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Narrativizing Success : Attitudes toward African American Vernacular English in the Composition Classroom

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NARRATIVIZING SUCCESS: ATTITUDES TOWARD AFRICAN AMERICAN
VERNACULAR ENGLISH IN THE COMPOSITION CLASSROOM

A Thesis submitted to
the Graduate College of
Marshall University

In partial fulfillment of
the requirements for the degree of
Masters of Arts in English

Department of English

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ABSTRACT

My thesis analyzes academia's response to African American Vernacular English (AAVE) features in academic writing and how teachers' responses to AAVE writing create socially constructed personas for students based on their vernacular dialect features. The results show spoken language strongly influences written language, although the range of dialect use varies from single feature usage to use of multiple features, and occurrences of use are highly localized. While instances of AAVE in academic writing are irregular, instructor response to features shows a pattern of strikethroughs and imperative statements used to correct language. As studies demonstrate such approaches to writing have negligible effect on students' writing (analysis shows AAVE features that have been marked by instructors in such fashion persist in final drafts), educators must practice new approaches to addressing AAVE in composition classrooms. As academic writing is more than the application of standard grammars, academia needs to rethink the weight placed upon Standard American English (SAE) in relation to non-standard varieties of English. Current attitudes of "zero tolerance" for non-standard English dialects suggest educators could benefit from a course on language awareness and on American dialects. However, knowledge of non-standard dialects does not appear to be sufficient, as negative attitudes towards AAVE persist, even in classrooms where instructors have received training. Instructor attitude

may greatly influence student writing, but to prepare students for success as agents of language, students must recognize social implications of language. As instructors should be expected to gain knowledge of and have respect for language diversity, students should be expected to gain a similar knowledge of language diversity and the choices available to them as writers. Academia presents a space of interaction between knowledge and thought, designed to develop students into professionals within a wide range of areas. As academia continues to grow and diversify in the areas of studies, instructors, and students, room must be made to include the diverse languages of marginalized groups. This thesis addresses the history of academia's treatment of AAVE, an examination of AAVE features, and solutions towards shifting current attitudes towards languages in order to support the design of academia.

Introduction

Over the past few decades, the teaching profession has stood as a vanguard on issues of justice, freedom, equity, and access. Within the framework of education, special emphasis is given to writing as a vehicle for social transformation and power. Writing teachers aim to do justice to the possibilities of knowledge and the dormant counter- hegemonic powers available in all varieties of English. Clifford Geertz, the leading American cultural anthropologist, stresses educators' need for "fluency in an enlarged vocabulary," asserting the "reach of our minds, of what we can say, think, appreciate, and judge, the range of signs we can manage somehow to interpret, is what defines the intellectual, emotional, and moral space within which we live" (113). As writing teachers, our goal is for justice in the pursuit of knowledge of the relationships defining our collective place in the world: aiming for justice for the diverse languages we encounter in the classroom; aiming for justice in the work we do to become better teachers; and working to bridge the difference.

My thesis analyzes academia's response to African American Vernacular English (AAVE) features in academic writing and how teachers' responses to AAVE writing create socially constructed personas for students based on their vernacular dialect features. The results show spoken language strongly influences written language, although the range of dialect use varies from single feature usage to use of multiple features, and occurrences of use are highly localized. Although instances of AAVE in academic writing are irregular, instructor response to features shows a pattern of strikethroughs and imperative statements used to correct language. As studies demonstrate such approaches to writing have negligible effect on students' writing (analysis shows AAVE features that have been marked by instructors in such fashion persist in final drafts), educators must practice new approaches to

addressing AAVE in composition classrooms. As academic writing is more than the application of standard grammars, academia needs to rethink the weight placed upon Standard American English (SAE) in relation to non-standard varieties of English. Current attitudes of “zero tolerance” for non-standard English dialects suggest educators could benefit from a course on language awareness and on American dialects. However, knowledge of non-standard dialects does not appear to be sufficient, as negative attitudes towards AAVE persist, even in classrooms where instructors have received training. Instructor attitude may greatly influence student writing, but to prepare students for success as agents of language, students must recognize social implications of language. As instructors should be expected to gain knowledge of and have respect for language diversity, students should be expected to gain a similar knowledge of language diversity and the choices available to them as writers.

