

“Whiteboys”: Contact Zone, Pedagogy, Internalized Racism, and Composition at the University’s Gateway

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This chapter addresses my struggles to understand the ways in which two male students of color wrote about whiteness in my first year composition course, a core curriculum “gateway” course at a large urban Catholic university. These students both attended largely white secondary schools after primary school experiences with other children of color. Through their use of language, and their thinking about race and class, I argue that these students are using their own life narratives to complicate constructions of whiteness in two educational spaces where Mary Louise Pratt’s “pedagogical arts of the contact zone” are at work—the secondary schools they write about, and the college composition classroom in which they produce that writing. This chapter describes the writing they produced, my responses to that writing, and the implications for teaching race in composition.

Storytelling in a Composition Contact Zone

This chapter addresses my struggles to understand the ways in which two male students of color wrote about whiteness in my first year composition course, a core curriculum “gateway” course at a large urban Catholic university. The chapter is not a full-scale endorsement of these students’ writing on race. In fact, I found their writing disturbing at times, and questioned myself about how to respond to it during the semester. Neither is this chapter a critique of their views on race, accompanied by my ideas about how to “fix” them. Instead, I want to look hard at the work they produced and the views they articulated in a classroom that became—in part by design and in part by circumstance—a place where whiteness became an enduring theme in the writing, reading, and discussion of several students. I am deeply invested in understanding the texts they produced in my class, which offer insight into the racist and antiracist dynamics at work in a class like mine. Further,

I believe their texts offer insight into the lives of college students of color who have attended largely white secondary schools.

These particular students were part of a course that I taught in the spring of 2011. They used whiteness as a complex term for narrating their families' aspirations toward upward mobility—through attending “white” schools, moving to “white” neighborhoods, and using “white” language. The central assignment of the semester was to write an extended personal narrative “book” on an event that was crucial to determining their current identities (Blitz & Hurlbert, 1998). The class read each student's narrative and offered feedback in whole-class writing workshops. I asked them to read previous students' narratives—and each other's—as the course “texts.” Students also conducted fieldwork on their own uses of language as they composed their narratives. I met with each student individually three times to discuss their writing. In their final portfolio reflections, they described their experiences writing, reading, and revising these narratives, and then described themselves as writers. I taught this extended narrative project in an effort to increase student engagement in their own writing, to build classroom community, and to shake up students' assumptions about “college English.” Throughout the fieldwork, conferencing, and workshops that occurred along the way, I hoped to promote an ethos of ownership and idiosyncratic energy in student writing, so that students would leave my class invested in the idea of themselves as writers able to respond to a range of writing challenges. I further hoped—though this hope was less well-developed at this point in my teaching of composition—that students would interrogate the larger social patterns and issues that formed the context for the stories they narrated.

Rhetorical risk-taking became something of a norm in this particular section of the course, where students praised each other's texts for their “honesty” and “rawness,” and for going “all in” in workshop discussions. As issues of language, class, sexuality, and race emerged in writing and discussions, conversations sometimes became confrontational or loaded, although my other sections of the course would sail through similar texts and topics in fairly placid order. Early in the semester, after reading a narrative by my former student about coming out of the closet to herself and her mother, three students chose to use their writing workshops to come out as either gay or bisexual to the entire class. At a Catholic university where recent efforts to start a Gay-Straight Alliance had been publicly rebuffed by the administration, these coming-out narratives represented a move into uncertain territory, a particularly bold act of self-identifying against institutional sanction. (The university has since recognized a campus group for GLBTQ students and allies.)

The class of 26 students was among my most heterogeneous in terms of race and ethnicity. Nine students identified as white, six as African American or Afro-Caribbean, three as Latin@, two as Arab American, two as Asian American, two as Indian American, one as Chinese, and one simply as “brown.” The ethnic diversity

of this class at first belies the segregation of the university's five colleges along race and class lines: five of the white students and one Latina student were enrolled in the liberal arts college; five Asian and Southeast Asian students and two white students were enrolled in the health careers college; two white students, one Asian student, and my self-identified “brown” student were enrolled in the business college; six African American or Afro-Caribbean students, two Arab American students, and one Latina student came from the college of professional studies. Of the nine students in the college of professional studies, five were enrolled in this college's “Liberal Studies” program, to which students are admitted contingently to the university when their applications do not qualify them for admission into the programs to which they initially applied. All the non-Asian male students of color in the class were part of the Liberal Studies group. I do not know the extent to which students were aware of each other's program of study, though I do know they tended to sit with, and seemed to already know, other students from their own colleges. In some other sections of the course, a majority of students come from the same college or a particular program within a college, and those sections tend to look much more homogeneous.

Students wrote about a wide range of topics in their narrative projects, from the death of a friend to a car accident to experiences with bullying. The most common topic in that section of the course—more common than the three coming-out narratives—was that of being a student of color at a majority-white high school. The five students writing on this topic were all male. They included two African American and one Latino student from the Liberal Studies program, an Indian American student from the physician assistant program, and the self-identified “brown” student, who was a finance major in the business school. They were from New York City, California, New Jersey, Long Island, and South Carolina, and had grown up and attended school in suburban and urban areas. They attended Catholic, Christian, and public high schools. Most of them had attended primary school with majorities of students of color, but one had attended majority-white schools in elementary school. Although they were all somewhat familiar with each other's writing, and some requested each other as writing partners, this cohort did not agree on much of anything having to do with the racial politics of language: Freddie hated “correct grammar”; Lamar claimed he avoided “slang”; Dante wrote in what he called “Black English.” Nor did they have much common ground on the racial politics of identity: Chris and Dante defined themselves as part of non-white subcultures; Lamar imagined people considering him a “whiteboy”; Freddie occasionally passed for white; and Syed ranted about how much easier his life would be if he were white like all his friends.

I will write about two members of this group whose work was particularly troubling to me, Freddie and Lamar. These two students had been deemed “white” by their high school peers and they both appeared to desire distance from the

disadvantages of being people of color. Their discourse about their experiences and about writing itself appeared to me to voice a great deal of internalized racism, or acceptance of negative views about people of color. At the same time, their writing and discussion also became places to interrogate and challenge racism, and to look for rhetorical strategies that fit their purposes in narrating their experiences in majority-white schools. In what follows I will introduce the scholars I have found most useful as guides for navigating the contested terrain onto which I believe we stumbled as a class, and then focus on Freddie and Lamar in two separate, but related, case studies of students of color narrating their relationship with “whiteness.” Finally, I will reflect on my struggles to read and respond to their writing, and how it has impacted my approach to teaching about race.

Marc Lamont Hill, education scholar, public figure, and antiracist activist, articulates my hopes for creating a space of shared storytelling that can offer insight into oppressive social structures evident in students’ lives. Asking educators to “reimagine the classroom as a space in which teachers and students can ‘risk the self’ through individual and collective storytelling,” Hill calls for more practitioner research into storytelling’s role in critical antiracist pedagogy:

Although scholarship in fields such as composition theory and critical race theory advocate the use of storytelling, there remains a need to develop educational theory and practice that prepare us for the benefits, challenges, and consequences of enabling personal disclosures within the classroom. . . . [T]he failure to take such considerations seriously severely undermines our ability to transform the classroom into a more safe, democratic, productive, and culturally responsive space. (2009, p. 97)

I offer my account as a contribution to the larger educational project of developing the theory and practice needed to support the kind of work called for by Hill.

On a similar note, Beverly Daniel Tatum, scholar, administrator, and race relations expert, calls for a practice of “creating identity stories” in her vision of effective interracial education in a post-Brown era (2007, p. 32). She suggests these identity stories require teachers’ curiosity and an open-minded stance toward student texts: “Affirming identity is about asking who [students] are, and where they want to go, and conveying a fundamental belief that they can get there—through the development of their intellect and their critical capacity to think” (2007, p. 32). I saw particular potential in my diverse classroom for a productive sharing of identities and experiences across my students’ re-segregated secondary schooling experiences post-Brown v. Board of Education. The act of narrating stories from their segregated schooling experiences as part of their entrance into college seemed calculated to deepen their self-awareness and cultural competence, as well as to raise uncomfortable questions.

