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REPRESENTING AND NEGOTIATING DIFFERENCES IN THE CONTACT ZONE

Min-Zhan Lu

Questions for Pre-Reading

1. In the opening paragraph Min-Zhan Lu writes that "conflict and struggle" are necessary for "any attempt to achieve multiculturalism in the United States of today." What do you make of the essay beginning with this claim?
2. What do you think about Lu's examples of "cultural tourism"? What examples of cultural tourism come to mind from your experiences or those of people you know?
3. How will you respond to Lu's statement that "the freedom of the privileged is oftentimes grounded in the oppression of an other"? Notice that she didn't write "another" but "an other." What could she mean by that?
4. Lu maintains that life in the contact zone "invites us to cause waves, to ask how and why rather than just nodding politely to statements with which we agree or disagree." How and why do you agree and/or disagree with her about how best to respond to contact zones?

Questions for Relating to Other Selections

1. Explore the writer's claim that most people are "eager to identify with democratic ideals such as justice, equality, and freedom for all." Is Lu correct that we can "mobilize . . . the moral power of American democratic ideals . . . to pressure ourselves to overcome our fear of entering a contact zone"? How can we mobilize this moral power that represents the best that is in us all? Does Peter Lamborn Wilson, in "Against Multiculturalism," share any version of Lu's trust in an idealistic democratic core to most Americans that can be mobilized for constructive cross-cultural or cross-racial contact zone work?
2. What would a dialogue between Lu and Wilson be like, do you suppose, if each were asked to review the other's selection in this book?

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Specifically, imagine how they would talk about and relate Lu's "cultural tourism" focus to Wilson's rejection of multiculturalism as "hegemonic particularism."

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In an essay on multiculturalism in the academy, "Arts of the Contact Zone," Mary Louise Pratt defines the contact zone as a "social space 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 as they are lived out in many parts of the world today" (34). I am taken by the image of a "contact zone" because it foregrounds the necessary conflict and struggle involved in any attempt to achieve multiculturalism in the United States of today. However, learning to live cultural differences in a contact zone is challenging for all members of our society, those at the center as well as those on the margins, for it works against the grain of several common-sense views of diversity. When grasping one's relationship with diverse cultural sites, most of us tend to take an either/or approach: 1) we perceive cultures as discrete and self-contained rather than interactive and constructed in relation to others; 2) we perceive ourselves as strictly inside one and outside the rest of cultures; 3) we view our cultural identity as strictly determined by such markers as place of birth, nationality, skin color, or other biological features; 4) we view issues of race, class, and gender as separate rather than intersecting. These prevalent approaches to diversity, working with a general emphasis on product over process, often lead us to "tour" cultures supposedly alien to those we consider our own. That is, our attempts at

achieving multiculturalism tend to slide into a kind of "cultural tourism" in which we try to know more about diverse cultures by reading more texts written by and about people of diverse cultures without challenging the monocultural and, at times, even centrist point of view we habitually take toward these alien cultures. We assume that we are somehow outside of rather than implicated in the cultures *about* which we talk, read, and write; and we treat them as fixed and discrete entities or "things" to be recognized, grasped, and boiled down to bits of information which we can then in turn "have" and keep in our minds as souvenirs of our tour.

Let me use a personal story to explain my quarrel with cultural tourism as a method of living cultural difference. When I first arrived in this country, I took a bus tour through Harlem in New York City. At that time, for twenty-five dollars or so, you could take a bus tour to see all the attractions of New York City in one day. Harlem was listed as one of them, along with the Statue of Liberty, the United Nations building, and Chinatown. The only difference between visits to these later attractions and the visit to Harlem was that when we got to Harlem, the bus drove straight through instead of stopping to allow us to get off and visit gift shops. After making sure that all the windows and doors on the bus had been securely locked, the tour guide pointed out the famous spots of Harlem for us, including a building where the body of one of the Kennedy kids had been found with a drug overdose.