Academia presents a space of interaction between knowledge and thought, designed to develop students into professionals within a wide range of areas. As academia continues to grow and diversify in the areas of studies, instructors, and students, room must be made to include the diverse languages of marginalized groups. This thesis addresses the history of academia’s treatment of AAVE, an examination of AAVE features, and solutions towards shifting current attitudes towards languages in order to support the design of academia.

Chapter One: AAVE History, Attitudes, and Linguistic Features

Scholarship analyzing the features of AAVE, dating from the 1960s, often generates discussion—among linguists, psychologists, and educators—surrounding the appropriate methods for teaching students who bring varieties of English deviating from academic—or “Standard English”—into the academic classroom. Research demonstrates spoken language strongly influences written language—significantly so in African American cultures, where the oral tradition weighs heavily on linguistic structures. Although research on the history and sociolinguistic factors of AAVE continues to grow, research on teacher response to nonstandard varieties of English and linguistic variables is incomplete. Teacher response to AAVE features reveals a pattern in teacher technique that seeks to discredit AAVE as “bad” language, using imperative statements or strikethroughs to correct nonstandard language.

With strides being made in the 1960s to unify Americans, claims of racial injustice should seem an issue of the past. Yet, racism continues to grow—though in ways more subtle than the direct physical attacks of the past. William Labov asserts, despite the growing black middle class, the gap between whites and blacks in America is growing further apart, with varying dialects being the most obvious indicator of the disparity (as cited in Quinn 480). As the physical gap between blacks and white continue to grow—while the number of neighborhoods with 75 percent or more blacks continues to grow, the number of mixed neighborhoods (50 to 75 percent) is shrinking—inner city blacks are further removed from the centers of power where SAE is spoken. “Blacks,” Labov claims, “born in America sound black” (as cited in Quinn 479). What passes as “black speech”—or AAVE—is often discredited as proper language, labeled as a variety of nonstandard English, whereas SE receives the tag of the language of privilege.

Typically, the cutting edge of sound change is found among the leaders of the upper working class—schoolteachers, politicians, draftsmen, the people with power within a community, with phonetic variable (sound changes) being highly localized within a certain community. The theory is sound changes “are symbols of community—and that a rapid acceleration of change in the language occurs when excluded groups begin to share in the power” (Quinn 480). As the language of prestige is dictated by those in power, changes in social status—either upward or downward mobility—become dependent upon the rate at which people acquire the standard language. According to Labov’s studies, the growing discrepancy among blacks can be traced by a community’s direct contact with speakers of SE: people who use language to get “out of uncomfortable situations had all moved grammatically in the direction of standard dialect. The group with no contact had moved dramatically away” (Quinn 480). Unfortunately, this trend continues to separate blacks and whites from those who have power to those who are unable to share in the power. Standards of English recognized in classrooms fail to account for varieties of English that deviate from Standard English. A 1993 study found race plays an important role in attrition rates. At the end of a four-year study of sixty-one participants within a first-year writing class, 75 percent of students required to take an additional Developmental English course were African Americans. Of the 75 percent, only 50 percent graduated to the next level, while the other 50 percent dropped out of school. By the end of four years, 57 percent of Caucasians had graduated, while only 22.5 percent of African Americans who had started the program had graduated. African Americans are placed in college remedial English classes at a much higher rate than white students, receiving only 6 percent of BAs granted annually

(McLaughlin 117). An unfortunate reality in the success rates of African Americans is the role language plays in academic and economic success.

Most recently, public attitudes toward AAVE in the classroom were addressed in the mid 1990s as America watched national phobias play out in the Oakland Unified School District. When the district passed the resolution on Ebonics (AAVE), mainstream America fought back, insisting there was no place for nonstandard forms of English in classrooms. Although the Linguistic Society of America and other distinguished scholars of education came forward to defend it—recognizing AAVE as a rule-governed variety of English worth of respect—America—and, African American leaders, including Jesse Jackson—remained ill-informed and pushed to repeal the resolution, citing the use of Ebonics in language education as “teaching down to children” and a “disgrace” (Balester 202). The goal of recognizing AAVE as a worthy dialect was to educate teachers in its history and structure, fostering respect for it and encouraging its use as a way to bridge students into use of SE in proper settings.

