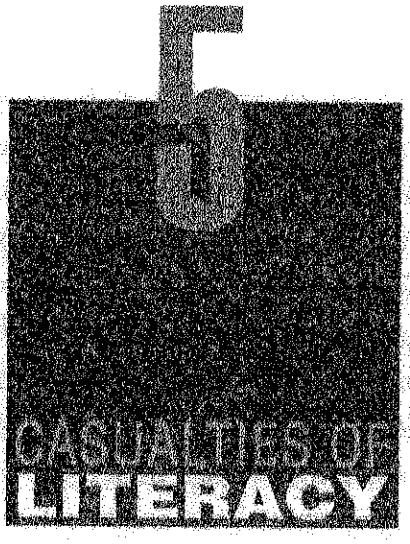

During my tenure at Columbia College, Chicago, I was asked to give a talk to fifty or sixty part-time writing teachers about the presence of vernacular in students' writing. I approached my discussion knowing that most teachers still support code switching, which I'm against. Given the egalitarian ethos and liberal politics that inform current literacy research and instruction, most teachers only parrot the expected response to the question of BEV—"Yes, respect it!" But this is often accompanied by an unspoken caveat: "As long as students use BEV with other blacks and WEV at school."

So I began my talk with the same argument and encouragement that I wish to advance here: Rebuff the ideology and pedagogy that seek to reduce so-called black dialect interference in speech and writing. Focus instead on the inextricable stylistic and rhetorical value of BEV, for as the anthropologist Signithia Fordham (referencing Felicia Lee [1994]) makes clear, "black discourse style increases rather than diminishes the longer Black students are in school" (1999, 287).

Since BEV ain't goin' nowhere, it only makes sense that we should allow students to combine it with the discourse we're required to teach, a strategy that I call code meshing. Accepting code meshing would mean abandoning the Ebonics approach or, rather, what should be called the Ebonics concession, where students are either instructed

in BEV and then required to translate it into standard English or are given a choice of using vernacular in creative assignments but not in formal papers. I promote a thorough, seamless mixture of BEV and WEV that leads to more natural, less artificial, well-expressed prose. The benefits of code meshing extend beyond producing better papers. I believe it will help teachers avoid imposing the harmful effects of American racialization on students, which happens when we view their linguistic habits as subliterate, fundamentally incompatible with what's considered standard.

My position echoes arguments of years ago that advocate against code switching and that, fortunately, are being revived in current research on education and writing. Take, for instance, Gerald Graff's belief that the rigidity that accompanies most instruction in standard English does a disservice to all students, particularly blacks. For Graff (2003) common speech and street smarts are useful to education in general and academic writing in particular and not just as a means to an end, as if BEV were merely a bridge to be crossed to get to standard English. He illustrates his claim in an analysis of the sociolinguist William Labov's interview with Larry, a black teenager.[1] For Graff, Larry's working-class vernacular response—"He'd be white, man"—to Labov's question of God's race is more forceful than what many white middle-class speakers might utter. Further, Graff finds Larry's reply to Labov's follow-up question—Why?—to be clear and articulate. Larry responds: "Why? I'll tell you why. 'Cause the average whitey out here got everything, you dig? And the nigger ain't got shit, y'know? Y'understan'? So—um—for—in order for that to happen, you know it ain't no black God that's doin' that bullshit" (quoted in Graff, 2003, 37). According to Graff, Larry's "powerful, cogent, and interesting" (37) expression suggests that code meshing, a way of speaking and writing that combines BEV with formal English "seems preferable to code switching," which prevents these English varieties from intermingling. In short, as Graff puts it, "linguistic integration is preferable to segregation" (27). And, as I asked in the conclusion to my speech at that teachers' meeting, shouldn't it be?

It didn't take long for Diane to answer no. She was the only other black teacher in the room. I had noticed that she had sat unusually

stiff backed and stone faced during my presentation. Her unemotional expression surprised me, since we had been generally friendly toward one another the few times we'd met before. As she spoke, however, it became evident that she had been masking her fuming discontent.

"I too want to help black college students write better," she stood and said, "because the ones who come to intern at the advertising company where I am an account executive can't write their way out of a paper bag." This, Diane declared, is what prompted her to begin teaching writing when she could spare the time.