For me, this ride through Harlem highlights all the limitations of cultural tourism. There we were, a busful of tourists. Under the supervision of the guide, we gazed at Harlem safely through the glass, with the lens of someone interested in presenting the United States as not only advanced and prosperous but also tolerant of the quaint lifestyles of ethnic enclaves. The glass partition guaranteed that the "culture" of Harlem remained an object separated from and studied by those on the bus. The tour guide's portable voice amplifier made sure that the diverse points of view held by those inside and outside the bus were overpowered by the guide's. So at the end of the tour, we all went our separate ways with bits and pieces of new information neatly tucked away in our minds: a few glimpses of the people and streets of Harlem, a list of names and events associated with it, and, for some of us, a few thoughts on some of the things ignored by the guide. There was no exchange among the people on the bus. Nor did any of us on the bus attempt to find out the views of the people living in Harlem, not to mention any possibility of being challenged and reshaped by their views.

Variations of this type of cultural tourism take place around us all the time. For instance, it is not unusual in college classrooms for a professor

to assign a text in which an unfamiliar culture is discussed and then lecture on the main points being made about that culture without analyzing the particular perspective toward that culture taken by the author of the text or the professor himself in his interpretation of it. It is also fairly standard in some classrooms to expect students to do no more than imbibe and regurgitate the points of view of these authorities by taking class notes and doing multiple-choice tests designed to evaluate their ability to retain these views. Other examples of this lack of attention to the perspective shaping the tour can be found, ironically, in instances where special cautions are taken to make certain that the tour is conducted by an "authentic," local guide. For example, a few decades ago, a library interested in promoting multiculturalism decided to organize a lecture series on books by "ethnic" writers. Upon finding out that I would be teaching a course titled "Writings from the Borderlands," in which I'd be using many of the books included in the series, the series coordinator asked me if I would lecture on Maxine Hong Kingston's novel *Woman Warrior*. I thought it would be nice if I could give the lecture after I'd had a chance to discuss the book with the students in my class so that I could talk in my lecture about how we negotiated the potential differences in cultural positions taken by the writer, teacher, students, and characters rather than just giving the lecture audience my interpretation of the book. But there was a schedule conflict. The lecture series was scheduled for the first two months of the term, and I would not be using Kingston's book until the end of term. How about having me do the lecture on another book in the series instead, I asked. For instance, I'd just finished teaching Judith Ortiz Cofer's book *Silent Dancing* and would love to talk about how my class and I read it. After a long and awkward silence at the other end of the phone, the coordinator mumbled something about the need to match the book with the speaker. Being Chinese rather than Puerto Rican, I didn't "match."

One of the assumptions operating behind this tendency to match the site with the guide, I believe, is cultural tourism's equation of authentic knowledge of a culture with membership in that culture from birth. Following such logic, my authority to guide a tour through a book on Chinese culture is guaranteed by my having been born a Chinese and thus my ability to pass as a local. This assumption identifies perspectives shaping my interpretation of the book as unequivocally at the center of and one with those of all Chinese: Kingston, the characters in her book, or others who live in places like the ones Kingston portrays. This assumption ignores the ways in which particular perspectives, such as my experience of alienation in Chinatowns or my preference for postmodern

narrative style, might mediate my view of the book. In fact, for cultural tourism, attention to such factors could be only an unwelcome complication of the authority of the guide and a distraction from the smooth transmission of knowledge that ought to take place during the tour. It is precisely my obvious "Chineseness" that would call attention to the issue of perspective, and that automatically disqualifies me as a guide to a book such as *Silent Dancing*, which would require a Puerto Rican guide.

In opposition to such cultural tourism as an approach to cultural difference, I want to suggest that instead, when viewing and talking about diverse cultures, we represent and negotiate cultural differences in the contact zone. The image of a contact zone, a social space where cultures grapple with one another, can focus our energy on the asymmetrical relations of power existing within and among cultures and on the need to bring about change in these power relations. To go back to my example of the bus tour, approaching Harlem in the contact zone would push me to do four things I didn't do during the tour: 1) view the culture represented by the people within and outside the bus in terms of their interrelationships and interactions; 2) attend to the differences within these cultures cutting along lines such as race, gender, class, sexual orientation, profession, education, and religion; 3) approach the differences within and among these cultures in the context of their often asymmetrical power relationships; 4) consider ways of renegotiating such relationships following the purpose of multiculturalism. For most of us on the bus, to approach cultural differences in the contact zone would mean setting aside our privileges, forsaking the shelter of the glass partitions, and eliminating the amplification of the tour guide's voice so that we could grapple with the voices of those shut out by such privileges. And as Pratt notes of the contact zone, it would require that we import a lifeway in which "no one is excluded and no one is safe," a lifeway which might reshape each of us in radically different ways (39).

