7 Subversive identities, pedagogical safe houses, and critical learning

Suresh Canagarajah

The practice of reserving something of oneself from the clutch of an institution...this recalcitrance is not an incidental mechanism of defence but rather an essential constitution of the self. (Goffman, 1961, p. 319)

A Century of English Education, written by John V. Chelliah (1922), a local teacher in my hometown while the British were still governing Sri Lanka, intends to glorify the pedagogy and policies of the colonial educational system. The teaching approaches of the missionaries are presented as very effective in creating a new breed of Sri Lankan Tamils who mastered the knowledge and language of the rulers. In these boarding schools, the missionaries wanted to isolate the students from the vernacular influences of their homes and mold them according to their new set of values. Occasionally, we see references to some unruly students in Chelliah’s book. Such students have been dismissed from the school for escaping from the boarding at nights to attend Hindu temple festivals, maintaining secret miniature shrines for Hindu deities in their cupboards or desks, and surreptitiously practicing what are called heathen songs and dances. Though the author is ashamed by the hypocrisy in this behavior and is happy that such acts met with decisive punishment, it is possible to guess that many more of these acts went undiscovered. Those who read Chelliah’s book today may have a new sense of respect for these students. It appears that they were trying to negotiate a conflict that was common to other colonized subjects. How could they learn English while maintaining membership with their vernacular community and culture? While some were obviously prepared to join the new English-speaking community formed by the missionaries and British settlers, these students didn’t want to lose their local identities. Perhaps they struggled for a way in which they could maintain dual identities - learning English while also remaining Hindus. Since such hybridity was not permitted in the missionary educational enterprise, they had to resort to indirect and surreptitious ways of living out their unusual identities.

We know today that challenges of such nature are widespread in language learning and that they are, in fact, integral to the language acquisition process. What motivates the learning of a language is the construction of the identities we desire and the communities we want to join in order to engage in communication and social life. How we resolve these conflicts is at the heart of becoming a successful language learner. I am among those who welcome what has come to be known as the social turn in language acquisition studies and literacy instruction. From focusing on the abstract grammar system and treating learners as a bundle of psychological reflexes, we have begun to treat learners as complex social beings. Our interest now is to consider how learners negotiate competing subject positions in conflicting discourse communities and how these struggles shape their practices of language learning.

In order to pursue such an orientation profitably, we have had to redefine our understanding of the human subject. We have borrowed constructs from disciplines as diverse as philosophy, rhetoric, literary criticism, and the social sciences. We have adopted different theoretical positions ranging across feminist scholarship, language socialization studies, Bakhtinian semiotics, and Foucauldian poststructuralism. These schools have helped us understand identities as multiple, conflictual, negotiated, and evolving. We have traveled far from the traditional assumption in language studies that identities are static, unitary, discrete, and given. To elaborate, our new realizations are as follows:

1. The Self is shaped considerably by language and discourses.
2. The Self is composed of multiple subjectivities deriving from the heterogeneous codes, registers, and discourses that are found in society.
3. These subjectivities enjoy unequal status and power, deriving differential positioning in socioeconomic terms.
4. Because of these inequalities, there is conflict within and between subjects.
5. In order to find coherence and empowerment, the subject has to negotiate these competing identities and subject positions.
6. Selves are not immutable or innate; they are reconstructed and reconstituted in relation to the changing discursive and material contexts.

Despite the fascinating theoretical advances we have made in this inquiry, I sense a dilemma for researchers when they study learner identities in classroom contexts. Though they are theoretically attuned to representing the resistance of students to unfavorable identities imposed on them, they don’t have any evidence for such complex acts of negotiation in their corpora. In many cases, they find that students appear to take on the unitary identities (shaped by notions of deficiency, inferiority, and disadvantage) conferred on them by the dominant discourses. With some disappointment, the researchers promise to look further into their
The pedagogical dilemma

Let's look at some cutting edge research that is being conducted currently on classroom identities to consider how students fare in resolving the conflicts they face in language learning. Sandra McKay and Keith Chick (2000) talk about the contradictions between the multicultural discourse of the African National Congress (ANC) and the monolingual policies of schools in their paper, "Positioning Learners in Post Apartheid South African Schools: A Case Study of Selected Multicultural Durban Schools." Examining the power of two dominant discourses – English-only and Declining Standards – they show how speaking Zulu is associated with being disruptive, deficient, and rude in the school context. Also, not adopting the “Christian middle class ethos” (constituting such values as involvement, work ethic, honesty, and charity) is negatively associated with monolingual working or underclass behavior. The students gradually begin to align themselves with the favored discourses and identities, distancing themselves from the indigenous discourses of the lower classes in their classroom interactions with the teacher.