Tatum cautions, “We cannot control the stories others are telling—but we must take responsibility for the identity stories we tell” (2007, p. 32). Hoping to begin the semester with my own identity story, I asked the class to workshop a piece I’d written before we started discussing their own. I wrote about my challenges as a young, white middle school teacher in a majority white school, confronting my early adolescent students’ ideas about race and sexuality in my first years in charge of a classroom. I hoped my narrative would model the visibility of whiteness in all of our educational experiences, and dispel the idea that there are no “racial issues” in classrooms where most students are white. I hoped it would encourage students to look at the racial landscape of their own schooling and adolescence more generally. That semester, the students who took me up on this invitation to interrogate whiteness were all students of color who had spent time in white-dominated educational spaces.

In addition to Hill and Tatum’s calls to engage students in critical antiracist storytelling, I have been helped in my attempts to interpret and respond to student narratives by antiracist scholars from a range of disciplines. The first group includes scholars in composition and rhetoric who are building on Mary Louise Pratt’s 1991 call for a “pedagogical arts of the contact zone” (p. 40). Pratt’s vision of classrooms as contact zones, that is “social spaces where cultures meet, clash, and grapple with each other, often in contexts of highly asymmetrical relations of power, such as colonialism, slavery, or their aftermaths” (1991, p. 34, allows me to see my students’ texts as speaking to and speaking through “acting white,” a trope for upward mobility through deracination. Narrating complex stories of their experiences with allegations of “acting white,” my students at times affirm and at other times challenge the oppressive equation of class and race hierarchies built into this trope.

Pratt’s particular term for texts produced by culturally marginalized writers in contact zones is “autoethnography.” An autoethnographic text is one

in which people undertake to describe themselves in ways that engage with representations others have made of them. Thus if ethnographic texts are those in which European metropolitan subjects represent to themselves their others (usually their conquered others), autoethnographic texts are representations that the so-defined others construct *in response to* or in dialogue with those texts. (1991, p. 35)

Pratt’s conception of autoethnographic texts is particularly useful to me in understanding the potential and limitations of asking student writers to navigate intricate rhetorical power dynamics about “risking the self” in the “highly asymmetrical power relations” of the university gateway. The course’s extremely mixed crowd faces a white Ph.D.-wielding female instructor who casts all kinds of shadows across that gateway. Just a glance at my ratemyprofessor.com page offers a giddy range of

readings of my teaching persona, my pedagogical agenda, and its execution. In such loaded contexts, Pratt describes autoethnographic texts as “a selective collaboration with and appropriation of idioms of the metropolis or the conqueror . . . merged or infiltrated to varying degrees with indigenous idioms to create self-representations intended to intervene in metropolitan modes of understanding” (1991, p. 35). My difficulties reading and responding to my students’ narratives make much more sense when I acknowledge the complexity of the tasks they undertook as autoethnographers, and the uncertainty of my role in its reception, implicated as I am in “metropolitan modes of understanding.” Viewing my students’ troubling and contradictory texts as autoethnographic has been immensely helpful to me, since those troubles are precisely where they may offer a map to the biologically fictional, yet socially real racial identities they engage.

The second group of scholars who have helped me think through these student texts work in Critical Race Theory (CRT), sociolinguistics, and ethnolinguistics. These scholars map radical linguistic reorientations toward capitalist, racist, sexist and homophobic doxa embedded in academic literacies. Their body of work demands attention to and analysis of the multiple emergent literacies of writers in pedagogical—among other—cultural arenas (Alim, 2006; Campbell, 2007; Gilyard, 2011; Guerra, 2004; Martinez, 2014; Smitherman, 1977; Young, 2009). As a part of their methodology, many of these scholars move between social analysis and personal narrative in their own writing. Their attention to lived experiences of race is inextricable from their broader analysis. Their work has encouraged me to challenge my students to produce a kind of explicitly critical autoethnography. Critical Race Theory’s concept of “counterstory” is related to that of autoethnography, using experiences with micro- and macroaggressions to illuminate the daily intricacies of racist logic, as well as to formulate antiracist analytic responses grounded in lived experience (Gilyard, 2011; Guerra, 2004; Kynard, 2010; Villanueva, 1993; Young, 2009). The deployment of multiple genres and literacies in CRT resonates with Pratt’s call for a “literate arts of the contact zone,” including but not limited to “autoethnography, transculturation, critique, collaboration, bilingualism, mediation, parody, denunciation, imaginary dialogue, vernacular expression” (1991, p. 37). My students’ writing over the course of a semester—to me, to each other, to imagined and real audiences outside our class—showcases a stunning range of formality and informality, use of languages, wit, inspiration, and strategy. They appear to be writing in a contact zone, and in modes that lend themselves to CRT practice and analysis, and I use tools from CRT in my efforts to respond productively to this highly uneven body of writing.

Finally, I am influenced by composition scholars engaging with whiteness studies (Ratcliffe, 2005; Ryden & Marshall, 2012). Heavily influenced by Critical Race Theory, such scholars propose their stake in antiracist scholarship as follows: “[r]ather than turn the gaze outward to the constellation of ‘othered’ racialized

subjectivities, the study of whiteness intends to focus on the pernicious, unnamed source of that othering” (Ryden & Marshall, 2012, p. 14). The project they embark on—that of a “mapping of whiteness” (2012, p. 9)—offers a provocative model for what my students set out to do. Ryden critiques personal narratives as a way for white people to “come out” about their whiteness, to discern their silent privileging and then somehow atone through the narrative itself. And my students’ narratives certainly articulate an investment in whiteness. However, my students come at whiteness from a profoundly different angle, as people of color for whom whiteness has always been visible, and tied up with ideas about upward mobility. A potential benefit of their writing in the contact zone of our college composition classroom is the rhetorical opportunity they created to undo the monolithic nature of “whiteness” itself.

In what follows, I will look at how my students’ texts engage the notion of “going white” as they attempt to get ahead. As I tell their stories, I will also narrate my own responses to their writing. Vulnerable to what Pratt calls “the perils of writing in the contact zone”—“[m]iscomprehension, incomprehension, dead letters, unread masterpieces, absolute heterogeneity of meaning” (1991, p. 37)—these texts require careful reading. I struggled to respond quickly and creatively to these students’ writing, especially when they appeared to articulate internalized racism and a positive investment in white privilege, or “whiteness” more generally. I will speculate on the implications of our interactions for a deeper understanding of the allegations, assets, and attributes of “whiteness” in a composition class invested in the liberatory potential of writing. In my conclusion, I will discuss changes in the ways I use racial narrative writing in my classes, in part resulting from my struggle to read these texts.

Freddie: “Whiteboy”

Whiteboy was my nickname—not because of my skin tone but because of who I was. I am a Puerto Rican and Spanish kid who was born and raised till about 13 in Bushwick, Brooklyn. Coming from Bushwick I was expected to be ghetto. My parents weren’t like other parents. They molded me to live in a way that earned me the name of Whiteboy.

Freddie’s dogged rhetorical embrace of whiteness posed a puzzle to me in reading his autoethnographic project. Solving this puzzle requires understanding how he read the rhetorical situation of our class, and how this class became the occasion for his articulation of a complex, contested depiction of himself as a “whiteboy.”

“Whiteness” serves many rhetorical purposes for Freddie. Throughout his

narrative, Freddie depicts race as an incredibly fluid aspect of identity, one that is highly interchangeable with class and language. Whiteness, for Freddie, is first and foremost a sign of wealth: his parents give him an “expensive” high school education at a “white school.” It is an asset: his father “proves [Freddie’s] nickname” by buying him a fancy car. Whiteness is also a way of speaking or writing: his “mad proper” way of talking, learned at that expensive private school. It is a way of not speaking or writing: his inability to speak Spanish. It is a jab: an outsider stance in Bushwick and Washington Heights, an accusation of community betrayal by “going white.”

Skin color rarely comes up in Freddie’s descriptions of whiteness. Instead, whiteness is a trope for privilege of all kinds, a way to signal an allegiance to affluence. He uses the term to represent race and class mobility as something inscribed on his body and in his speech, “not because of my skin tone but because of who I was.” Here, he seems to agree with Vershawn Ashanti Young, who asserts that “passing today involves not looking white but acting white” (2009, p. 46). Young further lays out the dilemmas for people of color—he speaks of African Americans but I think the point applies to Freddie as well—when upward class mobility becomes equated with deracination. Young locates “blacks in the impossible position of either having to try to be white or forever struggling to prove we’re black enough” (2009, p. 6). Freddie’s take on whiteness as a form of privilege, as I read it through Young, is thus significantly different from the white privilege of white people, who are notoriously unaware of their racial privilege. Rather than experiencing the notorious invisibility of whiteness, Freddie sees whiteness everywhere.