This is no small job for anyone, for it will involve each of us in continuing struggle against our existing habits of thinking about cultural differences and revision of our existing knowledge of ourselves and the world around us. For example, I remember feeling pretty "liberal" during the tour through Harlem: I'd made an effort to know more about an unfamiliar culture, and I had managed to become more knowledgeable about its distinctiveness without condemning it. I could now claim that I was there, had seen this and that, and I knew x, y, and z about Harlem when topics such as the Harlem Renaissance or Black Nonstandard Dialect surfaced. Looking back, I think my liberal complacency came mostly from my then unequivocal sense of my identity:

I was a Chinese graduate student of English. This sense of myself allowed me to dissociate from two groups I perceived as implicated in the economic and racial discrimination taking place in Harlem: a white corporate America and a so-called "Chinatown" that I took to consist mostly of small business owners and employees who I believed viewed all blacks as stupid, lazy, violent, and dishonest. I felt I was able to transcend these groups' economic interests and their ignorance of the rich cultural heritage of Harlem.

The concept of a contact zone, with its emphasis on interaction, asymmetrical power relationships, and radical change would challenge such liberal complacency about cultural diversity. When I told myself I was this and not that, I was representing cultural diversity in two ways. In identifying myself as a Chinese, I was depicting cultural differences in terms of a world divided between black, white, and Chinese cultures. In identifying myself as a graduate student, I was projecting a world divided into corporate, academic, and small-business cultures. In each case, I had depicted myself as solidly within one and outside the other two. I was also representing cultural differences politically by acting as a spokesperson for the interests of only one of the three cultures. That is, I was mostly speaking in the interests of the so-called "highly educated" within the Chinese community.

In trying to revise such a form of representation in the contact zone, I would have to put my depiction of cultural difference in the context of the asymmetrical power relations among these cultures in contemporary U.S. society. For instance, my self-representation as a Chinese graduate student of English had privileged the viewpoint of an academic culture, one which believes that its interest in scholarship can enable its members to transcend the material interests and the racist ignorance of the other groups. The ethos of multiculturalism would also require that I try to be accountable for the interests of the least powerful groups in my two representations of the United States: the interests of the African Americans in a society cut by racial divisions and the interests of small businesses in a society dominated by economic and educational capital. For example, I could consider how employees in a grocery store in Chinatown or Harlem might respond to my liberal condescension. This question could lead me to consider why only "they," not "I," were working for a small business located in a place such as Chinatown or Harlem. This might in turn help me bring back into awareness the ways in which one's access to formal education and fluency in written English affect one's ability to obtain jobs outside small business and in locations other than Chinatown and Harlem. This line of thinking points to the

extent to which Standard English and educational certification divide the United States and protect the interests of the educated, including people like myself as well as members of white corporate America. As a result, it would make problematic my assumed separation from white corporate America and help me instead to acknowledge my implication in all forms of exclusion perpetuated by the social power of Standard English and formal education taking place in Harlem and Chinatown. The only way I might disrupt rather than perpetuate the asymmetrical power relationships would be to search for the viewpoints of members of the so-called uneducated in Harlem and Chinatown and to let these points of view confront and grapple with my "educated" approach to cultural differences. My grasp of the political dimension of my self-representation as a graduate student would also remind me of my interests in speaking as a Chinese American. This ought to push me to attend to the differences in the kind and degree of racial and educational discrimination experienced by members of the African American and Chinese American communities as a result of the slavery of blacks in U.S. history, so that the viewpoints of the least powerful of the three racial groups depicted in my self-positioning—the African American culture and people—could grapple with the views of the other cultures.

In short, the concept of the contact zone would challenge any complacency toward my existing knowledge of myself, Harlem, white corporate America, and Chinatown small business. Instead, it would point me to the need to struggle against my existing habits of talking and thinking and to search for alternative and oppositional points of view. And it would map out lines of inquiry to be used for revising my existing knowledge of myself and of cultural differences. Living cultural diversity in a contact zone poses challenges for most of us because it works against powerful beliefs which have become common sense in today's United States. To begin with, life in the contact zone rejects the notion of an authentic self. Instead of affirming the belief that there is some kind of stable essence within each of us called "me"—an essence guaranteed by one's skin color, nationality, ethnic heritage, biological features, and so on—the concept of the contact zone teaches us to perceive one's self as continually being formed and reformed. Furthermore, this self is seen as made and changed through interaction with others in the process of negotiating with those with less—as well as more—privilege than oneself. This image of a self in the making challenges our faith in freedom of self-expression. It asks us to assume accountability for the operation of power in any expression of the self. For the freedom of the privileged is oftentimes grounded in the oppression of an other. Life in the contact

zone also pushes us to work against our belief in pluralistic consensus. Instead of assuming that we all have a right to think and act as we choose without consequence, we perceive our personal choices as actions which can have effects on the often unequal distribution of power across cultures. Thus, it requires that each of us envision ourselves as actively negotiating rather than passively observing cultural differences when approaching "alien" peoples and cultures.

