

The Fortunate Traveler: Shuttling between Communities and Literacies by Economy Class

Suresh Canagarajah is an associate professor in English at Baruch College of the City University of New York. He teaches postcolonial literature, Masterpieces of World Literature, ESL, and composition. His research interests span bilingualism, discourse analysis, academic writing, and critical pedagogy. He hails from the Tamil-speaking northern region of Sri Lanka, and taught in the University of Jaffna from 1984 to 1994. Among his publications are *Resisting Linguistic Imperialism in English Teaching* (1999), and research articles in the professional journals *TESOL Quarterly*, *College Composition and Communication*, *Language in Society*, *Written Communication*, *World Englishes*, *Journal of Multilingual and Multicultural Development*, and *Multilingua*. His book *Geopolitics of Academic Literacy and Knowledge Construction* is to be published by the University of Pittsburgh Press in 2001. He has worked with inner-city community service organizations in the South Bronx, Los Angeles, and Washington DC. He contributes to the literary and cultural activities of Tamil refugee groups in North America and Europe.



‘You are so fortunate, you get to see the world – ‘
Indeed, indeed, sirs, I have seen the world.
Spray splashes the portholes and vision blurs.
Derek Walcott, *The Fortunate Traveller* (1986)

While we are seated under the mango trees outside our house on a warm breezy afternoon in Jaffna chatting in Tamil, my Dad suddenly whispers something in English to my mother and they both sneak into the room inside, letting me play with the maid. They would emerge a couple of hours later seeming tired and exhausted, leaving me curious as to what they had uttered in English earlier. There are other occasions when we’ll be talking

about some wayward relatives, when my parents would switch to English to discuss some unpleasant episodes that shouldn't be understood by a four year-old like me. Or, while planning my upcoming birthday party, they would quickly switch to English to talk about a gift or invitee they'd like to keep hidden from me. These early experiences would leave a lasting impression on me of English as a language of secrecy, power, and mystery; a language owned by others, not belonging to me; a language that could put into disadvantage those who aren't proficient in it.

Many weeks and months later I would continue to put one and one together, understand with the help of context, guess the meaning, till I gradually began to break the code. Thus, even before I started attending school, I grew into some rudimentary levels of proficiency in English. My parents later learnt – much to their dismay – that they couldn't use English as a secret code any more between themselves. More dramatically, I joined the in-group now, sharing with them jokes, secrets, and gossip that we kept away from the monolinguals around us (like our maid). It was exhilarating to join the exclusive club of bilinguals (at least the two adults in my house) as we teamed up to put others into disadvantage. It would be much later in life that I would become politically sensitive enough to question the unfair power enjoyed by this language. It is after developing this sensitivity that I would understand the need to teach English critically and share its resources widely in my community to democratize its possibilities. But the strategies that helped me acquire proficiency in the language in my pre-school days would remain with me as I strove to become literate in English. These are the strategies: a curiosity towards the language, the ability to intuit linguistic rules from observation of actual usage, a metalinguistic awareness of the system behind languages, and the ability to creatively negotiate meaning in context. The characteristics of humility, wonder, and excitement over the power and complexity of language have also encouraged my coming into voice in English literacy. In an educational context where there was little explicit teaching of writing, and a social context that was predominantly oral in communicative tradition, such were the inner resources required to develop bilingual literacy. Perhaps these are the secrets of everyday learning – characterized by reflective understanding, strategic thinking, and contextual reasoning – that are at the heart of any educational experience. They sustain me as I negotiate the communicative traditions in Tamil and English – not to mention the hybrid discourses of diverse institutions and contexts – as I continue to develop a literate voice as a bilingual.

Childhood Literacy

I was born into a family that was already bilingual. In fact, both my parents were teachers of English, having done teacher training locally. Our relationship with the dual languages was complicated. We used Tamil for everyday oral communication. But the language of choice for literate activities for my parents was English. Literacy in our family involved more reading than writing. Moreover, we rarely indulged in academic or 'serious' reading and writing. Being literate meant the reading of the bible, newspapers, and some light fictional texts. As children, we were given simple books of nursery rhymes and stories that depicted the life of amiable pigs, ducks and sheep. I remember that these books had a gloss and color that was lacking in locally produced nursery readers in Tamil. Writing meant sending letters to acquaintances or business institutions. This was quite frequent in a community that lacks widespread use of telephones. (My family never had a telephone in Sri Lanka.) The relative status of the type of oral/literate and reading/writing activities we did in either language (which has remained largely the same throughout my life) would influence my written discourse. The Tamil of my oral interactions influences the English of my writing. I have used rhetorical skills of Tamil oral discourse in my English academic texts. This is partly because my family hadn't developed a discourse for English oral interactions or that of Tamil written traditions. The awkward tensions it creates and the creative ways in which it has been negotiated constitute the story of my development as a bilingual writer.