Though the narrative stops there, we can guess that there is more to the experience of the students than that. How do the students negotiate the conflicts between the multicultural policy of the state and the monolingualist policy of the school? Surely, they can sense some of these tensions in their everyday social and educational life? How do they cope with the dual life of participating in the vernacular life outside the classroom and the English-based Christian ethos inside? We need some way of exploring these less conspicuous issues of student consciousness and agency in our research. McKay and Chick (2000) do sense the need to discover evidence of student resistance and promise to go back to the research site to obtain further data. But the data we need may not be more of the same; we may need data from different sites of student life.

To take another study, consider Eva Lam's (2000) presentation of the Chinese high school student, Almon, in her paper, "L2 Literacy and the Design of the Self: A Case Study of a Teenager Writing on the Internet." The student is frustrated by the negative identities provided for his "broken English" in the classroom. But on the Internet, Almon engages in a variety of discourses – pop culture, religion, therapy, cyberculture – all in English with a range of native and nonnative speakers. He can sense a visible improvement in his proficiency in the language as he engages effectively in these communicative interactions. His ability to distance himself from the language in computer-mediated communication perhaps enables him to be expressive in biographical and narrative writing on his homepage. He is definitely empowered by the new identities he enjoys on the Internet as a friend, knowable fan of Japanese pop music, founder of the fan group for pop singer Ryoko, and owner of an internationally popular homepage. Lam (2000) brings out the ironies effectively when she concludes:

Whereas classroom English appeared to contribute to Almon’s sense of exclusion or marginalization (his inability to speak like a native) which paradoxically contradicts the school’s mandate to prepare students for the workplace and civic involvement, the English he controlled on the Internet enabled him to develop a sense of belonging and connectedness to a global English-speaking community. (p. 476)

We are left with the question, What is it about the school that prevents students from negotiating favorable identities? Why is it that Almon has to endure these empowering identities outside the walls of the classroom? Are there other sites in the classroom where Almon may practice some of the alternate identities he enjoys or negotiate the conflicts in his selfhood?

To consider a final example that brings me close to the niche I am creating for my study, take Kelleen Toohey’s (2000a) “Assigning Marginality: The Case of an ‘ESL/Learning Disabled’ Student.” She discusses how an Indian student, Surjeet, gradually acts according to the learning disabled status assigned by her elementary school teachers in Canada. Ironically, Surjeet fits neither the ESL (English as a second language) nor the learning disabled status. She speaks English at home with her primarily Punjabi-speaking parents and siblings. She displays some interesting skills of social and linguistic negotiation in her off-task interactions in the classroom. But the very anxiety of trying to avoid the learning disabled status influences her to falter. In a case of self-fulfilling prophecy, her teachers’ ascription of the learning disabled identity gets solidified as the school years progress and Surjeet gets loaded with more remedial courses. But, here again, we sense that there is more to the story than what we see in the classroom interactions. How does Surjeet explain to herself the contradictions between her life at home and the classroom, between interactions with her teacher and with her friends? How does she negotiate the conflicting roles and identities she plays out in these different settings? In a more extensive discussion of this study in a different context, Toohey (2000b) observes that there is more student agency and resistance displayed in off-task activities away from the teacher. My
purpose here is to explore such off-task sites to understand their role in the construction of more complex student identities and the development of critical learning practices.

The politics of safe houses

To understand why students may seek alternate sites in the classroom to construct more complex identities, we have to understand the school as a power-laden site. Students may be so intimidated by the authority and power of the teacher that they desist from presenting identities that are not institutionally desired. Also, examinations, tracking, and other institutional reward systems place subtle restrictions on the extent to which students can resist the subjectivities desired in the school. In interacting with students from a variety of backgrounds (some from more privileged backgrounds), students are under peer pressure to conform to the dominant discourses and identities preferred in the classroom. These are but some of the mechanisms through which the school functions as a medium of ideological and social reproduction. Ironically, even when students flagrantly oppose the identities desired in the classroom, the school has a way of defining them as failures and assigning them socially marginalized positions. Linda Harklau (2000) shows how the immigrant students who are continually being assigned stereotypical “ESL student” identities (as culturally alien and socially handicapped) resist these roles in favor of more complex subjectivities as they become gradually socialized into the new community in the United States. But the more they oppose, the more they earn the displeasure of their teachers and become failures. In the face of power of this nature, students are caught between two bad alternatives— that is, to conform or to fail.