In addition to challenging common beliefs in the unchanging essence of the self and freedom of expression, the concept of the contact zone also challenges the view of knowledge as a commodity. As cultural critics have repeatedly pointed out, dominant institutions in the United States are structured to promote the smooth transaction of goods rather than to enhance confrontation and change. One of these "goods" is knowledge, especially knowledge that has been commodified, backed up by seemingly self-evident facts yielding definitive explanations of things. In this view, the authority of a cultural broker rests on the knowledge she possesses and her ability to pass that knowledge on to others. Life in the contact zone, on the other hand, requires each of us to shift attention away from knowledge transmission toward the process by which knowledge is made: to examine the institutional source of our right to study and know and our access to the means of knowing. Life in the contact zone promotes the act of revision, encouraging each of us to constantly re-view and re-make our existing knowledge by experimenting with points of view oppositional to and suppressed by the views that we each habitually employ. Such a lifeway could produce radical changes in our personal lives and in society, changes which for most of us would involve sharing privileges and power taken for granted as rightly ours. The contact zone makes the transaction of knowledge a risky business. Our authority can no longer be ensured by the amount of knowledge we currently have. Rather, we are constantly pushed to challenge and revise the very knowledge we believe ourselves to have acquired.

Let me use a short story by Sandra Cisneros, "Little Miracles, Kept Promises," to argue for a form of discussion representative of life in the contact zone. "Little Miracles, Kept Promises" has appeared regularly in anthologies on multicultural issues because of the identity of the author and its subject matter. The author has been identified as multicultural because of her Mexican American cultural heritage and because her writings portray life within the Latino community in Chicago and Texas (Vitale). "Little Miracles, Kept Promises," as the editors of one anthology put it, tells a story about a tradition which "consists entirely of letters to saints. In keeping with Mexican tradition, these letters are left

before a statue of the saints along with a . . . little miracle—a small charm" (Colombo, Cullen, and Lisle, 221). The letters are written by characters living in Texas border towns and are about life in those communities. Most of the characters mingle Spanish and English in their speech and writing.

To resist the tendency to tour the culture and people represented in the story as an exotic community separate from the lives of the reader, when discussing the story we need to do more than merely state one another's opinions. Rather, we need to shift our attention from what each of us has to say about the story to the potential asymmetrical relations of power within and between the cultures represented by the reader, the author, and the characters. And we need to discuss one another's opinions by reviewing and revising them in the context of those relations. Let me illustrate by considering responses to one of the twenty-seven letters in Cisneros's story, which reads as follows:

> Dear San Martin de Porres,
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> Please send us clothes, furniture, shoes, dishes. We need anything that don't eat. Since the fire we have to start all over again and Lalo's disability check ain't much and don't go far. Zulema would like to finish school but I says she can just forget about it now. She's our oldest and her place is at home helping us out I told her. Please make her see some sense. She's all we got.
>
> Thanking you,
> Adelfa Vasquez
> Escobas, Texas

When reading the story, many of my students have tended to see this letter as an example of the gender divisions in what they call "Mexican culture." Here is how one student responded:

> The Mexican culture seems to be inundated with gender roles that members of the American culture would consider archaic and old-fashioned. For instance, there is an important reference to the roles Mexican women are expected to play in Adelfa Vasquez's letter. She is praying to the saints to make Zulema "see some sense" that "her place is at home helping us out." Zulema, the letter reveals, would like to finish out her schooling but is needed to do chores at her home. If Zulema were male would she be allowed to pursue an education in order to improve his [*sic*] life? The reader gets the sense that yes, were she male, Zulema would be allowed to finish her schooling and the burden of household tasks would fall completely on the shoulders of Adelfa. But since Zulema is a woman, her place is "at home helping [Adelfa] out." Cisneros writes about the attitudes in Mexican culture concerning the role to be played by the females.