Everyone knew that, despite our both being black, Diane was espousing a different position from mine on how the politics of race should inform the way we teach writing. This difference led her to contend that my advocacy for "code meshing sells black students short; it suggests they can't master the standard dialect." She said it would impair their ability to demonstrate the kind of rigorous, academic writing she would expect, regardless of race.

I stood in front of the room, trying unsuccessfully to don the same stony disposition that Diane had displayed earlier. I managed to hear Diane without getting too hot, that is, until she announced: "I'm black too. And I'm quite familiar with the codes of BEV. I know them better than anyone here might suspect. But I also know when and where to use them. No business out there is going to allow students or me to bring those codes to work, so we shouldn't allow them in here." Then she added, "I don't make the rules. I just follow them. I want to teach my students how to do so as well."

With that, Diane almost stopped, but she received such loud applause that she rose again. This time, speaking directly to me, she said somewhat sympathetically: "Look, you're a nice guy. I know this is personal for you, and I know you mean well, but far be it from me or you or anyone of us here to limit the chances for success of any minority student, especially underprivileged blacks, who need to learn the language of public communication in order to make it in this world."

She finished her rant with an example of someone whom she thought best showed why we shouldn't code mesh—me! "Look at you," she pointed, "a well-dressed, well-rehearsed, polished, articulate, black male college professor—how'd you get here? Students

should have the same opportunity to become English professors. But they won't if we let them continue to do ghetto literacy."

Although I had anticipated this juxtaposition of ghetto black versus middle-class black and had come prepared to discuss its role in aggravating the gap between the classes, my anger got the best of me; I was all set to go ghettomatic and eat Diane up. I was set to signify on the fact that she wore a fur coat in early November before it seemed necessary, a symbol for me of middle-class pretension. I was also going to point out her ultraproper racial speech performance: the way she always pronounced *the* with a formal sounding long *e,* even when it wasn't exactly appropriate. I placed this speech habit within the same realm as Momma's (and my own) "Talkin' Proper." That is, there are times when Momma deliberately affects both intonation and speech patterns commonly associated with white people when she thinks someone white, or at least important, is on the phone. These were idiosyncrasies of Diane's that flared up during our discussion as traits to knock. But I kept quiet because Momma had taught me better. "If you ain't gone say nothing good 'bout a person, go on 'head 'bout your business," she'd say, putting a black spin on the old saying.

Although I haven't always followed Momma's advice, the applause that Diane received suggested I should. Instead of getting the teachers to interrogate our instructional practices and the unconscious beliefs that inform them, I landed in the hot seat. Diane had successfully deflected attention from the issues and onto the image of the transformed ghetto boy. Apparently, this figure was enough to get teachers to believe that whatever it took to sculpt my class profile into a manicured prototype, whatever pains I underwent to become the eloquent black male teacher giving a talk to a mostly white audience, and whatever struggles I might still face are par for the course—necessary. According to Diane, I personify a conservative brand of literacy instruction that I should promote, not denounce.

I denounce Diane's belief because it surrenders to prejudice. She doesn't deny that prejudice exists, but she wants students to dodge its consequences by not using BEV. Further, she is satisfied with a financial solution. As I see it, the problem of language prejudice is primarily an ethical issue. Economic consequences are certainly at stake. But our

current class structure is established on a set of racist beliefs that need to be exposed and changed. This is why I don't believe that the black masses should do what a few so-called successes have been able to do. I believe the few are exceptions, which doesn't necessarily mean they're exceptional. How the masses are treated, their fate, paints the real picture. Dealing with the circumstances that prevent their success, rather than trying to package mine, is the real task we should take up.

Since so many teachers agree with Diane, I want to use this chapter to expand my argument, beginning with a similar situation that prompted the literacy scholar and critic Victor Villanueva to write "Whose Voice Is It Anyway?" (1987). The issues that came up during my interactions with Diane are also concerns of Villanueva's. His take on the journalist and author Richard Rodriguez underscores points that I had in mind at the meeting and want to pursue here.