Though students are not always blind to the hidden curriculum in the classroom (Almon, for example, is painfully aware of the negative identities ascribed to him), they don’t have the resources or space to negotiate these conflicts favorably. More important, they also need a safe way of adopting alternate identities without being penalized for (what is perceived as) deviant behavior. I wish to present some hidden spaces in the classroom that provide a safe site for students to negotiate identities more critically. It is my contention that if classroom ethnographers and other researchers can go beyond the surface-level interactions between teachers and students (especially in on-task encounters), they can discern the agency of the students in managing the conflicts for their identity in more complex ways.

I call these sites safe houses, following Pratt’s (1991) theorization of their role in the cultural contact of postcolonial societies. She defines safe houses as “social and intellectual spaces where groups can constitute themselves as horizontal, homogeneous, sovereign communities with high degrees of trust, shared understandings, and temporary protection from legacies of oppression” (p. 40). Though it is Pratt’s definition (first introduced in a keynote address at the annual convention of the Modern Language Association) that has influenced recent academic discussions in fields such as composition, literature, and English, I have used the term in ESL contexts (see Canagarajah, 1999). The term is generally used as synonymous with underlife in institutional contexts (as in the sociological studies of Gottman, 1964, and Scott, 1990). I also see connections with studies in ESL, bilingualism, and literacy where researchers have seen students adopting discourses and behaviors that are not authorized or rewarded by teachers (see note 7 for a list of studies in this field).

Safe houses in the academy are then, sites that are relatively free from surveillance, especially by authority figures, perhaps because these are considered unofficial, off task, or extrap Pedagogical. Domains of time, as well as space, may serve as safe houses in educational institutions. The following is a list of spatiotemporal domains I have uncovered as safe houses in my research:

In the classroom: aside between students, passing of notes, small group interactions, peer activities, marginalia in textbooks and notebooks, transition from one teacher to another, before classes begin, after classes are officially over.

Outside the classroom: the canteen, library, dorms, playgrounds, and computer labs.

In cyberspace: e-mail, online discussions/chat.

There is a danger in describing safe houses in such a schematic and structured fashion. Students can make almost any site in the educational environment free of surveillance by colluding in constructing a culture of underlife behavior. They can develop gestures, signs, and symbols that can enable them to interact and communicate in their own terms right under their teacher’s nose. In this sense, safe houses are somewhat fluid and mobile.

Before I offer some data on the ways students negotiate conflicting identities in safe houses, let me note the significance of such sites for minority students (who feature in my studies). It appears that minority communities have always collaboratively constructed sites of community underlife wherein they can celebrate suppressed identities and go further to develop subversive discourses that inspire resistance against their domination. In addition to Chekhov’s (1922) book cited at the beginning of the chapter, there is further documentation from my own community in Sri Lanka during colonial times when locals adopted a double-faced behavior of pretending to be Christians outwardly, but maintaining a
vigorous life as Hindus within the local community in in-group circles (see Wickramasuriya, 1976). They pretended to be Christians to qualify for better jobs and higher education from the British. This surreptitious behavior often led the colonial rulers to call my people lying, inscrutable, undependable, hypocritical, shifty, and cunning. But these are the weapons of the weak – to borrow the title of the book by James Scott (1985), who articulates the politics of this strategy through peasants in Southeast Asia. For the disempowered who realize the difficulties of challenging the might of dominant groups directly, these are simple acts in their everyday life for gaining a measure of control over their lives. The acts of stealing, foot dragging, cheating, and noncompliance are partial and safe ways of resisting the power of the master and gaining some relief in material terms for their survival. These are acts through which they also retain their dignity and develop hidden ideologies that explain the injustice of the situation and work out spiritual alternatives that give them hope. Over time, these communities develop a shared understanding of their oppression and ways of coping with the hostile environment. Even the jokes, parody, sarcasm, name calling, and veiled threats are disguised forms of resistance. There is an expanding body of ethnographic literature that shows that there is a well-developed tradition of under-life resistance in minority communities. In Asia, we know of lower caste communities using safe houses against upper caste communities, women against men, serfs against landowners.²

Here in North America, we now know that the African American community has a well-developed tradition of safe houses. Slaves had to adopt a double life – appearing to fulfill the expectations of the master, but sharing another level of social life with fellow slaves where they outsmarted the master – as a safe and sometimes the only way of regaining their humanity and dignity. There is an evolving ethnographic literature from slave society that reveals the underlife of the slaves (see Raboteau, 1978). Slave narratives give insight into the ways in which black people organized Sunday schools and literacy classes unknown to the master, where they developed theologies that condemned the injustice and promoted utopias of glorious afterlife for the slaves. Frederick Douglass (1845) personal path to literacy had to involve surreptitious means – including bribing white kids, using the books of the master’s children when the family was away, and cheating school-going kids to make them share their knowledge. Sociolinguist Thomas Kochman (1981) finds contemporary speech acts keeping alive the hidden forms of resistance from slave times. Ambivalent talk, speaking behind the back, or parodying, joking, and satirizing the talk of the dominant communities are an indirect form of opposition. Kochman calls them “fronting” (p. 125).