1.1 History of AAVE Formation

Two issues emerge in the discussion of the development of AAVE: The first centers around the issue of AAVE having its origins in creole languages—the question of whether its predecessors, beginning with the slave trade, feature traces of creole languages similar to Gullah (spoken on the islands off the coast of South Carolina and Georgia) or the English-based creoles of Jamaica, Trinidad, Guyana, Hawaii, or Sierra Leone. The second issue

questions whether AAVE is currently deviating further from the SAE and the vernacular of white dialects in the United States.

The Creole origins question is an older issue, causing much discrepancy amongst linguists and historians. The majority of historical work on American English has come from researchers concerning themselves almost exclusively with patterns of migration from the British Isles and the spread of British regional features throughout the United States. We must acknowledge any variety of English must have its roots in England. Still, for hundreds of years English has been spoken outside the British Isles, and those non-British varieties of English have influenced and shaped language patterns without its speakers having set foot in England. Among the lesser-known varieties of non-British English are the pidgin and creole languages spoken in Asia, the Pacific, the Caribbean, and Africa. Recent research offers evidence most African Americans use a variety of English preserving some features common to both Caribbean and West African varieties of English, but differing in grammar (in syntax) from the Standard American English of the mainstream white culture. The most discussed (and, in accordance with a 1979 federal court decree, vested with a veneer of being an authentic theory) theory on the origins and historical development of African American speech is the Pidgin/Creole Hypothesis. Pidgin/Creolists—linguists and social historians supporting this hypothesis—argue that by comparing and tracing similarities in the phonological (sound), morpho-syntactical (word formation), and semanto-lexemic (word meaning) features in existing creole dialects in West Africa, the Caribbean, and the United States, one can observe a high degree of cohesion in the speech patterns of these communities. Creolist William Stewart proposes AAVE “probably derived from a creolized form of English once spoken on American plantations by Negro slaves and seemingly related

to Creolized forms of English, which are still spoken by Negroes in Jamaica and other parts of the Caribbean” (351). These theorists speculate that, although certain surface level modifications exist, the innate structure of contemporary African American speech is similar and can be traced to the dialects of the British Isles.

Furthermore, the Creolists maintain that, with the exception of a few vocabulary entries, there are no African elements in Black American speech. They contend the hybrid vernacular which emerged from the inception of colonial era contacts made between the Niger-Congo Africans and Europeans—for the purpose of trade—are the unique linguistic creations of the Europeans. According to Creolists, when European and West African languages first united, what developed on the coast of West Africa was a hybrid vernacular called “pidgin.” Pidgin/Creole linguists hold Pidgin refers to a language that has no native speakers. All Pidgin dialects emerge as a contact vernacular—out of the necessity to facilitate communication between two communities that do not share a common language. According to this theory, any language facilitating communication between two people who do not speak the other’s native language is a “lingua franca”—a language used for purposes of wider communication. Although all pidgins are lingua francas, not all lingua francas are pidgins; a common third, autonomous, language may be used for the purpose of communication.

Pidgin/Creolists are further divided into two camps: those who hold a polygenetic view of the origins of pidgins and creole dialects, and those who maintain a monogenetic view of the origins. Those ascribing to a polygenetic view argue pidgin and creole dialects were created by European colonials settling in Africa, Asia, the Caribbean, and Latin America, where each pidgin developed through lingua francas particular to the homeland. In

Spanish colonies, a Spanish Pidgin emerged; in Portuguese colonies, a Portuguese Pidgin emerged; in the Dutch, French, and English colonies, a Dutch, French, and English Pidgin emerged, respectively. As the slave trade flourished on the West Coast of Africa, in the Caribbean, and in North and South America, the theory contends descendants of the original slaves were born on plantations in which these pidgin dialects were acquired as native languages. Over time, the pidgin vernaculars originally created as a means of trading on the coast of West Africa became the standard form of communication between African slaves and their European masters.

However, pointing to the vast similarities existing among the Caribbean creoles and paralleling features in the creoles of the South Pacific and Far East, many Pidgin/Creolists reject the polygenic view. They argue the first pidgin had to have been made earlier than the colonial era when contact was first maintained between Europeans and non-European peoples. Instead of hypothesizing all creole dialects are the creation of communication between Europeans and the specific speech community from which they emerged, these theorists posit the monogenetic view all pidgin and creole dialects originated from a common ancestral language. Supporters argue that, before the colonial era, the Portuguese were the first to engage in international trade along the West and East coasts of Africa and into China and India; therefore, according to these theorists, Portuguese is the European language on which all pidgins are based.