Villanueva recalls listening to Rodriguez's guest lecture to the National Council of Teachers of English (NCTE) in which Rodriguez "spoke of how he came to be an articulate speaker of this standard dialect" (1987, 17). Villanueva says the English teachers present for the speech sat at rapt attention. They saw their work implicated in Rodriguez's success, a connection he makes himself in his acclaimed memoir *Hunger of Memory.* Rodriguez writes that he went to "a school where all of [his] classmates were white and many were the children of doctors, lawyers, and business executives." In stark contrast he was "a bilingual child," "'socially disadvantaged,' the son of working class parents, both Mexican immigrants," and "able to understand [only] fifty stray English words" (1982, 11, 12). Despite these setbacks, he grew up to get his PhD in English and become an influential writer and a sought-after speaker—all because, as he says, "My teachers were unsentimental about their responsibility. What they understood was that I needed to speak public English" (19).

Rodriguez uses his experiences in school to justify a polemic about language and literacy education. Most directly, he believes that bilingual education is a mistake, and by extension he also believes "black English [is] inappropriate in classrooms" (33). He describes bilingual education as "a program that seeks to permit non-English-speaking children (many from the lower class) to use their 'family language' as

the language of school." In response to such a proposal, Rodriguez says, "[I] am forced to say no" (11–12). But his no comes at a personal and cultural expense. He writes about how, as a result of his acquired English-language education, he became estranged from his family, particularly his father, and how his Spanish heritage became like a foreign culture. All this was agonizing, he says, but worth it to achieve his goals.

Rodriguez uttered these sentiments in his lecture at the NCTE conference, where, according to Villanueva, "he was impressive," had "a quiet eloquence," and was a match for "Olivier's *Hamlet.*" All this overwhelmed the teachers, who gave Rodriguez what Villanueva describes as "an enthusiastic" yet "uncritical acceptance, marked by a long, loud standing ovation." Villanueva says he "was surprised because [Rodriguez] had blurred distinctions between language and culture, between his experiences and those more typical of the minority in America, between the history of the immigrant and that of the minority, in a way that [Villanueva] had thought would raise" not "the audience to its feet" but "more than a few eyebrows" (1987, 17). The difference between the minority and the immigrant, which Rodriguez blurred, was of concern to Villanueva because some immigrants are eager to assimilate and often have opportunities to do so, whereas minorities are often disallowed complete assimilation even when they try. According to Villanueva, to conflate these two sets of experiences is not only illogical but erroneous. In the end, Villanueva says, "Rodriguez told the teachers to continue to be sensitive but to forget about doing anything special" (17). Rodriguez presented himself as the product of the teachers' traditional best practices; he saw himself as more than the proof—he was the pudding itself.

Rodriguez's claim is similar to the rhetorical move that Diane made and the advice she gave the teachers at our meeting—using me as the example. Like Diane, Rodriguez believes, according to Villanueva, that "the old ways may be painful, but they are truly best." Also like Diane, Rodriguez thinks "linguistic assimilation is like alchemy, initially destructive perhaps but magical, creating something new and greater than what was." From this both Diane and Rodriguez admon-

ish teachers to "do as [they] have always done" (Villanueva 1987, 17). This advice sounds as wrong to Villanueva as Diane's sounds wrong to me. As Villanueva writes, "One person's experiences must remain one person's, applicable to many others, perhaps, but not all others" (21).

The problem that Villanueva has with Rodriguez, and that I have with Diane, is not only about the application of monolithic solutions to all students but about translating bad solutions into universal ones. When Villanueva thinks "of an eighty per cent dropout rate among Puerto Ricans in Boston, of Mexicans in the Rio Grande Valley where the dropout rate exceeds seventy per cent"; when he thinks "of places where English and the education system do not address the majority—Spanish speakers for whom menial labor has been the tradition and is apparently the future," he "must ask how *not* bilingual education in such situations" (1987, 21). Likewise, when I think of the rampant failure among black students, especially at Columbia College, Chicago, where more than 90 percent don't make it to graduation, I also ask how *not* code meshing.

But just as so many teachers find all kinds of reasons not to support bilingual education, so too many writing teachers find all kinds of excuses not to back code meshing. Some flat-out disregard the words of critics like Keith Gilyard, who grew up code switching. He doesn't believe that other black students should undergo the same trials he underwent to get to where he is. In fact, he too criticizes Rodriguez's "self-annihilation" and "cultural suicide" (1991, 160–61), which Gilyard says aren't so much necessary evils for minorities as they are "merely evil" (Gilyard 1997, 327). This is especially the case, Gilyard thinks, when teachers translate Rodriguez's "appraisal of his pain into pedagogy" (Gilyard 1991, 161).