Apart from such anthropological precedents, there are also sociological explanations for why safe houses are important for all of us – whether from the minority or the dominant social groups – for identity construction. There is an interesting tradition in social psychology, stemming from Goffman’s (1961) study of underlife behavior in what he calls “total institutions” (e.g., mental asylums, prisons). While the inmates conform to the restrictive selves demanded by the institution for the official eyes (primary adjustment), they take up a range of alternate practices and identities in the underlife to develop a more qualified or independent conformism (secondary adjustment). Goffman goes on to theorize that it is in the gaps and cracks of institutional life that we develop our independent orientations to identity, although we are expected to display the restrictive selves demanded in public life. My assumption is that all students may construct such safe houses in schools to develop their in-group culture and alternate identities, while minority communities have the additional advantage of drawing from traditions of underlife culture from their communities as they borrow historically well-tested strategies for negotiating conflictual identities.

Safe house styles of negotiation

My examples of the ways safe houses function in helping students negotiate identities come from two different pedagogical contexts that share some similarities – African American students learning academic writing in a southwestern university in the United States and Tamil students learning English for general academic purposes in Sri Lanka.³ Unlike the Sri Lankan ESL students, the former are learning academic English as a second dialect and not as a second language. I am offering examples from communities that are distant from each other, partly to show how widespread these underlife practices are. In both cases, however, students perceived that their acquisition and use of the standard codes and discourses of academic English would involve taking on identities that were undesirable for them, would complicate their community consciousness or solidarity, and would lead to the denigration of their valued identities.

They perceived the academy to be imposing unitary selves that didn’t take account of the cultural complexity they brought with them. Still, they adopted the roles and identities demanded for academic success as they were motivated by social mobility and economic well-being. In the safe houses, however, they displayed a more critical negotiation of identities that gave evidence of their agency. I have discussed elsewhere the challenges and conflicts experienced by these students (see Canagarajah, 1993, 1997); here, I’ll focus on the ways safe houses helped them construct alternate identities and practice critical literacy.

To begin with, safe houses provided a space where students could adopt more hybrid identities deriving from the heterogeneous discourses they were competent in. These identities could not be displayed in the classroom because the school demanded standardized English codes.
and discourses. In the Sri Lankan university, there was frequent code-switching in the student underlife interactions. When English-only was the norm for interactions in the ESL class, such mixing of languages in the safe houses is subversive. Note, in the interaction below, how two students (S1, S2) switch to Tamil to unpack the meaning of the comprehension passage being read aloud by the teacher (T) standing at the front of the class:

Text 1:

T: (reads) ... it is our duty to look after trees and replace them through reforestation. (To class) Reforestation means replanting trees and vegetation. (Continues reading)
S1: Reforestation enRaal ennappa? [What does “reforestation” mean?]
S2: kaTaakkaam. umakku teriyaataa? Social science-ilai paTiccam. [Don’t you know reforestation? We studied about that in Social Science.]
S2: illai appaa. marankalai tirampa naTukiratu. [No, man, replanting trees.]

By speaking softly to each other in a private aside, the students are defining this as a safe house interaction. Their use of Tamil in this case enables them to share information from other courses and experiences outside the lesson to collaboratively define a difficult English word. Also this communicative practice is a representation of the bilingual and bicultural life these students live outside the classroom. Similarly, in the case of the African American students, they draw from both the vernacular and the mainstream codes they were proficient in as middle class subjects. Their e-mail and online chat discussions gave evidence of a wide range of speech acts from both traditions, that is, capping, sounding, insult routines, and narratives, interspersed with detached argumentation and textual interpretation. Whereas the public sites of the classroom adopted a narrower range of legitimized discourses and pressured students to adopt uniform identities, safe houses provided a space for the display of more complex discourses and mixed identities.

In fact, in many cases, students celebrated identities that had to be suppressed in the classroom. Some identities and discourses may be construed as deviant or dysfunctional in educational contexts. Consider the insult routine two African American boys, Donnie and Ray, are engaging in below in an e-mail exchange:

Text 2:

From: DONNIE JONES
To: RAY WRIGHT
Subject: HIMSELF 8/09
PUSSY ASS NIGGA!!!
Subversive identities, pedagogical safe houses

These discourses would be associated with divisiveness, confrontationalism, and narrow-mindedness in the mainstream circle of the classroom. Although playful and imagined, we mustn’t discount the possibility of these identities being inspired by the pressures of cultural reproduction and ideological conformity in the institutional context. At other times, students adopted academic roles playfully. In a peer critique, Donnie adopted the teacher’s authoritative tone. Initially, he provided a very balanced and complex feedback on the paper of a colleague:

Rhonda, this has the potential of being a good paper but it needs a lot of work. This is a research paper yet there isn’t any research in the paper except for the interview. You are being too subjective in your writing. It is O.K. to be somewhat subjective but not too much. You are focused in on the subject well but you have seem to lost touch of your audience. Remember that they are social scientists and they require hard facts.