Another important reason why my oral discourse in the vernacular influenced my writing is because there was no explicit teaching of writing during my education in Sri Lanka. The language classes in my secondary school in Jaffna did have a component called essay writing (in addition to grammar, speech, and reading). But the writing instruction consisted of teachers assigning topics for our essays, taking them home for correction, and students reading out aloud their exemplary essays in the next class. The correction usually focused on grammatical, syntactic, and spelling errors. A grade was assigned using a vague/undefined notion of expressive effectiveness. With hindsight, I may call this a product-oriented practice towards writing – although there was no explicit rhetorical theory or teaching practice that motivated teachers to adopt this approach.

I emerged as a writer of no mean standing in this background. I still remember an essay in the Tamil class that was praised by my teacher in grade 6. I was asked to read this to the class as a model of good writing. It was one of those ubiquitous topics in secondary school, i.e. the most memo-

rable experience in my life. I adopted some reflexive moves and dramatic twists that impressed the readers. I narrated an incident during an educational tour organized by my school. I first evoke the excitement and fun among the students as we begin the tour in a chartered bus at daybreak. Then I move to the tragic climax around the middle of the tour: as our bus approaches a railroad crossing on one of those bridges common in Sri Lanka which the trains and cars use alternately, the guard rails on both sides close with the bus trapped in the middle. With the train approaching us, I pause before the inevitable conclusion. I employ a stream of consciousness to dramatize the various feelings and thoughts that rush through my mind in a mixture of flashbacks composed of reality and illusion. As the train nears us, I awake from sleep to realize that all that I had narrated was in fact a dream. Thus I cheat the reader. The expressive effects, the emotional climaxes, suspense, excitement, and personal involvement were very much appreciated. This constituted 'good writing' for my vernacular teacher, my classmates, and me during those days.

My English essays were also usually commended. But before I left school I had an experience that taught me that not everything was okay with a style that heightened feelings and sensation. This occurred in the annual essay-writing competition held by the school for the senior classes. There were many subjects given for us to choose from. Knowing my strength, I chose the subject 'A Day in the Life of a Beggar'. In a chronologically structured essay that begins with daybreak and accompanies the beggar as he goes through the streets to beg for food, I end with his monologue under the awnings of a shop where he spends the night. He reflects on his sad plight and is in tears. I bring out the contrast between the plight of the beggar and the indifference of the rest of the society, much of this through the self-pitying musings of the beggar himself. I was certain that the examiner would be moved to tears by this expressive writing and offer me the prize.

But the decision surprised me. The prize went to a classmate, Seelan, who was in the science stream. He wrote on the subject 'Airplanes'. This was a technical essay on the recent developments in aerospace technology. The differences in both our essays were glaring. Seelan had adopted a restrained prose packed with information. (For the record, my friend was from a considerably more anglicized bilingual family that used English as the home language, and was also an avid reader in English.) It is possible that he was more influenced by the literate discourse in English while my writing showed the trace of oral discourse from the vernacular. We must also note here the background of the examiner. Though other English teachers had appreciated my expressive writing in English, this teacher

(who was very senior in the school) had done some education in England, held a Master's degree, and was deeply inducted into English literacy. It is possible that this teacher's background made him appreciate a different discourse. But, interestingly, no explanation was given as to why the prize was awarded to the essay on airplanes. Our teachers didn't have the language to theorize decisions and assessments on writing. (There was only a single examiner for this contest, implying the belief that conclusive judgments could be made by anyone according to presumably universally accepted standards.) Since we weren't given any explanations, I was left to learn by trial and error. But one incident of negative feedback was not sufficient to teach me that expressive/emotional writing was not the only or best mode of writing in the world.