Others who oppose code meshing are heartened by the historical and popular bias against BEV. The writing theorist Lynn Z. Bloom, for instance, promotes her own fatalistic resignation to linguistic segregation. In her essay "Freshman Composition as Middle Class Enterprise," she says we shouldn't privilege BEV because "there is little evidence that American culture at large, despite increasingly multicultural classrooms, will grant equal opportunity for [BEV] to be valued on par

with Standard English" (1996, 671). Bloom camouflages the linguistic prejudice she supports with a pseudoegalitarian approach. Teachers should not penalize students for using vernacular "while they are also learning the dominant standard," she writes. Yet she requires those same students to recognize the "innumerable *other contexts* where alternative dialects are appropriate" (671; emphasis added). This is the code-switching approach I argue against and that Villanueva also finds unfavorable. "Limiting the student's language to the playground and home," he writes, "still speaks of who's right and who's wrong, who holds the power" (1987, 21). But, like Diane, Bloom is adamant: "Like it or not," she says, "we are a nation of Standard English" (1996, 670). My response to Bloom is the same one that Villanueva gives to the teachers who embraced Rodriguez: "I would rather we left speaking dialects relatively alone" (1987, 21).

To be clear, it's more than the notion of standard English that I'm against. It's the methods that teachers use to get students of color to use it—methods that ultimately make many refuse it. Also problematic is the vague and limited scope of codes used to define standard English—a definition that determines more what standard English *is not* than what it is. Following from that is a serious question about whose political-economic interests are best served by restricting the meaning of what's standard. The all-too-common response from teachers to such concerns leads Villanueva to observe: "When it comes to the nonstandard speaker, we are torn between the findings of the linguists and the demands of the marketplace" (1987, 21).

My response, which admittedly may be easier said than done, is that teachers should be more, not less, critical of the "marketplace." We should prepare students for societal change, not merely to fit in. Our job should be educating students, not refashioning them into what we imagine the "marketplace" demands they should be. We should be encouraged by research that gives BEV parity with WEV—and that values both in school, in student papers, and in their speech. We should struggle for both to be thoroughly mixed together in the marketplace. If we don't, we follow Diane and Bloom and kowtow to phony social and political prescriptions for moving up the American class structure.

I acknowledge that the promise of upward socioeconomic mobility is seductive. But, if truth be told, the promise coming from education today is a fantasy. While the educational guidelines for navigating the American class structure pay lip service to providing opportunities for all, the real function of those guidelines is to keep most of those born at the top on top. In light of this, Diane and Bloom are wrong to urge that we teach WEV just so BEV speakers may play climb-the-socioeconomic-ladder when everybody knows the game is rigged and the rungs are weak. When blacks fall and lose—as many inevitably will—they become brick and mortar in the foundation that sustains the current American class structure. The linguist Wayne O'Neil puts the point this way: "The enterprise of making lower-class speakers over into middle-class speakers is simply a piece of the educational emptiness that helps maintain the present distribution of power in society. For wasting time there, on a thing that is bound to fail, serves to render school children skilled enough to be exploited but finally uneducated, used to failure, and alienated enough not to oppose exploitation" (1973, 190).

According to O'Neil, asking lower-class black students to bifurcate their linguistic abilities does not for the most part increase their chances to become middle class. In actuality, this practice does more harm than good and promotes failure rather than success. It unrealistically expects those who grow up speaking a language variety to drop it. Youngsters, especially college students, are smart enough to recognize this. Where they once saw education as a beacon of hope, after years of experience with linguistic tyranny, they lose hope.

Take Mica, for example. In "Failure: The Student's or the Assessment's?" Kay Harley and Sally I. Cannon describe Mica as a nineteen-year-old, new single mother. She is so eager to be in school that she writes: "Being in an college english class I felt I was final going to learn something about this word call english" (1996, 70). Harley and Cannon write about Mica because, despite her enthusiasm, she failed their writing course, while their white students passed. What were Mica's problems? Her teachers' list is long: her "direct discourse was often unmarked"; her "sentences are sometimes fragmented or fused"; the "missing tense markers, particularly 'd' or 'ed,' and copula ('to be')

deletions reflect Black English Vernacular (BEV)"; and "she was unable or refused to squelch the personal" (1996, 74–75).