Then, finally, in the space given for “Other Comments,” he dropped his mask and exposed his true feelings by saying: “Get real, this is a lousy paper.” This very direct statement contrasted with the carefully worded and sensitive statements that preceded it. However, his play-acting was so convincing that one cannot help but admire him for having mastered the academic voice (featuring highly qualified comments, syllabic abstract words, complex syntax, and an authoritative tone).

These acts of identity are not educationally unhelpful. Donnie is getting some practice in the use of the academic register. This ability to style shift is an important communicative competence required in the contemporary world of fluid discourses and the mingling of social groups. The adoption of competing identities – vernacular and academic in this case – would also invite interesting comparisons and a reflexive analysis of these roles. These psychological and educational advantages are also evident from a series of marginal comments by Sri Lankan students in a beginning-level ESL textbook. One student has first written, “I love all of the girls beautiful in the Jaffna University.” Under this comment, another has written in different ink, “Reader: I love you. Bleeve me.” Yet another student – presumably female – has written (in different ink and handwriting), “I do not love you because I do not believe you. You are terrible man.” These students are playing at being lovers. They are engaging in a discourse that is usually taboo in local classrooms (coming from a sexually conservative society). These words and clauses have been picked up by the students, themselves, from outside the classroom. But they are being used creatively here as the two initial statements are combined by the third writer to form a complex sentence. This playfulness therefore leads to syntactic and vocabulary development in addition to the psychological benefit of vicariously living out distant (sometimes oppressive) roles and understanding the alien discourses undergirding these

---

Text 6:

From: SONNY TIPPLENS
To: DEXTER BOMAR
Subject: FIGHT THE POWER 8/10
stay black, fight the power, support your people.

PEACE HO!

Text 7:

From: DEXTER BOMAR
To: T.K.
Subject: THE BLACK MAN 8/10
TO STRONG... TO BLACK... TO STRONG... TO BLACK...

FFFFF
FF
F

IGHT THE POWER
identities. Such practices can also encourage a reflexive awareness of the students' own statuses and roles in relation to the imagined identities they are often excluded from.

It should be clear from the examples above that students adopt identities that are more complex, interesting, independent, creative, and sometimes pedagogically oppositional than the ones they display in the public sites of the classroom. We can move further into the data to ask how they explain this dual life to themselves, why they adopt the strategy of safe house negotiations, and what implications these acts of negotiation may have for their larger educational and social life. A consideration along these lines shows that students can move beyond their conflicts to reflect critically on their challenges and construct their own explanations and strategies for dealing with them. We thus see in the safe houses the students' capacity for critical awareness and agency.

Students are aware of the relative benefits safe houses provide in the educational context. They find the public sites of the academy very oppressive and stultifying and desire the detachment provided by the safe houses. Consider the following discussion among some African American students in their online chat forum:

Text 8:
Rhonda: I FEEL A LOT OF PRESSURE HERE TO PERFORM WELL BECAUSE EVERYONE KNOW WHAT HAPPENS IF YOU DON'T. I DON'T THINK THEY SHOULD TREAT US LIKE STATISTICS. THEY PREACH INDIVIDUALITY, SO TREAT US AS INDIVIDUALS AND NOT COMPARE US TO OTHERS.
Sonny: (...) like Donnie said, you can only be pushed so far on the same track. It seems as if we are all being taught to be exactly like the board of education of the state of (xxx).
Dexter: the univ. is trying to stripped us of are identity, beliefs in order to make a world where it comforts them the most. (INT 8/15)

It is clear that students sense the reproductive effects of education. They are clearly under pressure to conform and adopt identities they perceive to be desired by the educational institution. We can also sense the opposition they have for pedagogical identities. Safe houses provide enough detachment from these pressures for students to negotiate their identities in a manner that suits them.