College Literacy

There was not much difference in my writing strategy when I proceeded to the more cosmopolitan capital city to obtain my first degree. I was majoring in English. The course work consisted mainly of lectures on literature – from Chaucer to Eliot and after. There was just one course on 'language' – which featured a structuralist approach to the description of grammar. What were called 'tutorial classes' – an hour a week – were reserved for writing assignments deriving from the lectures. A tutor was assigned to small groups of four or five students. The essays we wrote weekly were graded largely according to content. The rhetorically oriented comments were scribbles in the margins, like 'original insight', 'interesting idea', or 'meaning not clear' and the flagging of awkward syntax. The discussions in the class featured our reactions to the content of the essays. In a sense, these tutorial classes were somewhat personalized versions of our other lecture classes. In fact, in some tutorial classes there was very little writing. The hour was spent discussing the assigned texts in a collaborative, discussion-oriented manner. While the English department recognized the need for effective writing skills by assigning an hour for this purpose, there was no understanding about how this was to be inculcated.

I was left to learn by trial and error once again. When one of my essays in the first year was praised by my tutorial instructor for original insights and fresh use of language and was awarded an A, I thought this approach was what was appreciated in the university. I took my style a step further in my next essay. This was on the short story by Faulkner, *Dry September*. In this story a black man is lynched after being falsely accused of rape by an aging white woman. My essay was an interpretation of the evils of racism. In passionate prose, replete with rhetorical questions and exclamations, I

moralized on the implications of the story: 'O why, why should people be judged on the basis of their skin? When will prejudice ever end? When will we begin to look at people as human beings and not as black, brown, or yellow?!...' This paper was rewarded with an A and praised for its 'powerful language', its very 'personal response,' and relating the text to life.

There was some evidence that this style was not widely appreciated even in Sri Lanka. I recollect that the lecturers who gave me good grades (two of them in particular) had earned their first degrees locally and were doing their postgraduate degrees in Sri Lanka. They were also more deeply grounded in the vernacular literary and language traditions. But our examination scripts were marked by senior instructors who had obtained their doctorates in British universities. Here I didn't fare that well. I didn't see any As for my essays in the final tests. In fact, I remember one of my senior lecturers asking whether I really needed all the exclamations in my essays! (There goes another of my exclamations.) But that was the closest they came to posing a meta-textual (or even textual) comment on my writing. I began to intuit that the exaggerated, passionate, personalized style of writing wasn't universally appreciated in the academic community. But since there was little overt theorization or meta-discursive commentary on styles of writing, it was difficult for me to understand the rationale behind these different responses.

I must remark here, with the benefit of hindsight, that some of the different discursive influences – that of my local communicative tradition and the Western tradition – were coming into conflict in this formative experience of my literacy development. The predominantly oral influence in the vernacular tradition values the feelings, personalization, exaggeration, and hyperbole of communication. The restraint typical of serious Western writing is considered bland and mechanical. It is not surprising that my instructors who were rooted in the vernacular tradition (even though they were teachers of English) appreciated the discursive strengths I brought from this tradition. Of course, teachers who came from the traditional bilingual elite (with postgraduate education in the West) had an instinctive discomfort with this style – although they didn't have the language or tools to explain their preference. On the whole, both kinds of my teachers show the hybrid discursive traditions and styles of textuality that exist in postcolonial bilingual communities.

Joining The Academic Community

When I moved to the USA for my graduate studies, many of my sources of cultural shock pertained to text construction. In the very first essay I

wrote in my first semester at Bowling Green State University – an appreciation of a poem by Randall Jarrel – I found the instructor's red pen used a bit too much for my liking. He wanted to know why I didn't have two spaces after my periods, a single space after my commas, and five spaces at the beginning of my paragraphs. He wanted to know why the first sentences of my paragraph announced one thing while the rest of the paragraph went on to talk about different matters. He underlined my occasional typographical mistakes and called them spelling errors (I was new to typing; all my essays in Sri Lankan schools and universities had been handwritten, as typewriters and computers are hard to come by). He also referred to my occasional Sri Lankan idiom as grammatical or syntactical errors. His B minus was by now not surprising to me. I knew that he had gone totally out of his mind. With much exasperation I asked him, 'Don't you have anything to say about the original ideas I was developing in this essay? Did you only look at these insignificant mechanics of my paper to give me that grade?' I was, of course, expressing the bias of my community that content is more important than form. He blurted out something like, 'But these things *are* important'. What struck me as peculiar about his approach was the heightened sensitivity to the materiality of my text – the physical representation of what I was trying to communicate. It was shocking to learn that there were such numerous detailed rules and conventions relating to the encoding of ideas on the page.