Reflecting on how "Mica's paper challenged [their] habitual ways of assessing writing," Mica's teachers wondered whether her "writing might have a rightful place in a freshman writing course and in academic discourse more generally" (1996, 75). To answer this question they reread Mica's writing through the black verbal tradition. From this code-meshing perspective Harley and Cannon found reasons to validate Mica's writing and sing her praises: "Mica's writing does render the immediacy of her experience. . . . It is filled with strong details. . . . [Its] rich rhythm gives the piece poignancy and power" (75). They even compare Mica's writing to the work of white female academics, like that of Jane Tompkins, "who call upon their personal experience to enrich and organize their understanding of professional concepts. If Tompkins can do it," the teachers ask, "Why not Mica?" (81).

Thus after a medley of compliments mixed with censure—"read as a whole, Mica's papers have a surprising unity," but "all fail to clearly and explicitly link example to generalization"—Mica's teachers acknowledge their "need to understand [her] errors, not as deficits, but as attempts at appropriating the discourses of other communities" (1996, 84). However, in the way these matters so often go, their analysis and subsequent confession do nothing for Mica. The teachers ultimately end where they begin. "We have no clear answer to the question. . . . Was the failure Mica's or that of our assessment procedure?" (85). But they do know one thing for certain. "Would we pass Mica's portfolio today?" They answer emphatically, unequivocally, no (85).

It's alarming that Harley and Cannon offer no word, no account, nothing to explain why they wouldn't pass Mica after reassessing her work. What difference would their reframing their assessments and attitudes have for students like Mica later on, in other classes? What would motivate teachers to take BEV into account when assessing their black students, when such reconsideration constitutes a challenge for teachers but ultimately has no positive effect on students?

To be fair, any teacher who confronts a student like Mica should experience some degree of conflict while endeavoring to meet the project of education, an enterprise that, as Bloom writes, sometimes

mandates that teachers "punish lower-class students for not being, well, more middle-class" (1996, 655). This is important to note because the difference between lower-class white students and lower-class black students in literacy classrooms is difficult to measure without accounting for the role of race. For poor white kids, learning how to write is part of a process that involves learning how to escape their social class. While passing a college English course doesn't guarantee them middle-class status, it at least propels them toward that status while keeping their fundamental racial identity intact. For poor black kids, learning how to write involves not only escaping their class but repudiating the language that bespeaks their race, which feels not only as if they're acquiring a new class status (which could be a good thing) but also as if they must lose their race in the process.

Many well-intentioned, liberal teachers like Harley and Cannon, who observe this difference among whites and blacks but don't understand it, begin to second-guess themselves when they pass their white students and fail their black ones. Convinced of their integrity, they confirm they're not racists. But when the problem remains, they must locate it someplace. So first they displace it onto their assessment practices—as if such practices are divorced from their own ideology—and then onto students. Thus the class background of black students or their culture is viewed as the source of the problem when it really isn't. Then what is?

Bloom's essay provides a clue. She writes that "nineteenth- and twentieth-century pedagogical practices and [literacy] textbooks," which themselves derived from "eighteenth and early nineteenth-century" ideologies of rhetoric and social class, are direct sources for the "folkways" that she says students must "absorb" in modern-day introductory college writing courses (1996, 656). That being the case, then Gavin Jones's insightful essay "Whose Line Is It Anyway? W. E. B. Du Bois and the Language of the Color-Line" helps us understand how those "folkways" apply to blacks.

Jones writes that "the notion of the 'Veil'"—Du Bois's metaphor for the invisible shawl that separated blacks from whites—"was just as important to discussions of linguistic division as it was to social segregation" (1997, 25). This means that Jim Crow laws were instituted just

as much to outlaw integrated language habits as they were to outlaw integrated race relations. This linguistic segregation was the outcome of nineteenth-century language debates. At stake was whether to separate black language from white language or consider them versions of the same.