Freddie frames his racial narrative as one of relentless assimilation into “whiteness.” He describes his family leaving a poor, largely Latino Brooklyn neighborhood for upward mobility in a middle- and working-class Italian American Queens neighborhood through Catholic school, new affluence, and new language. In places, Freddie’s narrative endorses his father’s encouragement to “pass” as Italian in order to receive the benefits of being perceived as “white.” However, Freddie’s assimilation narrative—and his end-of-semester reflective letter to me about his writing—also contain moments of critique of his family’s movement “out of the ghetto” and into a “whiteness” he depicts as geographic, economic and linguistic.

Language in Freddie’s texts consistently marks a place where assimilation into whiteness won’t “take.” He inserts Latino voices throughout this piece—largely voices from Bushwick, Brooklyn and Washington Heights, Manhattan despite his move to Howard Beach, Queens, and all of them critical of his increasing “whiteness.” In languages that resemble the “indigenous idioms” of autoethnographic texts, Freddie articulates a pull toward hip-hop literacy and Spanish in passages in which his assimilation into whiteness is not as totalizing as elsewhere. In Freddie’s multiple deployments of whiteness, I read what Pratt calls “selective collaboration

with and appropriation of” a range of languages, including the “white” English associated with Freddie’s Catholic high school, the Spanish he does not speak, and what H. Sami Alim calls “Hip Hop Nation Language.”

“People treat you a little better when they think you’re white.”

My father always told me our last name was an advantage to us because it was very closely related to an Italian name. Plus my looks were more of an Italian-white looks than the hood looks. I couldn’t complain. I would enjoy the boost from my last name in life.

When Freddie’s father takes him to a car dealer to buy him a BMW, the salesman treats them in a way that Freddie describes as luxurious and highly respectful, offering them coffee and calling his father “Mr.” The salesman, who Freddie takes to be Arab, also refers to them flying their “Italian flag” when he sees their address in Howard Beach. Freddie notices his father does not correct the assumption that they are Italian. Here is the conversation that follows:

“Dad, how come you didn’t say we’re Spanish when the guy called us Italian?”

“I always learned people treat you a little better when they think you’re white. You always get a little more and further than Spanish or black people may. And because of our last name a lot of people think we are Italian because it just sounds Italian. And you and me look it. So why not take the perks that an Italian man would receive.”

I understood the reasoning he had between it, and I really agreed to it. Like I felt yea they do get better treatment and if I can pull it off why not. It was better to be considered to be Italian. At least when you’re considered white most of the time in common situations there is no questioning. So that statement from my dad is how my life has been lived in since. If my appearance gives me a step ahead in life then I’ll take it, it can only help me.

This scene endorses literal “passing” for Italian—an immigrant group that has been launched more deeply into the realm of “whiteness” than Latin@s (Lipsitz, 1998; Roediger, 2006). In a way, Freddie’s father simply accelerates the historical

“whitening” of Puerto Ricans along this route toward whiteness, in the same way he does by referring to himself as “Spanish” rather than “Latino.” I had a tough time responding to this aspect of Freddie’s narrative. I am deeply opposed to the racial labeling of selected ethnic groups as “white” in order to offer them the privileges of citizenship, while withholding citizenship from other groups labeled as “non-white.” Freddie’s endorsement of his father’s erasure of his “Spanish” culture reads to me like a blatant moment of internalized racism in Freddie’s text, one that feeds into a history of white supremacy, anti-immigrant politics, and anti-Blackness. However, a vision of my class as a contact zone precludes my explicitly shutting down such views. Further, as a beneficiary of white privilege myself, I am not in a strong position to encourage others to turn their backs on such privilege. By encouraging Freddie to critique his father’s adoption of the perks of whiteness, would I be suggesting that those perks should be reserved for “real” white people like myself? Of course my desired target is white privilege, but no one in the room has a clean relationship with that privilege. Reading this text, and deciding how to respond in a public workshop, I found myself in a deeply uncomfortable, absurd position as a white teacher hoping to create space for students—especially students of color—to explore their racial identities in writing. By not responding, I was concerned about appearing to endorse the narrative of assimilation Freddie laid out. By responding, I was concerned about coopting the interpretation of his experience. This would violate my aspirations to create space for him to engage dominant narratives of racial identity with his own. Holding back seemed necessary in a classroom I conceived of as a contact zone, but I was highly dubious about leaving his words out there uncontested.

As it turned out, Freddie’s text eventually addressed some of the tensions I experienced as a reader. Into his occasionally triumphal narrative of assimilation into middle-class “whiteness,” Freddie intersperses several choruses of critical voices from Bushwick. When he imagines the neighbors talking about his family’s move to Howard Beach, he suspends their imagined comments on the page. These disembodied communal critiques endorse his assertions elsewhere that “whiteness” is about moving out and selling out, geographically, culturally and economically:

“They think they better they live in a white neighborhood”

“They don’t even consider themselves Spanish anymore”

“That’s what happens when you get a little money they leave the hood and live up somewhere else and don’t share the wealth”

Freddie doesn’t comment on these voices, which sharply contradict his embrace elsewhere of his father’s pursuit of passing for white. Instead, he simply inserts these critical voices into the text. Almost dialectically, he offers multiple stances on

assimilation, or what he calls “going white.” This also happens elsewhere in his text, in a scene that appears to parallel the “neighborhood” quotations above. Freddie narrates a scene of dialogue with another voice from the neighborhood.

“Yo fred, that school you going to turning you into a whiteboy huh?”

“I don’t get what you mean, I’m the same person,” I’d say.

“Well you probably cant tell but the way you speak and act aint the same you mad proper and shit.”

Freddie puts the awareness of his newly-“white” language in his old friend’s mouth, rather than his own. His questioner’s assertion—“you probably cant tell”—appears accurate, since Freddie responds to the initial allegation of being a whiteboy with an essentialized “I’m the same person,” requiring further explanation of the changes in “the way you speak and act.” Here, Freddie assumes a colorblind stance, often associated with whiteness’s invisibility (usually to white people). He portrays his own failure to recognize his racially-marked language. On the surface, its recognition comes from a disembodied voice from his old neighborhood.

However, belying this naïve posture, Freddie’s transcription of the conversation replicates the racialization of language that his interlocutor asserts. On the page, Freddie actually transcribes his own words differently than he does the other speaker’s. In the two framing lines of the passage above, he employs traditional means of rendering “Black English”—omitting the verb to be (“that school . . . turning you into a white boy”; “you mad proper”). Such omissions in Black and white English are discussed in depth by Smitherman (1977). In his own speech, however, he uses standard contractions of verbs (“I don’t get”; “I’m the same person”). Similarly, he does not use a capital letter on the proper noun “fred” in his friend’s speech, or end punctuation (“the way you speak and act aint the same you mad proper and shit”), whereas his own speech is capitalized (two “I”s), and he places a comma between his two spoken phrases to punctuate them more formally (“I don’t know what you mean, I’m the same person”). Freddie employs two different sets of punctuation rules in this paragraph, creating tension in his avowed lack of awareness of the linguistic difference his friend describes. It also raises the possibility that—consciously or unconsciously—he presents his own voice differently in a text written for school than he does the voices from his old neighborhood.

Freddie’s fluid moves back and forth between “proper” and “improper” grammar strike me as a form of what Juan Guerra calls “transcultural repositioning,” a blending of rhetorical strategies and codes to navigate multiple identities and writing contexts (2004, p. 8). On the surface of his narrative, Freddie endorses a trajectory of passing into whiteness to achieve a level of educational and

economic privilege. Yet in scenes like the one quoted above, this Latino writer demonstrates a nuanced sense of both the “Black” and “white” linguistic codes he has been engaging, and—through the voice of his friend—a tacit critique of passing. This blending of two systems of punctuation and capitalization also looks like what Vershawn Ashanti Young calls “code-meshing,” which “allows black people to play both the black and white keys on the piano at the very same time, creating beautiful linguistic performances that will hopefully help relieve double consciousness” (2009, p. 60). Freddie may be working out the different ways of thinking about race and language in this passage through his use of “white” and “Black” syntax.