It was fortunate that my graduate advisor had enrolled me for a course titled 'Bibliographical and Research Methods' in my very first semester. I soon learnt the documentation methods and citation conventions of various style manuals – like the MLA, APA, and Chicago. Although my real induction into academic discourse was to come later, this introduction to the textual conventions of writing was important to me. I also learnt to consider books as 'products' and understand such matters as copyright, reprints, and other conventions of the publishing process. Another component of the course was the introduction to word-processing. As I went through the routines of opening, saving, closing, and reopening files in the Macintoshes in the university computer lab, I realized what a fortuitous move this was. Not only did word-processing erase all the traces of my bad typing, the ease of producing successive drafts enabled me to give the kind of attention to the text demanded by my American professors. I enjoyed re-reading and revising my texts, as I didn't have to hand-write or manually type each draft all over again.

As for mastering the discursive aspects of academic literacy, this took a more difficult route. My reflective learning and critical thinking on the feedback of my professors enabled me to make some crucial insights into

differences in style, structure, and tone. When a young assistant professor teaching American Transcendental literature used his red pencil liberally – and pointed out that my introduction didn't lay down the outline of my argument or announce my thesis, and that my essay started at one point and ended at another point – I was disturbed. Soon I couldn't take it any more. After carefully choosing my words, I met him in his office to tell him that my strategy of developing an argument had a different logic all its own. I chose the terms inductive and deductive to articulate the difference. While he was demanding a deductive approach, which already anticipated the concluding point of the argument, mine was an inductive approach that proceeded gradually towards the thesis in the last paragraph after providing the relevant evidence first. When this failed to break his resistance, I brought my trump card. I said that, since I was from a British colony, I was inducted into a more leisurely writing style (that sustained a certain amount of suspense, discovery, and involvement in communication typical in British scholarly writing) while the American academic style was too rigid, calculated, circular, and self-confirming. This explanation seemed to make better sense to the professor and he began to comprehend my essays. But I must say that the professor's careful attention to the construction of my paragraphs and development of my essay sensitized me to a more self-conscious use of language and discourse.

The real watershed in my transition to the literacy expected in the American academy would come through a more ironic route. I *learnt* a lot about academic writing by *teaching* composition to undergraduate students. Around this time, I was also registered for a course on Rhetoric and Composition – a requirement for teaching assistants in the English department. As I perused the textbooks of my students and also studied the recommended reading from my course (featuring the cognitive process approach of Flower, Hayes, Emig, and others of this period), I could understand better the thinking of my American teachers. The textbooks defined for me such textual structures as topic sentences, thesis statements, body paragraphs, supporting details, and transitions. The course work introduced me to the processes of brainstorming, outlining, and idea development. Used to valuing the poignancy of spontaneous communication, these cognitive routines and structural features forced me to detach myself from my writing and thus develop a more restrained, objective prose. Having mastered the magic formula of academic writing, it was not difficult to cruise through graduate school with effortless ease. I thought I had reached the culmination of my progression into academic literacy. This feeling was confirmed when my early submissions to leading professional

journals like *TESOL Quarterly*, *World Englishes*, and *Language in Society* got accepted without much fuss.

An Outsider at Home

That this formula of academic text construction was not universally appreciated I was to discover when I returned to Sri Lanka to teach in my hometown after my doctorate. The reactions of my colleagues to my publications were not that enthusiastic. While some of them had praised my style in the articles I had written to local newspapers and magazines before my departure to the West, now they were enigmatically silent. Though they did not express openly their dissatisfaction at the new discourse I was adopting, their feelings were conveyed in other subtle ways. The only essay that one of my colleagues (who frequently edits my essays) approved was the article I published in *World Englishes*. This was different from my other articles. While the others reported empirically-based ethnographic or sociolinguistic research, this essay was on literature. I did a close reading of some Sri Lankan poets in English to bring out the ways they negotiated the competing discourses (i.e. of the vernacular and English). The essay was thus more impressionistic and less detached than my other essays, which fell into the typical IMRD (i.e. introduction-methodology-results-discussion) structure of research reporting. The fact that my colleagues appreciated my imaginative evocation of poetry in *World Englishes* did suggest their tastes and preferences in academic writing.