This question arose because "accounts of the Southern dialect of American English before the Civil War . . . noted that Southern Whites from all class backgrounds learned the grammar and pronunciation of black English and retained the habit throughout their lives, becoming in effect 'bidialectical'" (G. Jones 1997, 21). But after the Civil War, as Gavin Jones notes, "the comparative tolerance of black English by the wealthy whites before the Civil War, which led to the observation that the color-line had broken down in Southern speech, was destroyed by the new situation, in which poor whites and blacks were thrown into competition, and in which the tracing of white language to black influence was felt as a deep insult" (23). Thus the "debate over language," Jones writes, "revolved around white fear that the cultural fabric of the South may have been produced by the weaving together of two cultural strands (broadly speaking, the Anglo-American and the African-American) into a new, hybrid mode" (24).

Efforts to expunge BEV from WEV led to overstated depictions of the differences between the two. Referencing William Cecil Elam's essay "Lingo in Literature" (1895), Gavin Jones writes that "while in actual life black speech and white speech were virtually identical, when they were depicted in literature black speech was exaggerated in its 'lingual barbarisms' while white speech was 'revised according to Noah Webster and Lindley Murray,'" which amounted to "an act of discrimination" (1997, 23). In short, white speech was represented in print as correct, even though in practice it was just as incorrect as black dialect when compared with grammar books and dictionaries.

The logic that supported this linguistic discrimination hinged on what Jones calls a paradox, "the paradox that black language was essentially different from, yet entirely familiar to white language; that it was separate from white language without being unnervingly 'other'" (1997, 24). As a result black speech took on an exaggerated characterization, becoming a grotesque caricature that could be used as

evidence of black inferiority. White speech was also exaggerated but became virtuous and beatific. Exaggerated black speech was used as "sufficient cause for racial segregation." Exaggerated white speech became what blacks must learn to justify their right to integration, to equality (G. Jones 1997, 25). Thus, as Signithia Fordham writes (referencing Grace Sims Holt), "once Black Americans were freed from official enslavement, language became the major vehicle for perpetuating the legitimation of subsequent stages of oppression" (1999, 278).

In other words, despite the undoing of legal racial discrimination in 1954 with the *Brown* decision, language bigotry remains. This bigotry was expressed, according to Henry Louis Gates Jr., in the hopeful "predictions during the civil rights era that [BEV] would soon be a necessary casualty of school desegregation" (1988, xix). It was thought that interaction between blacks and whites would erase BEV. But, as Gates observes, "[BEV] has not, however, disappeared. . . . The black vernacular has assumed the singular role of the black person's ultimate sign of difference, a blackness of the tongue" (xix). Efforts to make BEV "a necessary casualty" also remain. These efforts result not in the erasure of the language—or even in its reduction—but in too many human casualties, students who fail or who have become jaded by education.

We know, then, that mid- to late nineteenth-century American ideologies of class and literacy were prejudiced against black speech. We should recognize that we accede to this prejudice when we apply those ideologies to the instruction of blacks or, for that matter, to white students. On the matter of literacy and white students, scholars have long observed, particularly in the famous document "Students' Right to Their Own Language" (1974), that Americans tend to believe that whites speak and write better than blacks when they really don't. Consequently, whites are often led to believe their speech is standard when really it's not. This state of affairs is being exposed because of its negative consequences for literacy practices in the workplace.[2]

It's not my intent to be too critical of teachers who genuinely want to do right by black students. I'm more critical of the prevailing ideologies of our educational system, which preclude all teachers from doing their best work with students. A. Suresh Canagarajah is the par-

ticular example I have in mind. He's a remarkably committed educator. Few can fill his big shoes when it comes to challenging linguistic and racial oppression, both nationally and internationally. Yet, like so many of us, he's required to participate in and perpetuate the practices he fights against. In his 1997 essay, "Safe Houses in the Contact Zone," he argues that teachers should promote "safe houses" for black students in our classrooms. For him safe houses are opportunities for black students to develop confidence in their educational abilities by associating with one another and using BEV with each other without penalty.