What makes safe houses additionally attractive is that students have the space here to develop a relatively strong sense of solidarity and community against the impositions of the school. Though students lack this sense of solidarity at the beginning of the semester (and thus adopt only safe and conformist identities), they become more daring once trust is established in the safe houses. This supportive atmosphere is important for students to adopt identities that are uncomfortable in the company of those who are alien or antagonistic. This solidarity is also important for students to withstand the onslaughts of dominant discourses and ideologies. So we find messages like the following where students cheer each other up with reminders of their past achievements:

Text 9:
From: SONNY TIPPENS
To: N.O.S. & H.O.S.5
Subject: SCHOLARSHIP 8/03
Hey! We're on scholarship!!!

Some messages advise students to stay united as they struggle against the common challenges they face for their identity and values:

Text 10:
From: SONNY TIPPENS
To: ALL
Subject: IS BERN GERT6 8/19
... to the PREVIEW posse; stay close to each other.
we are all gonna need help to get through, and i'd like to say all of us minorities make it. do it for your family, community, and culture, but most of all do it for yourself.
... good luck everyone
and remember, you on scholarship!!!!!
Sonny Tippens (T.K!)

Others send reminders to their colleagues not to lose touch with their roots. I call these the "stay black" messages, which pop up in the most unexpected places during discussions and e-mails:

Text 11:
From: RHONDA NICHOLAS
To: ALL
Subject: FIGHT THE POWER 8/19
Hello everyone, this is a reminder to everyone:
"STAY BLACK"
I LOVE YA'LL;
KELLI(MOOGY) from Spike Lee ?

Indirectly, these messages show the pressure students feel to adopt identities they don't desire. Such messages show the need for safe houses for
students to collaboratively work out ways of coping with the challenges they face in the academy. Once inside the safe houses, the students adopt many strategies and activities to negotiate identities.

Students do not adopt alternate identities unthinkingly. The safe houses provide a site for reflecting on the differences between divergent discourses and subjectivities. This comparative and critical reflection is important for students to negotiate identities effectively. Such discussions also show evidence of a metadiscursive awareness among students on the challenges for their identity. In the case of African American students, we see them talking in their safe house encounters about the differences between academic discourse and their home discourses and the implications for their identity:

**Text 12:**

Andrew: The scientist, at the start of his paper, announces his problem. Next, the author proceeds to spew data in stuffy scientific terms that only a well educated or well read scientist would know. The pattern is the same throughout the paper; state scientific data and interpret it for your own argument. Usually, half-way through the paper, the alert reader can predict the conclusion. Anything that is so predictable is not enjoyable to learn from. (INT 8/15)

Though students perform this kind of writing in class activities, here they adopt a critical position toward this discourse. They also discuss often the reasons for their dislike of this discourse:

**Text 13:**

Sonny: I don’t know about the rest of the black world, but I do know that I have a lot of imagination and feelings, and that is how I write. I guess that is why I don’t really like English classes, since you have to stay on topic, and a mind like mine likes to just write and include the topic, understand? (INT 8/15)

Comparisons of this sort show that students have a reflexive awareness of the competing identities and the choices they are left with.

There is evidence that the strategies students adopt to negotiate identities are also well-considered. They have their own reasons why safe houses are a good place to negotiate their conflicts. Students display metasocial awareness on the controversial strategy of compartmentalizing their identities, that is, adopting conformist identities in the public spaces and displaying subversive identities in safe houses:

**Text 14:**

Rhonda Nicholas: I really don’t have much to say because I’m here and I know what it takes to make it. Things haven’t changed and it’s not likely that they will be soon, so instead of trying to fight the system, I’ll just go along with it and perform as expected. It will make my college life a lot more peaceful and enjoyable. Imagine what kind of people and what kind of attitudes we would have if we went around holding grudges toward this university. Do you think they really care? They probably feel the fewer minorities, the better. (INT 8/17)

As minority students sense that their criticism and opposition will only lead to their failure in education, they see it necessary to adopt this dual life of identities. Sonny rationalizes their acts of “fronting” in the following way:

**Text 15:**

Sonny Tippens: … our experience at the university is what we make it, to a certain extent. We don’t have to take in everything, and believe it. Just remember it, put it down as the correct answer, and go on with the good grade. Not everything that is heard has to be believed, just recalled for a good grade. (INT 8/17)

This strategy of dual selves is therefore consciously adopted. Students see that the safe houses provide a way in which they can fulfill the expectations of their teachers in order to earn a good grade while retaining their independence and detachment in the hidden spaces of safe houses.