Furthering their argument that no traces of African elements can be found in contemporary Black Speech, most Pidgin/Creolists tend to ignore the comparative structures or rules of grammar (phonology, morphology, and morpho-syntax) as criteria for conceiving genetic relationship between languages, instead, using the etymology of the dominant lexicon

as basis (Smith 7). These etymologists focus on the origin and root meaning of words. Although accepting the existence of a non Indo-European phonology, morphology, and morpho-syntax in pidgin and creole dialects, Pidgin/Creolists etymologists use the base of the dominant lexicon as criteria for determining ancestral kinship. Studying AAVE, these etymologists have determines the dominant lexicon to be English based, therefore maintaining African American speech to have its origins in English language. However, there are some Pidgin/Creolists examining the deep structure or rules of grammar as the basis for genetic relationships between languages. In the case of AAVE, these structuralists maintain there is no provable African content in the deep structure or grammar of AAVE. In agreeing with the Pidgin/Creolists Hypothesis, these structuralists support English as the origin of African American speech. Furthermore, they contend the grammar of Black English is an archaic form of Indo-European linguistics, having roots in old English, Middle English, and Early Modern English grammars (Smith 9).

Examining the literature of Pidgin/Creolists, one should question why criteria for proposing genetic kinship in pidgin/creole languages differs from criteria in hypothesizing a genetic kinship to Indo-European languages. Most Pidgin/Creolists essentially accept that whenever contact was made between European and non-European people—in the linguistic assimilation of European and non-European languages—hybridization was the sole product of European linguistic dissemination. Therefore, all the world’s pidgins and creole dialects are European language based—the suggestion giving credence to the myth that the Europeans, being dominant in language, must also be inherently superior to Africans in all respects. As a consequence of such a “white supremacist” angle to language, the theory upholds a belief that Africans must have been primitives who, not having developed a

language of their own, do not have the capacity for developed human thought. Such theorists allow for African language to be reduced to a series of grunts—or, “baby talk” (Smith 9). Any such communication—even at its primitive level—was stripped once African slaves were segregated on plantations and exposed to the European language of their masters. Such xenophobic views of Africans are characterized by the writings of Ambrose E. Gonzales—a southern journalist who was born on a plantation and grew up speaking Gullah with his family’s slaves—in his book on the Gullah dialect, *Black Border*.

Slovenly and careless of speech, these Gullahs seized upon the peasant English used by some of the early settlers and by the white servants of the wealthier colonists, wrapped their clumsy tongues about it as well as they could, and, enriched with certain expressive African words, it issued through their flat noses and thick lips as so workable a form of speech that it was gradually adopted by the other slaves and became in time the accepted Negro speech of the lower districts of South Carolina and Georgia. The words of course are not African, for the African brought over or retained only a few words of his jungle tongue, and even those are by no means authenticated as part of the original scant baggage of the Negro slaves. (10)

Such perception of Africans as savages who did not have the capacity for fully developed language saturates Pidgin/Creolists literature, constructing the argument that it could have been only the Europeans whose superior intelligence and development allowed for the creation of language and invention of new forms of speech. During the pidginization process, the Africans did not contribute to the creation of a new language. In other words, according to Pidgin/Creolists, African American speech is strictly the product of an English based language.

Although the linguists and social scientists addressing the issue of creoles focus on one kind of evidence, there are several different possibilities that must be examined in answering whether AAVE was once a creole:

1. One must first examine whether the sociohistorical conditions under which Africans first came to the United States might have influenced the development of pidgins or creoles. Certain linguists—including Dillard and Stewart—support the hypothesis that many slaves arriving in American colonies and the Caribbean already spoke some variety of West African Pidgin English (WAPE) or Guinea Coast Creole English (GCCE). The argument for significant creole importation from the Caribbean in early American history has recently been strengthened by evidence corroborating “slaves brought in from the Caribbean colonies where creole English is spoken were the predominant segments of the early Black population in some many American colonies, including Massachusetts, New York, South Carolina, Georgia, Virginia, and Maryland” (Rickford 331). Considering the majority of early African Americans populated the South, immigrating to the North beginning with World War I, it is the demographics of the South which are relevant in evaluating the probability of prior creolization. The high proportion of whites to blacks in the South—in contrast to Jamaica and other British colonies in the Caribbean—further supports that the pidginization and creolization most likely occurred outside of the United States. Furthering this hypothesis, one must consider variations occurring in the eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries as the proportion of blacks to whites increased. Questions of motivation and attitude need to be examined when compiling extensive research, adding to the discussion the power of cultural and social constraints within language assimilation.
2. A second evidence to be considered is textual attestations of AAVE from earlier times—or historical attestations. This evidence can be divided into two categories: a)