Another instructive experience was my first attempt at writing an academic paper in the vernacular. Since the main contribution to the academic life in the local context was in Tamil, I had to write in the vernacular in order to show the relevance of my scholarship at home. In an essay on contemporary Tamil poetry, I adopted my newly learnt writing skills from my American graduate school. For example, my introduction followed a move typical of the well-established CARS model (standing for 'Creating A Research Space' as formulated by John Swales). I outlined my purpose in that essay, defined how my contribution differed from existing scholarship, indicated the structure of my argument, and spelt out my thesis statement. My colleagues, who rarely indulged in meta-talk on writing styles, were suddenly quite vocal in expressing their disappointment. Even some of my students came up to me and said that the introductory paragraph had sounded a bit too pompous and over-confident. They explained that in the vernacular tradition (in lectures if not in writing) one opens with an *avai aTakkam* (i.e. humbling oneself in the court). The speaker starts with a brief confession of his/her limitations, praises the knowledge

of the audience, and attributes whatever knowledge he might develop in his/her talk to others (i.e. elders, teachers, God). As the term *avai* (court) reveals, this rhetorical practice must have developed in the feudal social formation of the past. But the ethos of the scholar/rhetor is still influenced considerably by such an attitude. My cocksure way of beginning the essay – announcing my thesis, delineating the steps of my argument, promising to prove my points conclusively – left another bad taste in the local readership. They said that this excessively planned and calculated move gave the impression of a ‘style-less,’ mechanical writing. Although I had attempted this mode of writing half-mischievously, I understood that a better strategy was to find ways of encoding the planned/disciplined/organized ways of writing without putting off my readers by sounding self-conscious, self-controlled, or self-confident.

In terms of material resources and institutional support for literate activity, there were striking differences between the academic cultures of USA and Sri Lanka. Initially, the lack of many of the facilities I had enjoyed in the United States was a source of discomfort. I couldn’t word-process my drafts anymore. I had to first write them by hand, before typing the final draft for submission. Also because stationery was not easily available in war-torn Jaffna, I had to write fewer drafts. The lack of electricity and power reduced my writing time to the daylight hours. The badly equipped libraries didn’t always help me in my citations and documentation of references. My colleagues couldn’t help me much in the writing process. They would read my essays and enjoy discovering the new information, but rarely comment on them. At most, they would comment on some editing and typographical problems. It was difficult to expect too much from my colleagues as they lacked the induction into the Western publishing culture to comment authoritatively on matters of convention, style, or content. I had to develop the practice of re-reading my papers many times from different angles to aid revision. This contrast from the writing process in the West made me experience keenly the ways in which material/social contexts influence writing. I developed a cynicism towards cognitive process theories and pedagogues that reduce writing to an idealized mental activity.

But after a period of despondency, I adjusted my literate life style to suit my new context of work. I gradually opened my eyes to some of the features in the local academic culture that would help my writing activity. Most significant of these advantages is the lack of a publish-or-perish axiom in my institution. This removed the pressure from writing, and provided more time for reflection/revision. Gradually I adopted the practice of composing sections of my paper in the daytime (when the sun was

still up), while the night-time was spent on mulling over my points and working out my arguments mentally. Since there was no electricity, I couldn't read or write during the nights anyway. Furthermore, I had to plan the whole paper well in advance as it was difficult to write multiple drafts of revision (especially because I had to write them by hand with little spare paper). In retrospect, these were some of the best organized papers I wrote in my academic life. I ended up having a greater sense of control over what I was writing. The papers appear to be more coherent and smooth flowing. The relaxed nature of the writing enabled me to enjoy the writing process. Despite the disadvantages here, the papers I published in *Multilingua*, *Language and Education*, and *Language Culture and Curriculum* – in addition to *TESOL Quarterly*, *World Englishes*, and *Language in Society* – were all written in Jaffna.