All this shows that students are aware of the challenges facing them and have self-awareness of the need for, and objectives of qualified conformity in certain contexts. We mustn’t be misled by their outward conformity to think that students are simply passive and complacent. If we only had access to the in-group life and personal reasoning processes of the students, we would appreciate their logic for the need of this controversial approach for negotiating identity conflicts. With the data from the safe houses, we can say that the students are on top of the situation. They display agency in taking stock of the challenges facing them and in working out strategic ways of dealing with them. They have a way of explaining to themselves why they use safe houses to negotiate the conflicts for their identity.
Social and educational implications

Can keeping modes of critical learning to the safe houses and adopting conformist identities for on-task activities be of any educational value? Would this seemingly hypocritical approach be detrimental to the learning experience and social life of these minority students? We can first think of many indirect benefits for language awareness and literacy. An important consideration in critical literacy is that students should be encouraged to go beyond adopting the normative textual conventions or grammar structures in their writing practice. They should learn to negotiate the conventions and grammar to develop a text that favors independent and critical thinking. But students are often tempted by two evils: to either follow slavishly the established rules of writing in a genre or not grapple with the conventions at all so that they can enjoy a freedom of expression. As Foucault (1969/1972) argues, both extremes lead to forms of silencing. The former leads to the suppression of voice in favor of dominant textual structures, while the latter is idealistic in believing that voice is possible without following any conventions whatsoever. We have begun to appreciate now that voice is developed in the interstices of discourses and rules (see Foucault, 1969/1972). The detachment safe houses provide from both dominant academic discourses and the vernacular enables students to position themselves strategically for an independent and creative voice.

Furthermore, the retention of heterogeneous discourses and speech acts—thanks to safe houses that help students keep alive suppressed identities and discourses—helps in the development of multivocal literacies. All this is important at a time when we have come to appreciate that texts are not necessarily constructed in univocal discourses and uniform genres in postmodern practices of communication (see Warschauer, 2000). Texts may contain multiple discourses as long as they are given a creative wholeness by the writers to evoke their hybrid identities. The representation of diverse styles and codes within a single text doesn't necessarily lead to its incoherence. The text is getting redefined in the digital world where multiple texts may be embedded within the same text. There is therefore greater scope now for students to bring in alternate or nonacademic discourses—including the vernacular and even street speech—into academic writing. Safe houses provide important practice in negotiating the terms under which nonacademic discourses can be introduced in academic contexts.

The practice of moving between the safe houses and the public sites of the classroom also develops competencies necessary for crossing discourses and community boundaries. This movement between communicative sites and contexts develops important skills for literacy in contemporary society where students are called upon increasingly to shuttle between genres and discourses of diverse communities in order to be socially functional. Students gain practice in such important multilingual communicative strategies as code-switching and style shifting through interactions in the divergent classroom sites. While on-task activities often restrict discourse to the ones officially sanctioned by the school, the safe houses develop competence in nonstandard discourses. Similarly, the ongoing comparison between the vernacular and the mainstream discourses in the relative safety of the underlife helps develop a metadiscursive awareness to engage in these boundary-crossing forms of communication.

In a more direct sense, the safe ways of communicating opposition, practicing suppressed discourses, and adopting controversial identities helps develop strategies of footing. Students are testing out safe and strategic ways of constructing identities desirable to themselves without getting penalized by the academy. These strategies help in academic literacy where students face similar struggles of expressing critical opinions without antagonizing their academic audience. I have presented elsewhere some writing samples of students who bring into their texts some of the strategies they use in safe houses (see Canagarajah, 1997). Donnie, for example, writes a seemingly bland essay filled with quotations from academic sources in his effort to argue that the academy is a racist institution. When one reads the quotations closely, one finds that he has strategically picked these statements from venerable educationists to make allegations against the academy in very direct and expressive terms. This is a safe way of representing Donnie's criticism as he is making his point under the cover of the very academics he is interested in critiquing. Even the tone and style of communication that Donnie prefers are represented through the voice of his sources.

Finally, the practice of safe houses enables certain complex forms of legitimate peripheral participation. Since the classroom as a community of practice involves conflicts and inequalities for minority students (see Toohey, 2000a), they adopt certain detached forms of participation. Though students are slightly detached from the activities of the classroom, they are not completely so. Life in the safe houses has relevance to the pedagogical activities of the classroom. The students are simply orientating to pedagogical matters in different terms. The detachment provided by the safe houses enables them to relate to pedagogical matters in more critical and creative terms—especially from values that matter to them from outside the school. So the safe houses are complementary to the concerns of the school and classroom. The discourses and identities students develop in the safe houses enrich their critical and creative contributions to academic literacies and discourses.