He's building on the critic Mary Louise Pratt's notion, which she first expressed in a 1990 speech and published the next year, that "safe houses" are necessary "social and intellectual spaces where groups can constitute themselves as horizontal, homogeneous, sovereign communities with high degrees of trust, shared understandings, temporary protection from legacies of oppression" (1999, 595). These spaces are essential because classrooms are contact zones, "social spaces," according to Pratt, "where cultures meet, clash, and grapple with each other, often in contexts of highly asymmetrical relations of power, such as colonialism, slavery" (584). In a way, safe houses can be likened to rooms where a li'l bro receives encouragement, is heartened by his peers, who also help him develop strategies to survive his ongoing battle with Big Brother.

Safe houses, according to Canagarajah, provide at least two big benefits to black students: They allow students to develop a sense of racial security in a zone that opposes them. And, in terms of literacy, students can learn and practice what Pratt calls "the literate arts (think here of linguistic martial arts) of the contact zone," which will help them to engage in "critique, collaboration, bilingualism, mediation, parody, denunciation, imaginary dialogue, [and] vernacular expression," among other techniques (1999, 590). These arts are expressed in a long letter (in the form of a book) that Pratt says an Andean li'l bro, Felipe Guaman Poma de Ayala, wrote to Big Brother, in this case, King Philip III of Spain, "after the fall of the Inca empire to Spain." Guaman Poma's letter, she says, was "written in two languages," "in

a mixture of Quecha and ungrammatical, expressive Spanish" (1999, 584–85).

That Quecha, which apparently was Guaman Poma's native language, "was not thought of as a written language" and those who used it were considered illiterate, is important in this context. It reflects what we think about BEV and arguments against its use. It also reflects the consequences of restricting its use. Because of his writing style and dominant perceptions of it, not only in Spain but also later in America, it took 350 years for Guaman Poma's letter to be recognized as the "extraordinary intellectual tour de force that it was" (Pratt 1999, 584). Texts like Guaman Poma's, writes Pratt, "often constitute a marginalized group's point of entry into the dominant circuits of print culture" (586). If we recall Mica and her teachers' perceptions of her writing, we see the direct application. The writing classroom is a "dominant circuit of print culture," and students from oppressed groups often write papers in two languages that could be just as brilliant as Guaman Poma's letter. But black students' writing is often subject to the same highly indeterminate fate as Guaman Poma's text. Their writing is not given the reading it deserves at the time when a fair reading could do the most good. This is where Canagarajah's course reenters.

The class that Canagarajah describes was part of a university program designed to "induct [minority] students gradually into the 'academic culture' in order to improve their retention rate" (1997, 174). Ten black students took the course, and he observed all of them using a "range of discourses" in a safe house that they constructed while participating in an electronic discussion group that their teacher set up. He describes their use of BEV in the safe house as dazzling. As a result "the attempts [that black students] make to construct hybrid texts is immensely useful" to writing instruction, he says (191). He further suggests that teachers should assure students "that their vernacular discourses are valued academically, and that they don't have to be practiced in secret" (193). This is a version of the code-meshing argument that I make.

The problem I want to point out is this: while Canagarajah's recognition of the implicit value of BEV is commendable, the fact is,

judging from the evidence he provides, his students did practice their vernacular "in secret." He required his black students to dissect their language habits, to separate BEV from WEV. He writes: "The approach I adopted for my course called for a sensitivity to the vernacular discourses and communicative conventions that minority students bring to the classroom, while enabling them to gradually cross discourse boundaries and get acquainted with the academic conventions" (1997, 175). His approach seems promising, but in the next sentences we learn what this "sensitivity to their vernacular" means in relation to "academic conventions": "Although students are encouraged to employ their vernacular discourses *in their own community (and possibly in informal contexts in the academy)*, they are expected to master academic discourse to communicate successfully in college" (175; emphasis added). This is the separate-but-equal approach that is so standard, an approach that the linguist Elaine Richardson says creates detrimental circumstances for black students. "Once students realize that writing their words is not acceptable [in the larger university context]," she writes, "stereotype threat sets in and they get caught between two worlds, writing something that is neither [BEV] nor academic English but something else" (2004, 163).