Learning to live diversity in the contact zone would mean that we don't stop at responding by a shake or a nod of the head or "sharing" our own opinions with the student. Rather, both speaker and listener learn to chart the opposing terms used by the speaker to distinguish and rank different groups, such as the binaries of American vs. Mexican and male vs. female.

For example, attention to the binary of American vs. Mexican and male vs. female might help us to examine the ways in which the student depicts Adelfa's cultural position. The third, fifth, and sixth sentences of the student's paper depict Adelfa as a mother interested in having her daughter share "the burden of household tasks." This depiction puts Adelfa at the center of a Mexican culture which expects its female members to stay home and do household chores. The concept of a contact zone, however, would demand that we review this form of depiction in the context of the asymmetrical power relations between Americans and Mexicans in today's world. Since the student depicts Adelfa at the center of the less powerful culture, we have the responsibility to reread Adelfa's letter to search for potential points of view expressed in her letter which might clash and grapple with the viewpoint established by the student. We might notice that in the student's third sentence, the reference to Adelfa's letter deletes Adelfa's description of Zulema as "our oldest." If we were to focus on this part of Adelfa's description, which both Adelfa and Cisneros seem to foreground, we would have to add a question to the one asked in the fourth sentence of the student paper: If Zulema were not the oldest, would Adelfa let Zulema finish school? In the context of Adelfa's letter, the answer could be yes. This line of rethinking would make our initial certainty that Adelfa is unequivocally interested in perpetuating gender divisions of a culture called "Mexican" somewhat problematic. Our recognition of a need to revise our portrayal of Adelfa's position can then motivate us to look for more aspects of Adelfa's reasoning, undercut by the way she is represented in opinions similar to those voiced in the student paper.

We might notice that an addition has been made to Adelfa's statement. For example, the paper suggests that Adelfa wants Zulema home to help with household chores. Yet, Adelfa's letter indicates no explicit interest in getting more help for household chores. Adelfa seems more interested in another kind of help: getting "things" that can feed and shelter her family. Out of a seven-sentence letter, the first three sentences refer explicitly to such needs. "Home" in Adelfa's letter is not portrayed as burdened by "chores" but by a fire, the need for "anything that don't eat," and a "disability check" which "ain't much and don't go far." This interest in things which feed and shelter is completely ignored

in the student paper. The only sentence in the student paper which remotely touches on the issue of economic struggle is the fourth sentence, where improvement of life is presented as the automatic result of schooling. This sentence implies that the economic stress of Adelfa's family is caused by either their lack of education or their old-fashioned attitudes toward education, especially the education of female members of the community. However, if we listen to how other characters in the story discuss their economic distress, it seems that the dire conditions of Adelfa's family can also be related to the kind of job discrimination experienced by members of her community.

So far, we have located three types of interests underlying this student's approach to Adelfa's letter: an interest in contesting the asymmetrical power relationships along gender lines, an interest in presenting education as a means to economic advancement, and a lack of interest in representing the concerns of the economically underprivileged. One way of revising this reading in a contact-zone discussion would be to complicate the approach by acknowledging the divisions. It seems that our failure to fully represent the interests of the economically and educationally disadvantaged will only get in the way of our interest in breaking down gender divisions.

This revision would not be possible if we did not also tackle another aspect of this student's writing: the tendency to separate and rank the culture some of us call our own against the cultures represented in the story. For example, the second sentence notes that in the letter there is a "reference to the roles Mexican women are expected to fulfill." How would people like Adelfa, Zulema, and Cisneros respond to this portrayal of Adelfa as a "Mexican" woman? Why do some of us feel so comfortable calling someone "Mexican" when she is depicted as living in Texas? In calling the residents of Texas border towns "Mexican," are some of us who identify ourselves as Americans dissolving the implications of our actions in the lifeways portrayed in the story? What difference might it make to identify Adelfa's troubles as those of an "American" rather than a "Mexican"? What might be the reason for not making such an identification? What can be its consequences? This line of inquiry might help us consider forms of identification employed by residents of the Texas border towns within and outside the story, such as finding out what words writers like Cisneros or Gloria Anzaldúa use to describe these border residents in relation to both cultures. To what extent might these alternative names contest and break the lines separating and protecting the privileges of white middle-class American culture from the culture of Mexican Americans?