literary texts, court records, travelers' accounts, and other non-fictional works, and b) interviews with former slaves and other African Americans from the 1930s onward.

Questions of authenticity raise issues of reliability in linguistics studies, but these data need to be examined when hypothesizing the origins of AAVE.

3. Modern-day recordings from descendants of African Americans who left the United States for other countries in the late eighteenth and nineteenth centuries offer further evidence of the relation between AAVE and creoles. Because of the remoteness in their new countries, the approximation to the African American speech of their emigrating forefathers

AAVE may be traced to a creolized version of English based upon a pidgin spoken by slaves. While it may have originated from the West Coast of Africa, critics of the Pidgin/Creole Hypothesis suggest it certainly did not originate from Great Britain. Early research on the origins of AAVE want to trace to American regional dialects to British regional dialects; but early attempts to link these features ignore the key factor: for a population group with no history of residence in the British Isles, how would features from such diverse areas of the British Isles come into the English of African Americans?

Furthermore, the grammar of AAVE does not match the grammar of the allegedly identical features in the British regional dialects. Early research on "Black English" attempted to discredit its validity as a structured language. H. L. Mencken's revisions to his *The American Language*, a significant addition to early twentieth-century studies of language, gradually eliminated references to Black English, leading critics to question if Mencken viewed the vernacular as something real or invented by literary men—a theory later supported Richard Walser's 1955 essay, "Negro Dialect in Eighteenth Century Drama," in

which the literary historian suggested playwrights created the dialect. Contributing to the trivialization of the dialect, Raven I. McDavid, Jr. (a dialect geographer who abridged the 1963 edition of Mencken's work) suggests "Negro Speech" is a pretense contrived for the "white man boss" and the "vener" is dropped once the white man leaves (as quoted in Dillard 8). The supposition presented by such theorists suggests the earlier patterns of creolized speech have by now disappeared, maintaining the theory of American English having exclusive British origins.

To trace American regional dialects to alleged origins in British regional dialects, one would have to rely on improbable assumptions. Such thinking allows for patterns suggesting immigrants from East Anglia—the eastern most region of England—colonized the southeastern United States, despite records showing more than half of that population did not immigrate from that region. To maintain consistency within that theory, early language theorists had to accept the position of defending all language forms as having migrated from the British Isles—and all other migration patterns (including those spoken by African Americans) are linguistically non-significant. The dangerous assertion, J. L. Dillard concludes, is one step away from accepting the differences which AAVE exhibits must consist of patterns which white speakers once had but have now renounced (10). However, an important factor in the evaluation of past languages and dialects is the evaluation of contemporary languages and dialects. If, for instance, we were to assume there are no divergences in related Germanic languages, we would find it illogical to accept the Bible was translated from a now defunct language. But language does evolve, and traces of early patterns can be found in modern patterns; but the evolution of language therefore demands an expansion of and influence on language varieties. Language theorists can point to dialects

spoken exclusively by African Americans today; it would be dangerous to assume all African Americans—past and present—speak that dialect. An understanding of African American dialect of the past rests upon an accurate study and understanding of AAVE in the present.

Academic presentation of history makes it easy to forget the consequences of African involvement in the New World. Records suggest the first African came to America in 1492 with Columbus. Additionally, when the slave trade in West Africa opened in the fourteenth century, many West Africans were taken to the Iberian Peninsula, where Portugal played an important role in exploration of the New World. Although records of language practices used by Europeans and West Africans in the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries are scarce, African lexicon coexists with Portuguese etymons in grammatical structure, supporting theories challenging the British-Isle-only origins.

