to the general campus community, the other to a different speech community or cultural group to which they belong. This assignment allows students to become conscious of certain expectations of college writing without devaluing the patterns of literacy they bring with them.

Although students learn conventional forms, we also encourage them to be flexible—to multiply their rhetorical options. We provide many examples of writing that draw on different rhetorical traditions and violate the boundaries of what is considered appropriate according to Western conventions. Works like Anzaldúa's *Borderlands / La Frontera*—which blends autobiography and scholarship, English and Spanish, prose and poetry—challenge conventional rhetorical wisdom and open spaces for new kinds of academic writing. We compare these experimental forms with more conventional ones and ask students to weigh the purposes, powers, and risks that reside in the authors' rhetorical choices. In this approach, we follow Min-Zhan Lu's suggestion that

we might intentionally complicate the classroom scene by bringing into it discourses that stand at varying distances from the one we teach. We might encourage students to explore ways of practicing the conventions of the discourse they are learning

by negotiating through these conflicting voices. We could also encourage them to see themselves as responsible for forming or transforming as well as preserving the discourse they are learning. ("Silence" 447)

We provide frequent opportunities for language play and for experimentation with forms of expression beyond the thesis-driven essay: students may "translate" an essay into a poem, represent a subject such as their literacy history in a drawing, or develop an idea oppositionally rather than propositionally. We believe that fostering innovation helps students not only to appreciate the strengths and limitations of academic thinking but also to challenge its boundaries.

The examination of differences among diverse language groups and rhetorical styles enables students to understand that correctness is contextual, not absolute. We ask students to examine the university as a collection of social groups, each with its own cultural values, customs, and language conventions. We read analyses and critiques of academic culture so that students begin to see scholarship as a form of inquiry that functions within specific cultural contexts. Writing assignments involve fieldwork in the university—observing, interviewing, gathering data. One assignment has students interview a professor in a field that interests them and report on the types of research and writing, the use of evidence, the important theoretical perspectives, and the major current debates within the field. Examining the values and expectations of academic culture prompts discussion and debate about issues of assimilation: what one gains and loses—social mobility, power, identity, connection to family and friends—and whether or how to negotiate the often contradictory demands of home and school. As Lu argues, we shouldn't try to avoid the cultural conflicts students encounter in the academy; rather we should work toward "helping students reach a self-conscious choice on their position towards conflicting cultural values and forces" ("Conflict" 906). This approach stresses the dialectic relation between personal experience and academic analysis—the ability of each form of knowledge to deepen and enrich the other. Kurt Spellmeyer argues that it is only through negotiating the tension between one culture or discourse and another that we can learn to become active shapers of knowledge: "we cannot understand either without the other, without, that is, an inside and an outside. . . . The very word 'discourse,' in its root sense a 'running back and forth,' implies the need for such a doubleness" ("Foucault" 722).

As students come to realize that academic writing is, like all language, culturally based, we begin working more intensively with interpretation. Since all texts and events are open to multiple constructions, academic writing becomes a specialized form of storytelling. Scholars have begun to identify the stories or "master narratives" embedded in the discourses of many academic disciplines (see, e.g., Gergen and Gergen; Journet; Papke). Presenting academic analysis as an extension of narrative—a mode of thinking already familiar to students—helps demystify it. We read conflicting accounts of current events or scholarly essays that offer competing interpretations of the same material, and we talk about ways of evaluating these alternative narratives. Students then produce their own competing texts: a freewriting exercise asks students to recall an argument they've had recently and to describe it first from their perspective and then from the other person's, writing both accounts in the first person. Other activities include retelling a story from the perspective of a character other than the narrator, writing alternative endings to stories, or writing imaginary dialogues between the authors or narrators of different texts. In lengthier essays, students synthesize divergent points of view or propose several possible interpretations of an event or a text and then discuss which interpretation works best. The emphasis on multiple perspectives pushes students to think through issues in more complex terms. David Perkins's studies of everyday reasoning suggest that the most consistent problem students encounter in constructing an argument is not fallacious logic but failure to consider alternative lines of analysis before coming to a conclusion. A writing course based on cultural difference and multivocality can thus help students develop the intellectual complexity most valued by the academy.