If so, I believe this juxtaposition of opposed views on whiteness points to what Jeffrey Maxson calls “the most compelling insight of Pratt’s work: that language users write (or talk) themselves into and through unfriendly language environments by combinations of assimilation and resistance” (2005, p. 25). If we take my English composition class as an “unfriendly language environment”—and I will soon get to Freddie’s clear statement that he found English class to be so—then transcultural repositioning is one of his tools for surviving the task of narrating his racial identity in hostile terrain. In Freddie’s autoethnographic text, endorsements of assimilation into whiteness and critical resistance to that assimilation exist side by side, in his wielding of words and syntax.

Freddie’s final Bushwick critic is the harshest. When Freddie visits his old neighborhood in his new BMW, an acquaintance he does not know well challenges him with this analysis of his social mobility. (In this passage “this shit” refers to Freddie’s car.)

“You left the hood to go white? White boy school, now got this shit. Why do you even come back to the neighborhood to show off. You aint like us. You don’t even talk like us anymore . . .”

Freddie uses this hostile criticism as a turning point in his narrative, constructing a “return” to his heritage along two lines. First, he narrates a return to the urban geography he had left behind for a white ethnic enclave on the edge of the city. Second, he describes returning to Spanish and urban vernacular language communities he had left behind to join an English-only, “white” language community.

Freddie’s assimilation received another sharp critique during the class’s workshop of some early pages of his narrative. One Latina student in particular, upon reading that his parents failed to teach him Spanish as a child, became incensed. Her take was a very definitive echo of the Bushwick voices in Freddie’s piece. She said by cutting him off from his language, they had created a problem for all Latin@s. The whole class became very animated, with many students weighing in about whether or not their parents had taught them a “home language” other

than English, with a decided lack of consensus in the room. Both the voices in Freddie’s text and the voices in our room reinforced to me that he was writing in a contact zone, a space he and other students might have initially read as one supportive of assimilation, a space for students of color to “act white,” but where the reception of texts turned out to be “highly indeterminate” because it is “addressed to both a metropolitan audience and the speaker’s own community” (Pratt, 1991, p 35).

Spanish: “Now I was the Spanish white boy working in the Spanish ghetto with no idea of how to speak Spanish.”

Freddie’s narrative ends with a double return—back to his home language and back to a “ghetto,” though this time a new one. Although Freddie describes his critic as off-base, proposing to “let the hate sizzle in him,” he doesn’t want to “give people reason to talk shit” like this. So he gets a summer job as a Washington Heights lifeguard as a “cover up”—something to make it look like he earns his own way. He spends his last summer before college working with largely Dominican lifeguards, and—according to his personal narrative—learning Spanish.

They started teaching me the ways of their neighborhood and learning how to speak Spanish. . . . [T]hey would include me in conversations with them, pushing me to use the little Spanish I knew in order to learn. We grew close as friends, but they also grew close to me as my teachers. My car, my neighborhood I grew up in, my look, none of that mattered anymore. They were opening the doors for me to learn about my ethnicity that I wasn’t able to pick up myself in the past. We went to parties, I was able to pick up girls now at the pool since I was learning Spanish speaker. And the girls even found it cute that I had such broken Spanish. I told them I was learning and that the lifeguards were teaching me. . . . I grew a bond with people who thought of me as a white boy but not only that, they saw I had the potential in me.

Freddie’s narrative constructs a resolution to his dilemma as a Spanish white-boy that allows him to keep his car while learning Spanish in a new ghetto, one where he is not judged as a sell-out. His happy ending returns him to a “home language” away from home.

Attachment to Error

Freddie's narrative and his end-of-semester reflection invest a lot of energy in talking about "proper" language—the first sign of his "whiteness." While it marks him as "white" in Bushwick and Washington Heights, the pursuit of proper language—which I take to mean more or less "standard English"—oppresses him at school and as a reader and writer. In his final reflective letter to me, Freddie mentions frequently that he "hates English." While marked as different from his old friends in Bushwick by his "proper" language, Freddie's reflections on his writing expressed active distaste for "proper" language. He failed English in his junior year of high school and went to summer school, possibly because his own language was marked as non-white. He mentions many times the oppressive sensation of struggling to express himself in writing. If "proper" writing is "white," Freddie is not white at his new school. The remediation of his non-"white" language is marked at school as a failing point, and may contribute to his marginalization there, as he depicts it.

More than once, Freddie claims incorrect grammar as an essential part of his writing voice: "Though it may be very grammatically incorrect I enjoy using my voice and technique of getting the situation across. . . . I feel when pieces of writing are too correct or grammatically correct it bores me as a reader." Either he has taken my class's emphasis on holding off on attention to mechanics until late in the revision process to an absurd point, or Freddie is actually arguing for incorrect grammar as a rhetorical tool. He never defines exactly what he means, but he values editors who let him keep his "mistakes." He explains this in fieldnotes from a conference in the university's writing center: "I had many mistakes that needed help but he kept it cool with me . . . he didn't fight me about it." Freddie explicitly links his voice with his errors again in his notes here: "I told him I don't mind correcting my wrongs but at the end I still wanted my voice to be in the piece still so he understood that. He said my flows and topics were good ones."

I am tempted to read Freddie's attachment to error as a response to the emphasis on eradicating error in much secondary English instruction. Quite conceivably, Freddie could have encountered a writing curriculum focused on conforming to assimilated forms and rules, as modeled by largely white writers, when he arrived at his Catholic high school. Indeed, a brief look at the English Department curriculum of his high school's website reveals that no writers of color and only one female writer are included in the syllabi of English courses in grades 9 through 11. Further, the writing curriculum for all three of those years consists of "formal instruction in essay writing," beginning with "the five paragraph essay" in ninth grade. Two years after his experience failing English in eleventh grade and going through remediation in summer school, he describes English as a space where his voice has been taken away.

Hip-Hop: “I get lost in the music and find myself in the writing.”

Freddie’s articulation of resistance to correction occurred as he reflected on writing at the end of the semester. His reflections coincided with a new assertion that hip-hop music was a central influence on his writing, both as lyrical inspiration and as impetus to create original, resistant prose. At the end of the semester, I asked students to read H. Samy Alim’s “‘Bring it to the Ciphers’: Hip Hop Nation Language,” and to help me evaluate it as a tool for teaching future composition students about language. Responding to this piece, Freddie’s writing took an unusual turn to poetic enthusiasm: “I’m not one to enjoy English, but I read this piece like it was a menu at the restaurant with interest and hunger to learn more.” Freddie’s end-of-semester reflection ultimately asserted: “Only voices that help me when I write is voices that sing.” Citing Kanye West as his strongest influence, Freddie explains Kanye “gets my creative juices flowing from writing, to my memoir cover, to even my thoughts that occur before I write that help it to flow. He is known for his taking of chances in the public eye, and his unique sense of fashion and art.”

Unlike his personal narrative, Freddie’s reflections on his writing never refer directly to race. However, by making hip-hop music his inspiration, he may be referring to what Cecelia Cutler calls “the normativity of Blackness in Hip Hop . . . as a discourse that privileges the Black body and the Black urban street experience” (2009, p. 80). In fact, Cutler intriguingly suggests that DuBois’s “double consciousness conceivably plays a role in Hip Hop culture, but in the opposite direction” (2009, p. 79). If something like this is going on, Freddie is finding writing inspiration in a place where whiteness is marginalized, in sharp contrast to the kind of linguistic whiteness he was supposed to be seeking through his journey out of Bushwick.

Although Freddie cites hip-hop as a major influence on his writing, and his narrative explicitly raises the topic of altering his racial identity to obtain greater cultural capital, Freddie does not directly discuss the racial politics of his use of language, beyond his early invocation of his “white” speech. He uses the term “Black English” only when quoting another student who described his own writing using those words. Despite opportunities in course readings and discussions, Freddie is fairly muted on the racial dimension of hip-hop’s influence on him. He never gets more explicit than to say hip-hop is “about change in a society which claims to change everyday meanwhile there is standstills in so many different aspects out there.” Perhaps Freddie’s interest in this cultural form is no different than numerous white fans of hip-hop. His final engagement with language in his personal narrative offers a cryptic investment in linguistic innovation. He speculates that “the best quote . . . from my own words may be ‘If the world isn’t changing; at least language does.’”