In relation to issues of power, this study enables us to adopt a more complex orientation to micropolitics within society and education. According
to traditional ways of looking at it, safe houses may represent an elaborate form of conformism. After all, if students keep their oppositional discourses and identities to the underlife and simply collude with the dominant discourses in their public life, it is possible that the status quo won’t be challenged in any way. But James Scott (1990) sees more possibilities in what he calls the “infra politics” of underlife behavior. Safe house politics are infra for reasons that they are hidden from the eyes of the others and they represent a form of micropolitics that is not very conspicuous in the impact it has on wider social life. Hidden in the recesses of social spaces are pockets of resistance that have the potential of flowering into something profound and radical. What goes on in the safe houses simply represents a period of strategic mobilization and collaboration for marginalized groups to construct an oppositional culture. In extreme forms of oppression, crisis, or simply with increased confidence among the underprivileged, these hidden cultures may surface. If the tactic of the dominant institutions is to root out any signs of protest or to eliminate any space for the breeding of oppositional ideologies and identities, safe houses represent an outsmarting of the powers that be. The oppressed are collaboratively constructing social spaces that can enable them to form bonds, support each other, develop a critical consciousness, and construct subversive cultures.

We also mustn’t discount the possibilities inherent in imagined communities and identities. Though safe houses represent ideal conditions friendly to minorities that don’t exist outside, they keep alive a vision of the possibilities. Eventually, students may act out their imagined communities and identities. The very contradiction between both enables them to reflect on the differences and develop a keener sensitivity to what is and what could be. The imagined communities can, in fact, be very functional as they develop roles, discourses, and values that counter the dominant institutions and prepare the oppressed to adopt these when the time is ready for change. James Scott (1990) cites the examples of many peasant revolts where the seemingly spontaneous struggle for change is soon characterized by very orderly and planned forms of action. He argues that the members are taking on roles and identities that have been gestating in their communal underlife. Similarly, the discourses and identities students adopt in the safe houses – although they are sometimes playful – may, in fact, be very subversive. They nurture the dream of alternate possibilities in educational and social life.

Conclusion

There are other educational researchers who are beginning to discern alternate sites and cultures in the classroom. Though they don’t theorize pedagogical safe spaces as I have done here, they show that classroom discourses and cultures are more complex than we have imagined. The objective of this essay is to offer these safe houses and sites of student underlife as opening up interesting possibilities for the study of student agency in the construction of alternate identities. An understanding of student life in these domains can creatively complicate our estimation of the critical thinking and learning potential of our students. By tapping the strategies students display here, teachers may help them engage in critical literacy and language acquisition.

Notes

1. For a comprehensive theoretical review of these definitions, see Smith (1988). For an application to language teaching contexts, see Norton (2000).
2. Consider the following publications for masked forms of resistance in these communities: Abu-Lughod (1986); Adas (1992); Guha (1983); and Khare (1984).
3. A study on the challenges for African American students in academic writing was conducted in the University of Texas at Austin as a classroom ethnography. The subjects were part of an orientation course for minority students in order to increase their retention rates. These were all largely middle class students who were assigned to my class by the usual registration process. As a computer-mediated class, I had access to the e-mails, online discussions, and drafts of essays in a semester-long study. My data also constituted sociolinguistic interviews and classroom observation notes (see Canagarajah, 1997). The study with the Sri Lankan students was conducted at the University of Jaffna. These were largely rural students from the Tamil-speaking ethnic group. This was an ethnographic study on the challenges in learning English for general academic purposes. This group of students was also part of my class and they were grouped according to their placement scores. They were among the weakest groups in the entering batch of students. In this year-long study, I gathered data from pre- and post-course interviews, attitudinal surveys, and classroom observation, in addition to texts of writing and speech. The safe house practices were not the focus of the study; they emerged as significant sites of inquiry on classroom culture during the research process (see Canagarajah, 1993). In both cases, I obtained permission from the students to use the diverse forms of data in my research. In the case of the African American students, they signed consent forms giving me access to the e-mail messages after the course was over. The other texts were permitted for use as the course was in progression.
4. This set of data is from the online discussion of the students. Therefore, the conventions of representing them in the text are different from the mail messages cited earlier (in Texts 2–7). The coding at the end of the text refers to the date on which this Interchange discussion (i.e., INT) took place.
5. It is not clear whom Sonny refers to here as his recipients. It appeared to me that there were cliques among the students, with different acronyms to identify them, but I have not been successful in identifying these groups. In terms of discourse, it is possible that Sonny is using this as a secret language.
to confuse the others in the class, especially because this message is sent as an open (i.e., unprotected) e-mail.

6. Sonny often adopts this strategy of violating spelling conventions to parody or mock standard dialect spoken features. Here, he obviously means, "it's been great." Later in this message, he also deliberately misspells scholarship. I have generally cited the messages of the students with the spelling and typographical conventions as in the original.

7. For studies that give insight into safe houses, see Brooke (1987); Lucas and Katz (1994); Martin-Jones and Heller (1996); Miller (1998); and Rampton (1995).

References