Perhaps more important, such an approach enables students to consider how their personal and academic histories have been socially constructed, sometimes by others. We discuss the rhetorical condition in which writers write, investigating how power relations shape discourse and its reception. June Jordan's essay "Nobody Mean More to Me Than You . . ." is a powerful case in point that raises complex questions about whether or how marginalized writers can make themselves heard in the dominant culture without compromising their integrity. We also read the work of writers who have consciously resisted, disrupted, and reshaped the rhetorical condition itself—writers who, like Anzaldúa, "write to record what others erase when I speak, to rewrite the stories others have miswritten about me, about you" ("Speaking" 169). As students learn how language and stories

have been used to oppress as well as to resist oppression, they are situated “to engage critically the strengths and limitations of the cultural and social codes that define their own histories and narratives” (Giroux, “Postmodernism” 248). When students gain the confidence to challenge dominant cultural narratives, they can begin to construct more inclusive narratives of their own and thereby “undertake the knowledge-transforming violence that distinguishes the empowered from the powerless” (Spellmeyer, “Foucault” 719).

We believe a rhetoric such as the one we describe will foster an awareness of varied audiences, purposes, and social contexts for writing through an examination of students’ linguistic and cultural communities. When students can make connections between home and academy and look critically at each culture through the lens of the other, their experiences at the university will be enriched. As they explore the complexities of multiple perspectives and struggle with the challenges of communicating across differences, they can develop the dialogic thinking essential to critical analysis. By learning that language conventions are fluid, contested, and enmeshed in relations of power, students can make better-informed choices as they negotiate the complexities of communicating in a tremendously diverse—and tremendously inequitable—world.

Because multiculturalism is fast becoming a reality of our daily lives, not just a fashionable bit of professional jargon, instructors as well as students must engage in a learning process. Rethinking long-held assumptions about rhetoric is a difficult task, one requiring us to question reflexive beliefs about language, teaching, and our own position in the world. Delpit acknowledges the difficulty of genuinely understanding students’ cultural differences, suggesting that “we must learn to be vulnerable enough to allow our world to turn upside down in order to allow the realities of others to edge themselves into our consciousness” (297). The rhetoric we are proposing demands more than constructing a new curriculum—it also requires self-transformation. Committing ourselves to the long process of learning and relearning that this effort entails must be our first step toward embracing a truly multicultural rhetoric.

## Whose Voice Is It Anyway? Marked Features in the Writing of Black English Speakers

*Denise Troutman*

In sociolinguistics, linguistic features that are not usual or normal are called “marked.” “Unmarked” features are those that are accepted as the norm. The usage of the dominant group in a society is generally established as “normal.” We can more fully understand the concept of markedness by considering the conventional definition of the term *marked*. A marked object or person stands out prominently, the proverbial sore thumb, different from all others. Marked features in writing are the unaccepted kids on the block.

The following proscriptions warn against marked features in written English. Students are encouraged to make sure these nonstandard forms do not carry over from their speech into their writing.

*a, an.* Use *an* before a vowel (an eye for an eye); use *a* before a consonant (a desk).

**Double negative.** Double negatives say no twice. In standard English, a double negative is a no-no.

*he don't, she don't.* *Don't* instead of *doesn't* is nonstandard for one single person or thing. Wrong: She don't live here.

*knowed, blowed, had went.* Irregular verbs signal the past by a change in the root word. Know the standard forms.

***and* and *but* at the beginning of a sentence.** Many composition teachers still observe the rule banning *and* and *but* at the beginning of a sentence.

***you* with indefinite reference.** Never use this device in formal writing.

**Shifts in tone.** Be sure to maintain a consistent tone.

Proscriptions like these appear in standard usage handbooks and are