In his personal narrative, Freddie's collage of assimilation and resistance can make him seem lost, easily co-opted, what Min-Zhan Lu calls a "discursive schizophrenic" (quoted in Guerra, 2004, p. 20). At the very least, he seems susceptible to influence as his narrative repeatedly repositions him vis-a-vis his critics and inspirations. On the other hand, his engagement with outside voices and influences creates a dialogic, multi-perspectival quality in his writing, as he experiments with language itself to work out his questions about identity and assimilation through the semester. Freddie's refusal to invest in error-free writing, his influence by hip-hop, and his recent interest in learning Spanish suggest that his pursuit of "whiteness" as a site of rhetorical privilege is multi-dimensional. The dialogic dynamic he creates enables him to voice conflicting views on whiteness throughout his narrative. In fact, Freddie puts almost all beliefs about the meaning of his "whiteness" in the mouths of other people, including a critique of his father's upward mobility and deracination. The range of these voices suggests to me that he is working something out here, constructing a racialized self out of materials that offer contradictory takes on class, race, language, and identity.

In a composition class where I asked students to identify what "language they speak" on the first day of the semester, and got answers ranging from "Spanglish" to "Flushing Chinese American" to "Brooklyn English" to "Black English" to "18 year old girl English" to "just normal English, I guess," Freddie was markedly on the terrain of a linguistic contact zone. His uneven, sometimes experimental textual response signaled to me that he registered the uncertainty of that terrain. Freddie's story, at least on the surface, privileges a narrative of racial whiteness, cultural assimilation and upward mobility. However, other aspects—including his eleventh-hour pursuit of Spanish, his reliance on hip-hop, and his voicing of friends' sentiments critical of his move to whiteness—resist the assimilationist thrust. To some extent, his uneven narrative is itself a contact zone for the perspectives and forces that bear on his journey of upward mobility and racial assimilation—an amalgam of conflicting cultures, discourses, and what Pratt would call "highly asymmetrical relations of power." As such, it is an instructive text for me as an aspiring antiracist teacher in a course often considered the gateway to upward mobility and linguistic assimilation.

What the Hell is a Lamar?

Now my voice I think is just an ordinary voice . . . of a black kid from the inner city, with the private school background in a suburban community, with both sides telling him he talks "different," with finding out that both sides say some stupid things

about each other, while he finds out that what people say about another group of people aren't always true. There you have it the voice and definition of a Lamar, an “ordinary” teenager.

—Lamar, final portfolio, “What the Hell is a Lamar?”

Lamar used his personal narrative essay—“Not-So Ghetto Boy”—to tell the story of a year in his life when he was caught between a poor neighborhood in Paterson, New Jersey and its neighboring wealthy suburban county; between his urban Catholic elementary school, where “I never even had a class that I could remember . . . that had a white kid in it,” and his predominantly white Catholic high school; and between his two parents, who split up that year, then got back together. Like Freddie, he wrote about his ambivalence at being perceived as a “whiteboy.” Unlike Freddie, although his texts expressed distance from other African American young people, ultimately he appeared to value community with other young men of color in his secondary school and in our class. Freddie’s ambivalence toward whiteness appeared to verge on “discursive schizophrenia,” as he voiced multiple conflicting attitudes toward language and other attributes of “whiteness.” In contrast, Lamar’s ambivalence toward whiteness seemed to place a value on hidden safe spaces for communication among African Americans in a predominately-white institution—what Carmen Kynard calls “hush harbors,” after Nunley (2010).

Lamar chose to write about this year of his life when he was suspended across urban/suburban, race, and class fault lines. As a result of his parent’s break-up, Lamar wrote that he, his mother, and his brother moved into his aunt’s apartment in an urban neighborhood and building where he was scared to spend time outside. At the same time, he went to his first year of high school—leaving the city by bus to attend a suburban Catholic school. He argued that the contrasts he experienced during this year made him a stronger person, able to overcome hardship.

As I did with Freddie, I struggled to respond to Lamar’s writing about both race and language early in the semester. In retrospect, I can see that as a progressive white writing teacher, I had two goals for Lamar—one conscious, the other less so—during the semester he was my student. My first goal was about writing. I wanted him to elaborate in his writing, to render his experience in vivid, compelling terms. Second, and much less consciously, I wanted him to experience positive racial identity development. At this point in my teaching, I had a sense that a university gateway class could harm African American male students in particular by offering assimilationist politics and ideas about writing that would interfere with their happiness, sense of self, and success. These ideas were not fully evident to me, except in my discomfort when his writing appeared to buy into many stereotypes about young Black people, and to endorse “acting white” as a strategy for Black male success. Internalized racism is not something I would address directly, as I would writing with “details”—constantly demanding more in the margins,

writing workshops and conferences—but I could, however, unconsciously and/or with good intention, treat him remedially as an African American student with defective consciousness, happier in the white suburban throng than among his own people. Jeffrey Maxson reports that “several studies demonstrate how contact zone approaches may open up clashes between teacher and student cultures, as students challenge that instructor’s commitment to such progressive values as cultural diversity and gender equity” (2005, p. 26). What looked like internalized racism in his personal narrative initially challenged my ability to listen to his story. Krista Ratcliffe would find this inability to listen a serious pedagogical block, since she argues effective “rhetorical listening” can operate as “interpretive invention,” forming a “code of cross-cultural conduct” between writers of color and white audiences (2005, p. 17). So while my story of Freddie’s semester is largely about how he repositioned his writing in relation to language and race, my story of Lamar’s semester is about how I tried to reposition myself as an audience for his writing about language and race.

My inability to read a student’s personal narrative whose politics struck me as problematic threatened to become an encounter in which a student was obliged to mimic what he perceives as my politics around identity and access to opportunity in order to do well in a college gateway class. This would have been one more case of Lu’s “discursive schizophrenia” (Guerra, 2004), which I think Lamar successfully avoided by the deliberate construction of rhetorical and interpersonal in-between spaces, and which he ultimately did describe to me in his final portfolio.

Stereotypes: “I’m too hood for the kids not from Paterson and not hood enough for the kids from Paterson.”

A lifelong urban Catholic school student, Lamar carried heavy stereotypes about the hardened, uncaring schools, buildings, and young people of Paterson, New Jersey’s public schools. He writes about these schools in the language of an outsider, accepting stereotypes of an unfamiliar place: “my local high schools . . . were really bad, filled with teachers and students who just don’t care. The schools had low test scores, high drop out rates, and a reputation for having a majority of the town’s gangs.” In my early readings of his writing, this description read like a list of stereotypes about urban public education. However, it is also important to acknowledge that he is describing real and difficult learning conditions in under-resourced schools.

Arriving at his wealthy suburban high school, his initial hope was to find a cohort of like-minded students from Paterson: “Maybe there will be more like me, maybe even some from the same city, people I could relate to.” He bristled at the thought that white, suburban, middle-class students would pre-judge students of

color from Paterson: “It kind of got on my nerves a little bit because of the stereotype. If you’re from Paterson you were probably poor, Black or Spanish, in a gang, smoked weed, or you were an athlete. That is what most people thought. I guess it was because they did not know what it was like there so they were misguided.”

Although more students from Paterson attended the school than he originally expected, Lamar was unexpectedly alienated from them. After initially puncturing white stereotypes about urban students of color, Lamar found himself agreeing with them: “Many of the people [from Paterson] were ghetto, hood, and people noticed it.” He described feeling distant from other students of color, and concerned that they were responsible for any bad treatment he received: “There were many more than I had imagined would be there and many of them acted the same, like assholes. I knew kids that made our city look shitty. No wonder when I told people where I was from they would be surprised as if no one with even an ounce of intelligence could come from there.” Lamar separated himself from this group of students: “I guess I could not really fit the description. I was a smart kid. I talked differently than most of the kids from my city. . . . I was in all honors, except Spanish.” To avoid being stereotyped as an urban Black student, in his logic, it seems Lamar has to avoid other urban Black students. In my early readings of his narrative essay, I was concerned that these passages reflected negative racial identity, rejection of Blackness, and internalized racism. I struggled to respond to this aspect of his writing. Fortunately, this kept me quiet, so that Lamar could keep writing.