An Outsider in the Western Academy

I moved again to the United States in Fall 1994 after four years of teaching in Sri Lanka. It was partly my frustration with the conditions of academic work there that drove me to relocate. For instance, the postal system and all form of communication between my hometown and the rest of the world had literally broken down. I couldn't get the latest research information in time. I faced tremendous practical problems in keeping up with academic developments elsewhere. However, I have mixed feelings about my literacy life here in the West. The facilities for writing are all in place (i.e. computer, laser printer, stationery, mailing services, libraries, internet). But I feel that my writing process has suffered in some important ways. The availability of all these facilities has made me intellectually and rhetorically lazy. I plan less extensively now, as I know that the word processor will let me revise things as much as I want to. I cut and paste from other drafts more often. (Though I eventually revise for coherence and erase all traces of pastiche, I find these drafts less powerful than the drafts I hand wrote.) In fact, I don't enjoy the writing process as I used to in Sri Lanka. Sometimes the very thought that all this writing contributes to earning my tenure deadens my enthusiasm. Even the recent papers I have managed to publish in coveted journals like the *College Composition and Communication* and *Written Communication* seem overworked, littered with references, and convoluted in argument in an effort to satisfy scrupulous reviewers.

Traces of my vernacular discourse are increasingly visible in my writing nowadays. Perhaps it is the fact that I am less in control of my writing process, perhaps it is the influence of my brief interlude in the culture of my

native academic community, or perhaps it is my flirtations with vernacular academic writing that is to blame for this. But some of the criticism of my reviewers has in fact made me aware of the ways in which issues of style and tone could have ideological implications. A case in point is the paper titled, 'American textbooks and Tamil students: A clash of discourses in the ESL classroom.' It presently appears in the journal *Language Culture and Curriculum* (1993:6/2: 143–156). It was first sent to an 'international' ESOL journal published in America. The American reviewers (whose identity is betrayed by the spelling conventions, as you will see in the quote below) rejected publication based on the view that the display of feelings in the paper shows me as too ideologically biased against the West. This is how one reviewer opens his/her comments:

Certainly, impassioned writing is to be admired, especially if it is grounded in theoretical writings, as much of this article is. Despite these valid aspects of the article, the unnecessarily hostile tone of the writer towards the specific materials used and towards Western society and values in general undermines the logic of this argument While I will always support provocative articles which enable readers to re-examine long-held beliefs, articles whose logic is obscured by hostility are counterproductive. Rather than open dialog, they preclude it. For this reason, I am not recommending publication.

It is interesting how this reviewer (in such an important gate-keeping context) still adheres to the classic Western stereotype that feelings are against logic. More importantly, the display of feelings becomes an excuse to proscribe writing that is ideologically critical. Hostility (which is defined as 'unnecessary') can be a reason to bar a paper from publication.

Although I always remind myself of the need to restrain my display of feelings in my writing, feelings get encoded in my texts quite unknown to me! There is a limit to how much I can suppress my subjectivity in my writing. In papers such as the above, where I had done considerable rounds of revision to subdue my feelings before sending it to the publisher, feelings do get displayed nevertheless. In fact, in most cases it appears to me that the level of feelings I find acceptable in an academic paper differs for center and periphery scholars. Coming from an oral rhetorical tradition where feelings are an index of one's conviction in one's position and of truth, I have come to think of feelings as never totally eradicable in my writing. It is therefore no more surprising to me to hear reviewers saying that they detect feelings in my paper.

That such differences in attitudes towards affect can have ideological implications is conveyed by what followed in the case of the paper

mentioned above. Since I was working on another project at the time the reviewers sent back that paper, I couldn't start revising it immediately. I therefore decided to send it to another journal for consideration before I reworked it. So I sent the paper without any revision to *Language Culture and Curriculum*. To my surprise, the paper was accepted with absolutely no requests for changes. In fact, the manuscript was not sent back to me for any further work. The editor's letter simply stated that the reviewers had found the paper eminently publishable and that they would go ahead with scheduling the paper for printing. (I must point out that the editor of this journal is from Ireland, where much of the production seems to be taking place, although the publisher, Multilingual Matters, is based in Clevedon, England.) The issue here is not only that the British/Irish reviewers had a greater tolerance level for affect. It is possible also that their own feelings were not ruffled by the critical comments I was making of American textbooks and pedagogical dominance. They probably sympathized with my argument against American dominance, as they themselves are victimized by it!