For example, in posing a Mexican against an American, we run the risk of overlooking the involvement of those calling themselves "American" in the economic distress Cisneros depicts Adelfa's family as experiencing. In writing about the Mexican American community as if it were located outside the American border, we imply that people identified as American have nothing to do with the economic, gender, and educational stress portrayed in the story. Recognizing this should help us to be vigilant and to combat ideological blind spots in our approach to stories like Cisneros's: our lack of attention to or interest in economic and class conflict and our tendency to exclude and even expel peoples and cultures different from what we think of as our own.

Learning to live diversity in the contact zone can be unsettling for all of us. As indicated by my rereading of my tour through Harlem and by the discussion I suggest might unfold around one student's opinion of Cisneros's story, life in the contact zone aims at pushing us to yield what we have, including our existing habits of thinking and using language, our existing knowledge of ourselves and others, and the privileges and authority we enjoy and take for granted. It invites us to cause waves, to ask how and why rather than just nodding politely to statements with which we agree or disagree. It also reminds us of the material consequences of our reading and writing. To represent and negotiate cultural differences from the perspective of a less powerful other and disperse and dissolve what had appeared to be solid ground, the foundation of one's life and dreams. It can bring confusion and pain, when every part of our sense of self is engaged or grappled with by voices reminding us of the forms of domination we perpetuate in the choices we make when envisioning who we are and who we aspire to be. Letting go of the glass partition on the tourist bus can bring material consequences—the possibility of becoming a stranger, an "other," to those dear and close to oneself.

However, although a majority of the people I encounter seem initially unwilling to consider their own involvement in all forms of cultural exclusion, they are also eager to identify with democratic ideals such as justice, equality, and freedom for all. Because hegemonic culture seems to have so successfully led most of us to identify these values as classically American, I believe that we can actively mobilize what might be called the moral power of American democratic ideals—the principles of justice, equality, and freedom—to pressure ourselves to overcome our fear of entering a contact zone where diverse cultures and people meet, clash, and grapple with one another. We can use multicultural writings such as Cisneros's story to call attention to the gap between a democratic

ideal and the reality of the American society we have in the present and have had in the past. Calling attention to that gap can motivate students to carry out their aspirations for justice, equality, and personal freedom in the very process of reading and writing about cultural differences.

Let me make one last return to my tour metaphor to illustrate the difficulty of the task facing those of us interested in life in the contact zone. The example of my tour in Harlem, I hope, will help to keep in mind both the imaginary and material function of thinking and talking about cultural diversity and thus serve as a cautionary note on what the kind of discussion and reflection I propose can and cannot do. The concept of a contact zone can help us imagine an approach to multicultural issues which seeks out rather than excludes voices and points of view silenced on the tour bus. At the same time, for most of us to physically step outside that bus in the United States of today will involve more than breaking the mental block keeping us sheltered behind the glass, a mental block which the image of the contact zone can help to break. For the United States to become a social space where multiple Americas intersect in the context of equal relations of power will involve social and political rather than conceptual and linguistic changes. At the same time, visions of a different and truly united America are the necessary points of departure for a critical perspective on the here and now of ourselves and our nation. Therefore, in calling your attention to the limited scope of living diversity in our thinking and talking, I also want to remind you of its power to bring about discontent and social change. The kind of cultural work this type of reflection and discussion can do is probably best illustrated by the debate over the so-called political correctness orchestrated by a new wave of conservatives in the media. History has taught those of us on the fringe that we must be doing something right if all of a sudden we become a worthy topic, or should I say target, of the conservative media.

Conservative arguments against PC claim that the academy is dominated by a group of radical teachers who impose their version of politically correct positions on diversity and multiculturalism on colleagues and students, thereby suppressing the freedom of speech of those who dare disagree. But for teachers like myself, the core of our conflict with these conservatives is whether or not to call one another's attention to the politics of assigning and assuming particular points of view and not others. Unlike conservatives, we want to call attention to each individual's need and right to deliberate over decisions about where and how to position oneself in relation to diverse cultures. And we need to shift attention away from the amount of knowledge we have of diverse

cultures to the process by which we have come to adopt and assume a particular form of knowledge and to reflect on the politics of such knowledge-making. For those of us truly interested in a multicultural United States, PC must stand for power and conflict, politics and commitment, rather than for political correctness. The central message we need to get across is that no position, textual or otherwise, can be taken in isolation from the power relationships among diverse cultures with conflicting political interests.