Like the monolithic specter of “ghetto, hood, city” students of color he depicts, Lamar initially stereotyped the wealthy white suburban students he encountered at school as hopelessly different from him:

Most kids were from one of the richest counties in the country, and even when they weren’t wealthy, lets say they were middle class; I rarely had much in common with them at first. I mean it goes beyond skin color when I say something in common. Whether they were black, white, or Spanish it did not matter. The kids from this county were different.

However, his sense of their alterity did not last. Even in the passage above, he begins to break down the idea that the school is all white, or all wealthy. Stuck in a homeroom with no one from home, he slowly began to “be cool” with white suburban kids, commenting, “I noticed they weren’t too different from me after all. I came in with the idea that everyone was rich and stuck up but most people were middle class and very chill.” After this passage, the other students began to seem neither exclusively white nor exclusively rich.

While at school, Lamar describes his stereotypes against rich white people beginning to break down. At home it is the opposite. He depicts minimal contact with urban Black people. Alone in his aunt’s cramped apartment, he feels isolated

and claustrophobic. The building itself sounds straight out of a movie about urban squalor: “The hallways were dirty; the elevators smelled like piss and were broken half the time as I found out the first day. The staircase was a place for pot smoking drug dealers to meet and chill as I walked up inhaling the aroma that was the foulest thing I’ve ever smelled.” Lamar felt oppressed by his surroundings: “All I thought about how bad it was. The look, the people, the attitude was just awful to me.” Lamar does what I’ve been asking here—he describes in clear, vivid detail the impact of poverty on his building and the feeling it created.

The main impact he focuses on is how these conditions isolate him from other people of color in the city where he lives. Although he has little contact with people outside his family, he imagines how they might have responded to him. He called himself “quite the outcast at that building. I felt as though I was not as ‘hood’ as the other people my age I would encounter.” He imagined stereotypes the people in his building might have about him: “The people themselves frighten me, as I was not used to them. There was hardly anyone my age in the building, and if they were I doubt they wanted to befriend this little fat kid who goes to the white school.” He could not imagine connection with the other people there: “I could not really get to know anyone there, even if I wanted to I mean. It was too hard to make friends with complete strangers; I was one of the shyest kids ever and still am. How would I talk to them? Why would they talk back?” His isolation in the building, and the stereotypes that help reinforce it, echo his hopeless take on the city’s public schools.

The turning point in Lamar’s isolation from other young people at home and in school comes from what he describes as distinctly hopeful contact within and across color and class in his new school. Importantly, this contact rarely occurred within the school day and never within the formal instructional frame of a class. At first the lack of a cohort is what drives him to connect with his classmates. He describes one classmate in particular:

I would learn to fit in a little bit more because of the kid who sat in front of me. His name was Mike and he was different. He made me comfortable talking to white kids well because he wasn’t what I expected. He talked about smoking weed, rap music, and just had the funniest stories to tell me. He was that person that everyone knew and no one could hate.

Strangely, Lamar seems drawn to Mike for the same reason he is repulsed by other kids of color from Paterson—Mike is “acting Black,” as defined by Lamar. Although Lamar describes himself as strongly interested in rap music, he negatively associated smoking weed and joking around as something other Black people do in other places in his narrative. However, these qualities in Mike helped form Lamar’s first bond with a white student. Were the rules different for Mike? It seemed he could afford to engage in the oppositional drugs, music and humor that are off

limits to Lamar.

While my initial reading of this passage foregrounded the possibility of Lamar’s internalized racism, a more open stance toward his text as autoethnography might have lent me insight into his placement of value at the margins of the school day, and the power of the class clown when the class is a contact zone. “[M]ore powerful than a goody-two-shoes with respect to his peers,” (2005, p. 29) Maxson writes, the class clown is in a position of power not allied with the teacher’s authority. Lamar’s attraction to this kind of in-school-but-not-of-school power illuminates how Mike connects diverse groups and violates the boundaries that Lamar has depicted as so rigid. He made it possible to be “someone everyone knew and no one could hate.” Mike offers cross-cultural contact at the margins of Lamar’s new school.

Don’t Mess with Mr. In-Between

Lamar depicted “being cool” with middle-class white students in the informal space of his homeroom as a watershed moment in acclimating to his new school. Homeroom takes place inside school, with members of the school community, but is not part of the formal academic program. Similarly, Lamar described himself as fully comfortable only after he developed his own cohort of Black friends, which occurred as they navigated the routes in and out of the city together. In the interstitial space of the bus ride, with other kids making the same journey he’s making, he described exchanging rap music and words of caution, debriefing culture clashes, and analyzing social spaces. One friend always shared “this new song or that new mixtape or this freestyle” while another “helped me understand much more about our city, the good places, the bad, and the gangs. He helped me know a little bit about the area in which I now lived in, and he just confirmed my nightmares about this place.” Lamar’s text gestures to a space of shared cultural understanding and expression connected to, but not part of, both their suburban school and their homes in the city.

Lamar articulated the values of in-between spaces rhetorically in other texts as well, titling his portfolio and its contents according to lyrics and song titles by Jay-Z, a hip-hop artist who benefits from an in-between identity, a parallel “businessman” identity between his drug-dealing past and his music industry giant corporate success. For Jay-Z, success in self-expression, success in the music industry, and success as a drug-dealer weave in and out of his writing to create a rich series of contradictions and connections, particularly in his own memoir *Decoded*. Marc Lamont Hill calls Jay-Z a “trickster” figure—a drug dealer and commercial success who got away with it all, came out on top, maneuvered around the rules in white and Black worlds (2009, 45). While Lamar presents himself as anything but a trickster figure, such a figure capitalizes on the same logic of

juxtaposition, irony, and connection that holds sway in in-between spaces like those that Lamar occupies.

Despite alluding to these “decoding” conversations in the in-between space of the bus ride, Lamar was singularly unrevealing about them. If these are the spaces where his “decoding” takes place, these young peoples’ code-breaking practices remained hidden. I was disappointed in Lamar’s revisions of his narrative, which never developed the scenes in which he apparently fulfilled “the developmental need to explore the meaning of one’s identity with others who are engaged in a similar process,” according to Beverly Daniel Tatum’s research on Black adolescents attending majority-white schools (2007, p. 71). This seemed like a failure in both of my initial goals for his narrative. Lamar neither shared with an audience the visceral immediacy of his thoughts and feelings, nor expressed an unequivocally positive racial identity. Reading from my playbook as an aspiring antiracist white teacher, I felt that we had both failed.

Lamar’s refusal to spill the beans on his experience extended from the content to the style of his writing. The rough draft of his final reflective letter to me voiced a determination to use “proper language” in a class where most students were experimenting with their own voices, from “Brooklyn English” to “Black English.” His rough draft contained a passage describing how he “waters down” his language in school: “I do try to limit the slang terms when I am speaking to a teacher, you for instance, a parent, or an older person.” Because “I do not want people to stereotype me as an idiot,” he wrote, “subconsciously . . . I write very proper. I feel like I try to speak so it makes the person that I am speaking to more comfortable.” Tellingly, this articulation of his fear of being feared as a Black man, did not make it into the final draft of his reflective writing. His revision “watered down” even that allusion to racial fear directed at him.

I ended the semester torn between the story Lamar told and the larger story he seemed not to have told, as well as frustrated by his buttoned-up prose and behavior in class. Lamar clung to a cluster of rhetorical and social practices that looked to me like they reflected an investment in “acting white.” His avoidance of slang in his speech; his choice of a seat directly next to me in class (an unusual choice—in the circle of desks in my classroom, the seats directly next to me generally remained empty); his reticence in class discussion—all made it seem that he was keeping a tight lid on self-expression, even as he made a point of narrating his experiences negotiating his identity across class and race differences. I felt the class had failed to reach him, despite the fact that he had something important to say about negotiating multiple worlds. Stuck in my inability to remediate my students’ prose or his politics, I eventually returned to contact zone pedagogy for help navigating the challenges Lamar’s texts presented to me.