The reactions of my colleagues in Sri Lanka to my publishing activity in the United States has further impressed upon me the way in which style can be ideological. Consider their ironic reactions to the paper I published in *Written Communication* (1996), where I articulated the problems periphery scholars face in getting their papers published in mainstream journals. My colleagues felt that my political insights didn't go far enough or were diluted or compromised by the type of writing I was indulging in. Some felt that there was a tone of condescension in my attitude to periphery scholars since I was addressing center academics as an insider in the latter's circles. In making accommodations to the writing conventions of center publishing institutions, I had also ended up representing my colleagues in ways that were not appreciated by them. To my surprise, my attempts to represent my colleagues was judged by them as a misrepresentation of their interests and values. Thanks to my colleagues from Sri Lanka, I have become alert to the contradictions of representing periphery concerns and subjects in a discourse that is so alien to their interests and traditions.

Such experiences have taught me many things: that the conventions governing academic discourse are partisan; that the judgements on the acceptability of feelings/affect and other matters of tone or style are considerably subjective, differing according to the culture of the various scholarly communities; that matters of style can be ideological with different prospects for highlighting or suppressing a critical perspective. I have been emboldened by these experiences to now reconsider my literacy development. Perhaps I shouldn't have gone to such lengths to suppress

my feelings and ethos in my early journal articles. My writing strategy has been to write myself out of my texts. Thus my entry into the respectable center journals may have been earned at the cost of my subjectivity. On the other hand, I realize that I have always encoded feelings and personal modes of argumentation quite unwittingly, even when I focused on satisfying primarily the dominant modes of academic communication. I now consider ways in which I should infuse my vernacular rhetorical strengths into the academic discourse more consciously and confidently. I also feel more comfortable about attempting new forms of coherence in my writing that incorporate different voices and discourses. The current critique of texts and discourses defined in univocal and homogeneous terms has also given me confidence to construct multivocal, heteroglossic texts that show an active negotiation of the academic conventions from the basis of my vernacular oral rhetorical strengths. I am now constantly trying out ways of reconciling the competing discourses in a manner that is more satisfying to both my politics and poetics. This approach enables me to be at peace with myself in my writing activity.

Conclusion

Can I provide any hints for other non-native writers that will help them engage in academic discourse confidently in their professional life? Is there a secret for my success? I have mixed feelings about these questions. On the one hand, I don't feel I am 'successful' – I am still a student of academic discourse, restlessly experimenting in order to find a suitable voice in this discourse. (It is possible that it is this creative tension that has given life to my writing so far.) I also feel that I have not been provided with pedagogical or technical recipes that have helped me achieve mastery in writing. This is because I had my formative education in a community which doesn't indulge in much meta-talk about writing, and the theories handed to me during my graduate studies in the West have not always understood the unique challenges confronting a periphery scholar like me. But from another point of view, there *are* some lessons I have learnt during my literacy development that can help others. These are largely intuitive realizations and reflective insights that derive from the diverse contexts and cultures of writing I have been situated in.

To begin with, I find that being caught between conflicting and competing writing traditions, discourses, or languages is not always a 'problem.' These tensions can be resourceful in enabling a rich repertoire of communicative strategies. The conflicts I have faced as I shuttled between my native community and Western academic community generated many

useful insights into the ideological and rhetorical challenges in academic communication. I developed a keener appreciation of the strengths and limitations of either discursive tradition. It was probably a blessing that I was an outsider in *both* the center and periphery academic communities! The restlessness that was created by these rhetorical contexts generated a sense of experimentation towards finding ways of cultivating my voice in the academy. Perhaps all writing involves ways of appropriating the available conventions and discourses from the standpoint of one's ideological and rhetorical preferences. Coming from a non-native language group, this truth was conveyed to me all the more glaringly. I learnt about appropriating the dominant conventions or developing multivocal texts, not from postmodernist academic scholarship, but from the painful personal experience of shuttling between discourse communities. Perhaps the qualities that helped me treat my conflicts positively and educationally were the traits I identified at the beginning of the essay – i.e. humility in the face of knowledge, a reflective learning attitude, critical questioning of dominant practices, and contextually grounded theorization. It is somewhat anticlimactic to point to these very fundamental learning strategies as those that helped me in my progress towards a confident play with academic conventions. But these are, after all, the skills and strategies that lead to a constructive, self-directed, everyday learning experience. This is how I became a bilingual when I was a child. This is how I have grown to manipulate competing literacy conventions as an adult.

References

- Walcott, D. (1986) The Fortunate Traveller. In *Collected Poems 1948–1984* (p. 460). New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux.
- Canagarajah, S. (1996) Non-discursive requirements in academic publishing, material resources of periphery scholars, and the politics of knowledge production. *Written Communication* 13 (4), 435–472.