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Our Thoughts

If you had occasion to read "Against Multiculturalism" by Peter Lamborn Wilson in this collection, you would find that both he and Lu are making very similar arguments. Although where Wilson is writing to an elite but not necessarily academic audience, Lu is writing to academics. Yet Lu's essay is more accessible. The differences between Wilson and Lu are in the rhetorical strategies they use. Whereas Wilson carries an ethos of one of "us" ridiculing those "us," Lu carries the ethos of one of "them" who is nevertheless foreign—even to notions of "them." That is, Lu takes her position as an immigrant—an Asian who has adopted America—to point to her own distance from others who "us" would think is like "them" to point to differences. She points to what ought to be obvious: that being from a particular culture or from a particularly racialized group does not mean understanding everything about—or even agreeing with—those from that culture or group.

Lu begins her essay with a reference to Mary Louise Pratt's concept of "contact zones," where cultures collide. She argues that this is more than multicultural readings or texts (more than books like this one, in some sense). She argues that understanding other cultures means coming to an understanding of a myriad of differences, which includes differences in power relations. In a sense, she's arguing that we must question our own tendencies toward different forms of cultural tourism, since a tourist still sees from unquestioning eyes. We must not only watch and

evaluate from our own perspectives; we must also try to watch through varying perspectives that recognize real differences, including differences in power relations.

The word *privilege* often troubles students, since being poor or incurring a great deal of debt to attend college does not seem like a great deal of privilege, does not bespeak a privileged class. Lu puts another spin to this term. *Privilege*, according to Lu, is not synonymous with "White." The term has something to do with the kinds of things one does not have to consider unless one chooses to do so. If one is educated, one does not necessarily have to consider the ways of the poor from the viewpoint of the poor. If one is Chinese, say, one does not have to consider the histories of those who are third- or fourth-generation Asian American and the kinds of racist circumstances those generations have had to suffer. Privilege means not having to consider. Lu asks that we enter into zones of "conflict and struggle," that we recognize and suspend our privilege.

Prewriting

If you have not been previously assigned the essay by Wilson, we would ask that you read it and Our Thoughts concerning it now. We have argued that the two essays are essentially alike—that at bottom they are making the same argument. In preparation, then, for what is commonly called a "comparison and contrast" essay, but which we would call a "synthetic critique," we would ask that you create a dialectical journal after glossing each essay. That is, go through each essay and on the margins jot down the essay's main points. Using Lu's essay as an "anchor," jot down the main points in the left column of your dialectical journal. In the right column, jot down the ways in which Wilson makes the same points or counters them. As you do this, consider what each has to say about what Lu calls cultural tourism. What are the truths you see in each? We are asking you to play what compositionist Peter Elbow has called The Believing Game. Finding fault is almost easy. Finding what makes sense is almost harder. Play The Believing Game in understanding cultural tourism.

Writing

In *Shanghai Quartet*, Lu tells the story of her Chinese upbringing by way of stories of four women: Lu's grandmother, her mother, her nanny, and herself. And she tells of the decision to come to America. Maxine Hong Kingston is also of Chinese ancestry but was born and raised in

California. Judith Ortiz Cofer is Puerto Rican but was raised mainly in New Jersey, with frequent trips back to Puerto Rico (whenever her father, a career Navy man, was assigned to duty away from New Jersey, Cofer and her mother would return to Puerto Rico). Knowing this, then, write about identity and cultural tourism. Consider that no one has any clear-cut identity, that all of us end up being mixed. Feel free to include autobiographical details as well as what resulted from your prewriting in discussing the concept of cultural tourism.

Revising

It appears that for Lu, the opposite of cultural tourism is what rhetorician Kenneth Burke terms entering into the "wrangles and the flareups of the Human Barnyard." As you consider the different ways of cultural tourism, as opposed to the cultural collisions of the contact zone, discuss with the members of your group whether it would be better for individuals and our society as a whole if college students spent more time "nodding politely to statements with which [they] agree or disagree," or would it be better to make waves by asking how and why? What should be the right mix of politeness and civility with intense questioning of authority in classrooms and beyond? After the discussion, return to your description of cultural tourism to reconsider its implications. Remember: an academic essay should close by discussing the implications—the so what?—of your take.