First, I needed to abandon my goal that Lamar act like he felt safe in my classroom as a sign of his readiness for “college success.” This class was not Kynard

and Nunley’s hush harbor, nor was it Pratt’s “safe house.” The classroom where we met was part of another private Catholic school, one far less segregated than either his all-Black elementary school or his predominately-white high school. I suspect Lamar was developing his own hush harbors to deal with this new social challenge, in which he sat around the table with African American, white, Indian, Latino/a, Caribbean, Arab, suburban, urban, and rural students from a range of economic backgrounds. He may or may not have been aware of the ways in which he was considered a contingent member of that class by the university. As a member of the “Liberal Studies” program and, as a Black male college student, he was considered more “at risk” of not completing his college degree than students in other ethnic groups and other majors (St. John’s University Office of Institutional Research, 2010). His rhetorical caution suggested a high degree of awareness, however.

I believe now that his investment in “proper” English and “white” learning spaces was a lot more complex than I initially gave Lamar credit for, and that he was in the process of forming—or attracting—a cohort in his college composition class, under my radar. Articulating what happened in this space to me, his teacher, would have been either beside the point, or actually counterproductive.

Kynard adapts the term hush harbors from Nunley, and calls them “literal and metaphorical meetings and gathering points . . . unauthorized by the white gaze and its hegemonic centers” (2010, p. 34). Hush harbors “enact African American rhetoric, as opposed to merely providing utopian safe havens or survival strategies, and . . . do the important work of disrupting the social reproduction of bourgeois whiteness that the majority of classrooms and college faculty maintain” (Kynard, 2010, p. 34). I tried very hard not to inflict the “racialized policing of language and being in schools” (Kynard, 2010, p. 35) on my students that Kynard argues hush harbors resist and respond to, but I am not in a position to judge the extent to which I succeeded. In fact, it would be unrealistic to imagine this particular high-stakes gateway course—with its association with academic language and its caste-like composition of “diverse” college students, all positioned in excruciatingly intricate relations of proximity and distance to the privilege the university proposed to bestow on them—could operate as anything like Pratt’s “safe house” within the contact zone. Instead, I needed to come to terms with my class as a contact zone, and to expect that students would create their own safe spaces within the class to navigate their ways through it. Recognizing the uneven power relations in the room, and Lamar’s strategies for navigating the class, has lent me an appreciation of what Maxson calls “the most compelling insight of Pratt’s work: that language users write (or talk) themselves into and through unfriendly language environments by combinations of assimilation and resistance” (2005, p. 25).

Both Freddie and Lamar combined such volatile combinations of rhetorical and racial “assimilation and resistance.” Because of the shifting institutional and

cultural positions they inhabit (between classes, moving up through educational zones and in heterogeneous classrooms), they both (albeit in different ways and to different degrees) embrace and critique white, assimilationist discourses. Only once I began to discern this could I understand the ways Lamar represented his rhetorical relationship with hegemonic whiteness, the task he undertook all semester. I could notice that whenever he wrote about allegations of “acting white” based on his speech and attendance at a “white school,” he consistently rejected the idea of being a “whiteboy.” Whenever he addressed these allegations, which happened several times, Lamar described how calling him “white” misses the point of his story. He imagined that people in his aunt’s building “would probably think I was rich and that I was a whiteboy . . . [b]ecause of the school I went to. . . . Kind of weird because would I live here if I were rich is what I would be thinking about. I had no luck in that building.” He ironized allegations of both his wealth and whiteness here. His epilogue concluded with a sense of freedom from racial stereotyping, a sense of exploration: “I wanted to find out more of what I am. I felt like people did not know who I really was. I did not want them to think of me as a little ghetto kid[,] this black kid that is really white inside.” Here, he rejected both the externalized racism that dismisses him as a “little ghetto kid” and the internalized racism that would call him “the black kid that is really white inside.” Lamar’s take on this was quite different from Freddie’s, whose embrace of the label “whiteboy” appeared less ambivalent.

I want to read a final autoethnographic scene in Lamar’s narrative, one in which he illustrates his cautious rhetorical strategies of racial self-representation. The scene comes late in the narrative and stands out for a number of reasons. First, it took place on the street in Paterson, a place where he had been both terrified and forbidden to set foot for most of the previous pages. Second, it contains dialogue, physical description, and is more fleshed out and developed than the rest of his narrative—in short, it adhered more clearly to the qualities of “effective” narrative prose that we discussed all semester. Third, it described a crucial miscalculation in racial self-representation.

Toward the end of his difficult year, Lamar finally began to leave his aunt’s apartment and venture out to visit friends. On his first trip, he had to walk 40 minutes across town to get to his friend’s house, and he was “scared as hell.” He recalled his father’s advice about walking in the street in Paterson:

He said, “Keep your head up. Don’t look down at your feet when you walk. It makes you look scared. You do not want to look scared or weak or like you don’t know where you are. Those are the first people that get messed with. Be aware of your surroundings, if something does not look right avoid it.”

I walked for what seemed to be forever that hot summer day. I remember messing up my Air Jordans that day, I scuffed the side

and got a little dirt on them. I stopped and wiped it off. They were white with red on the side and a little black at the back. I had on the white shirt with a bunch of red skulls on it to match. I looked up continued walking and then I see two guys sitting in front of the store I was walking by.

One of them asked me, “You blood?”

I did not know how to respond. With the colors I had on I thought someone could ask me, I was just hoping they wouldn’t.

I replied, “Nah.”

And just kept walking.

Then I heard the other one looking at him and saying, “Chill n[___], that’s a kid.”

I guess that one had enough sense to know I was a bit young for that and knew that was a dumb question. The guy was probably high as he had the same smell as the staircase, that skunk-like odor that I was not a fan of. I thought to myself that maybe this outfit might be a bit much with the red and the skulls. I also thought wow that guy was fucking stupid. . . . I told [my friend] what had happened earlier and he laughed. He thought it was funny someone would ask me that. I was a “goodie goodie” in the eyes of most people so him laughing did not surprise me.

Lamar appears to lampoon a stereotype he also fears. To be labeled himself as a gang member is “fucking stupid,” and perhaps anticlimactic, given the reservoir of fear of Black gangsters he had built up after a year cooped up in an apartment. For someone who portrays himself as so disconnected from the people around him in a poor Black neighborhood, Lamar now takes DuBois’s African American “double consciousness” to the point of incoherence, showing its absolute foundation in erroneous fear. Lamar’s curious lapse in self-policing—wearing gang colors on his first walk through what he feels to be gang territory—demonstrates the extreme care required for young Black men to present themselves as non-threats. In this scene, he both makes fun of, and shows the dangers of, walking while Black.

I sense a parallel here to Lamar’s explanation of “watering down” his prose for adults to avoid trouble when he writes while Black. Lamar might be nodding along with Homi Bhabha singing Johnny Mercer’s lyric, “Don’t Mess with Mr. In-Between” at this point in his text. If, as Bhabha argues, the racial stereotypes with which Lamar’s text is preoccupied are a prime tool in the belt of “colonial discourse,” Lamar’s descriptions of himself and other young Black people are riddled

with racial stereotyping. However, Bhabha believes these stereotypes are slippery, “a form of knowledge and identification that vacillates between what is always ‘in place,’ already known, and something that must be anxiously repeated. . . . [A]mbivalence . . . [is] central to the stereotype” (1994, p. 66) and makes them thus unsettle the hierarchies they are meant to cement. Lamar, in upending the stereotype of a Black gangster—one of several stereotypes of Black men that had haunted him all year—managed to undo that very stereotype, staging a scene in which he entered the urban street, “scared as hell,” and was mistaken for the very threat he fears, “a blood.” He displayed the arbitrariness of this label, the Emperor-has-no-clothes element of his fear.

On the other hand, he does the opposite. He shows how easy it is for him to inspire fear in others, demonstrating the wisdom of surviving by refusing to show his “Blackness”—the specter of threatening male Blackness that he accidentally assumed in this moment. Paired up with the “idiots” and “assholes” he describes as the mass of his peers from the city who’ve come out to suburban high school with him, Lamar articulates the necessity of keeping a lid on his rhetorical Blackness. Like Bhabha, Lamar knows the complexity of living as Mr. In-Between. He is articulating a similar space to Bhabha, but it looks “different,” as Lamar has called himself numerous times. In his narrative, that space is both more urgent and more reserved.