This "something else" is exactly what Canagarajah's students produced. "In comparison to the verbal disputes conducted [among themselves]," he writes, the essays they wrote for him "lacked conviction and force" (1997, 186). While analyzing this writing failure in one student essay, he says he found the same failure in most. "Several other students failed to sustain the debate or rebut opposing views forcefully," he writes, "as they did in the person-centered arguments [among themselves]" (187). Canagarajah's approach set off the very disparity he observes. What's worse, his approach may have contributed to his students' accusing one of their peers of "acting white" because she received a better grade than they did on one of her essays (178). This accusation is a fitting description of the circumstances that Canagarajah stipulated. He required students to exclude BEV from their papers, consequently contradicting his own avowed wish to respect it. So, because the student accused of "acting white" had demonstrated traditional black speech and behaviors with her peers, her

writing performance was perceived as her attempt to act white, a show of her mastery of white language patterns.

Actually, it's hard to tell what linguistic approach the student accused of "acting white" uses because Canagarajah doesn't provide any excerpts from her paper. But it's not hard to argue that "acting white," at least in this case, is not an effect of a black inferiority complex or of blacks' wrongly thinking that school is only for whites. Instead, it's an effect of racialization, where behaviors considered to be white, like academic prose, are presented as superior by teachers because universities stipulate it. Even though I believe that Canagarajah ultimately provides good suggestions for teaching literacy to black students, I also believe his approach contributed to his students' viewing each other suspiciously—in racially segregated terms. It would seem that since Canagarajah framed his course by using the work of Pratt, which provides an example of a code-meshed text and the literate arts that produced it, he should have started where he ended. Instead, he first imposes code switching, then argues for code meshing. Some may say to this situation what I imagine some say about the severely delayed but ultimate arrival of Guaman Poma's letter: "It's better late than never."

In the case of many black students, however, late *is* never. This is why I argue for code meshing. If the modern-day introductory writing classroom is really to become a site of class transformation for first-year college students, then the middle-class project of that classroom has to function best for poor people and especially for poor black people. Right now it irrefutably does not. To make it so, teachers must challenge the myopic concepts of standard English and academic prose, reject code switching, and embrace code meshing straight from the beginning. Why should we expect anything different than hybrid speech and writing that mixes dialects anyway? And what's so wrong with hybrid discourse? Might it not arguably have some advantages over purer discourses, if there are purer discourses? And if students are eager and willing to accept our instruction, shouldn't we be willing to help them code mesh?

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Besides getting to the bottom of racialization, the major hurdle, of course, is to get academic institutions and the larger society to call

a halt to the moratorium on BEV. This is important because teachers who are eager to accept a proposal like code meshing will continue to feel constrained by institutional and societal beliefs and expectations. Fortunately, however, there is a move in writing textbooks and curricula to privilege the integration of diverse language habits within the standard lingua franca.[3] This should help institutionalize code meshing and provide strategies to implement it.

Until then, teachers like Harley, Cannon, Canagarajah, and me, who function as agents of an educational system that means to sustain and not change or even add BEV to the standard lingua franca, will continue to experience intra- and interpersonal conflict. We'll continue to disagree about whether to change the system or help a few students to navigate it. We will also continue to be ambivalent about whether to condone BEV or condemn it. And, worse, we will continue to be involuntarily oppressive of those who speak BEV, particularly those who personify or speak it to a greater degree than others. These are students who comprise most of the casualties of literacy. If we follow Diane's advice, we'll continue to require the impossible from them—that they save themselves.

Postscript

I can think of no better way to end this chapter than to call readers' attention to a scholar who has shifted from using code switching as a teaching strategy to advocating for code meshing. In his 2006 article "The Place of World Englishes in Composition: Pluralization Continued," A. Suresh Canagarajah borrows and enlarges upon my term *code meshing* (see chapter 4, n9, and Young 2004, 713n9). He writes that code meshing allows for the integration of diverse varieties of English in academic writing. Referencing his 1997 study, which I critiqued in this chapter and in which he required his black students to code switch, he writes, "I have experienced certain difficulties in implementing this approach. I have found that minority students are reluctant to hold back their Englishes even for temporary reasons." He goes on to say that asking students to withhold their dialects from their speech and writing "means 'acting white' for my African Ameri-

can students." And, for students from his native Sri Lanka, he says, it means "putting a show" (2006, 597). Canagarajah is a model teacher who has listened to the voices of his students and has adjusted his pedagogy and teaching ideology so that more of them will succeed. It is my hope that more teachers will follow his example.