“My Voice Is a Very Different Voice”

Honestly I think that my voice is the voice of multiple groups. It comes from me being around different groups of people throughout my life especially high school. I think it is hard to describe my voice in words, but it is sort of like that gray area where the labels of black and white meet, but I wouldn’t call myself a “black kid that acts white.” It’s a little more complex than that. Rather than being focused on one group of people and how they talk, like the people I grew up around, my voice is drawn from everything I have learned and been through.

By “gray,” I don’t take Lamar to mean a “postracial” identity, but rather a highly limited expression of identity in the uncertain terrain of a mixed-race school. Lamar doesn’t believe what any particular group says about itself or its others. What he does demonstrate in my classroom is participation in what looks like a cohort that is neither in-school nor exactly out-of-school: a cohort of other male students of color who also began writing about their experiences as racial minorities in mostly white schools, and found other ways to connect throughout the semester. Most of

this took place in texts or places that I could not monitor easily, such as peer review groups and side conversations.

The first sign was a seating change in the middle of the semester. Lamar, as I mentioned before, always sat next to me in the circular seating arrangement of our class. It seemed to pain him, since he often had to speak directly to me, or after me, in whole class workshops and he spoke as little as possible in class. But he stayed there. Midway through the semester, another member of the cohort—an African American male student who had sat in the back of the room and gotten laughs for his comments from day one—got frustrated. In the middle of a conversation, he made a comment about another students’ writing, and his whole corner of the room erupted in laughter. It had not been a particularly funny comment. “Why does everybody laugh after everything I say?” he asked rhetorically. At the next class meeting, this student moved his seat next to Lamar so that the three of us made up the front row of the class. This student worked especially hard on his writing in the later part of the semester, which he was choosing to write in a much more pronounced version of “Black English” than Lamar’s. But he wasn’t doing it for laughs. He wanted to qualify as a walk-on for the university’s Division 1 basketball team. His grades were the obstacle. He took care of this by the end of the year, when he pulled up his grades and got a spot on the team.

This was not the only student who gravitated to Lamar as the semester wore on. Another student who wrote about transferring to a majority white Catholic high school requested Lamar as a writing partner, describing how he felt their narratives were closely connected. This was a student who kept his cards perhaps even closer to his chest than Lamar, never revealing his ethnic identity beyond “brown.” He named his writing portfolio “Ciphertext,” and described inscrutability and encryption as central qualities of his rhetorical style. He and Lamar met a few times to discuss their narratives, and though I had access to some of the material that they wrote to each other, most of what passed between them happened at the margins of my ability to monitor them—in-between.

What I now believe Lamar was doing—in his narrative, his reflections on his writing, and in my class—was carving out rhetorical and literal spaces for connecting with other young men of color in a volatile integrated gateway course in his new university. These spaces afforded them opportunities to devise critiques and strategies for navigating the complex institutional cultures of writing at a university like mine.

Lamar’s work didn’t conform to my expectations, and I believe I learned from him about the lens I brought to bear on his situation. I assumed that because his texts voiced negative depictions of other urban Black people, and because he became comfortable at his predominantly white institution, that Lamar was suffering from internalized racism. That may or may not have been the case, but I gradually came to appreciate how he consistently rejected allegations of “acting white.”

despite his articulations of stereotypes about Black people that seem to create distance between himself and other African Americans. Further, I began to see and value his work building relationships with other male students of color in my class.

I believe that deeper understanding of the ways in which men of color in college support each other would repay further investigation in the contemporary contact zone of college composition. Shaun Harper's important recent study of highly successful Black male college students suggests there is no current evidence to support the widely-held belief that academically successful Black college students are ostracized by peers and accused of "acting white." Even John Ogbu, who initially asserted the "Acting White Hypothesis" with Signithia Fordham in 1986, suggested in 2004 that critical discourse surrounding that hypothesis may have drifted from the original intent of its authors. In fact, the Black male college students Harper interviewed identified the support of their Black peers on campus as crucial to their success. While Harper's demographic population is not one that Lamar fits into, Lamar's status is one Harper points to in "lingering questions" at the conclusion of his study, Harper wonders about the support received by students who are less high-achieving, less drawn toward leadership, and "whose racial identities are not as well developed" (2006, p. 354) as the highly successful students he spoke with. I hope my teaching account can contribute to a better understanding of the meaning of "acting white" for more marginalized Black and Latino male college students.

Lamar's rhetorical and social moves in the classroom yielded fresh insights for me about the intensity and subtlety of student writing in the "contact zone" of a college composition classroom. Ultimately, I began to see Lamar as part of a quiet cohort of male students of color who make spaces for themselves outside the direct awareness of their white female professor, who is, after all, liable to do things like publish their words in the academic street as I am now, however well-meaning my intent.

Conclusion: Composition Pedagogy "Acts White" in the Contact Zone

If Lamar's texts articulate the value of in-between spaces for negotiating the whiteness of the academy or composition pedagogy, Freddie's text may simply be such a space. His acts of "transcultural repositioning" are so multiple as to create a blur where his own take on "whiteness" might be found. Freddie and Lamar, and to some extent the three other male students of color in my class who wrote about attending "white schools," interrogate what Kermit Campbell calls "the hegemony of whiteness and middle-classness in the academy and in composition" (2007, p. 330). I believe the highly indeterminate receptions of their texts by this class

made a dent in this hegemonic whiteness for all of us. Keith Gilyard has argued that “in most classrooms . . . ‘race’ simply inscribes another othering discourse. It is an unproblematized matter of the non-White, the other” (2011, p. 82). With these writers at work in the class, the invisibility of whiteness simply could not be maintained.

My open-ended narrative assignment and whole class workshops were motivated by something like contact zone pedagogy, a practice of de-centered authority in discussions of autoethnographic writing. In this pedagogical space, these students’ texts articulated nuggets of what appear to be internalized racism against themselves and other people of color. Having elicited such writing, I hesitated to “correct” this internalized racism, while I remained concerned about seeming to validate these negative ideas about people of color through silence. Ultimately, neither student seemed entirely comfortable making capitulation to class and race hierarchies the last word and produced what I read as their own nuanced takes on allegations of rhetorical “whiteness” aimed at them. For both of them, school seemed a central place for personal and social transformation in ways that go beyond transformation into a “whiteboy.”

As far as I could tell, Freddie was not trying to “pass” at college. He was playing up his “street” identity, almost acting more like a kid from Washington Heights or Bushwick than one from Howard Beach. Or perhaps a kid from Howard Beach who affiliates with hip-hop music. And Lamar, who trumpeted his watering-down of slang, actually used a range of rhetorical styles in his texts. Both students used personal narratives of “acting white” to chart a course of ongoing thinking and writing for themselves, and subsequently for me and the rest of the class, too.

There is a danger that these narratives could function like what Wendy Ryden calls “whiteness narratives”—written by white people to make their whiteness visible to themselves and others. Ryden identifies “a rhetorical tradition of ‘confessing’ whiteness . . . a kind of ‘truth and reconciliation’ strategy of responsible owning of experience from which one can then move forward to become a member of the new group of antiracist workers” (Ryden & Marshall, 2012, p. 15). These students’ relationships to whiteness and its privileges are much more complex than this kind of whiteness narrative. They offered our class opportunities to perceive and analyze whiteness as a force in the lives of people of color, from which we all benefitted. But I may have expected them to also confess on some level, to disavow internalized racism and its allegiances to whiteness; I know that I struggled to respond where they failed to do so. It is useful to notice my somewhat unconscious impulse to guide student narratives into performing a rejection of whiteness and assimilation. My goal to give my students the opportunity to discern the role of race in their personal lives, and to articulate that role, is well-served by personal narrative. However, my goal of promoting awareness of systemic racism and racial injustice in both historical and contemporary contexts is not particularly well-suited to these means.

Since Freddie and Lamar were my students, I have altered my use of narrative as a tool for teaching about race in composition. My courses have gone from “happening” to involve a lot of writing about race, to explicitly addressing race as a core theme. I am undertaking another writing project reflecting on these new developments in my course and the writing that students have produced in the course of this new focus. I am grateful to Freddie, Lamar, and my other students for helping me learn to ask better questions and offer feedback that tries to help them articulate the role of race in their daily lives, and the larger systemic forces that lie behind those daily experiences. I hope my students and I can continue to learn from each other, and to use our understandings of the role of race in our lives to motivate us in reaching for ever-clearer racial analysis and more immediate action toward racial justice.

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