Critics of the Pidgin/Creolists Hypothesis argue that, if hybridization occurred when African and European language first converged, if the Europeans are solely responsible for the creation of the resulting lingua franca, the colonial Europeans would have had to employ their own grammatical structures and rules as the base for the hybrid dialect. Logically, it would follow that any African words or Africanisms existing in the Euro-American hybrid today would have been borrowed or adopted into English. Accepting both logics, it then follows that such words would have already existed in African languages before there was any contact with Europeans. Therefore, African words and Africanisms have not been borrowed into the speech of descendants from slaves; rather, in African's speech, African words and grammars have been retained. If, as Pidgin/Creolist theorists argue, the fundamental difference in Afro-American and Euro-American speech is found in

their vocabularies or lexical features, then it would follow AAVE should follow the rules of Euro-American grammars.

However, when analyzing grammars of pidgin and creole dialects in descendants of African slaves, not one of the vernaculars supposedly originating from European English bases incorporates a European grammar with African vocabularies. Critics of the Pidgin/Creolist Hypothesis further argue the pidgin/creole languages may borrow or adopt European words, the “underlying phonology and morpho-syntax of the dialects follow the rules of African grammar” (Smith 13).

Although the White majority in the US continues to be counterbalanced by an increase in African Americans and Latino Americans, the majority of our language histories and grammars maintain only British-derived rules matter. Failure to add a study on the backgrounds of minority languages to the perspective of the current language condition in the US prevents appreciation of the relationship between these languages and language varieties known as creoles. Approaching language from the England-to-America angle suggests American English can be easily identified as having structural similarities only to British English. However, the ease in recognizing the speaker of the following sentence being an African American brings to light the limitations of such an approach:

Sometime Daddy be drivin', he call people names.

Furthermore, there is little difficulty in identifying the socioeconomic status (poor) and ethnic group (African American) of the speaker of the following passage:

I can skate better than Louis and I be only eight . . . If you be goin' real fast, hold it. If it's on trios and you be goin' and you don' go in the ring, you be goin' around it. You be goin' too fast, well, you don' be in the ring. You be outside if you be goin' too fast. That man he'a clip you up. I think they call him Sonny. He real tall.
(Dillard 4)

Recognition of AAVE as differing from other varieties of and being independent of American English exposes AE is not as nearly as standardized as once believed; the language of some non-standard varieties of English greatly influences mainstream American English while not being identical to it.

Dialects do not attach themselves to skin colors, but judgments about ancestry do. Theories that trace all American English languages to British origins and dismiss AAVE as archaic speech present a picture of linguistic racism: the perception that speakers of AAVE hold onto an archaic dialect and are unable to keep up with language acquisition has moved the older prejudice of “thick lips and thick minds” to the modern prejudice about “deficiencies of language and concept-formation” (Dillard 11).

1.2 Structure of AAVE

Speakers of English dialects may often view the structure of AAVE as distinct from all other English varieties. Even though each dialect is unique, the distinctiveness of AAVE does not arise from the sentence structure alone. Basic sentence structures—declarative, imperative, and interrogative—are all formed essentially in the same way in all dialects: The fundamental sentence structure of all varieties of English dialects share the essential clause and phrase components. For example, the basic word order for SAE sentences is Subject-Verb-Object (SVO). Likewise, AAVE—and most English varieties—use the same canonical structure.

Whereas speakers of other English dialects are correct in viewing the sentence structure of AAVE as being distinct from other English dialects, the distinctiveness does not reside in the structure. Basic utterances—declarative, interrogative, and imperative

sentences—are all essentially formed in the same manner as other English dialects. AAVE shares its fundamental structure with SE in that essential clause and phrase constituents are the same. For example, word order for AAVE sentences follows that of other varieties of English: subject-verb-object (SVO). Even when embedding clauses or phrases, the structure parallels that of SE:

1. I think the dog ate the meal.
2. He told the students to be quiet.
3. He called Bill a fool.

AAVE may make use of more informal clause structure than SAE (for example: *We determined the drive to be too long for one day* would not be found frequently in AAVE), but such embedded clause types are represented in its syntax. Likewise, as in other varieties of English, the structure of AAVE phrases is head-first (the head or central element of the phrase is always on the left in written or spoken language; for example: the preposition *under* in the prepositional phrase *under the table*, or the verb *saying* in the participial phrase *saying he would fight*).

Although there are a number of distinct similarities in AAVE and SAE sentence structure, there exists a number of AAVE features offering evidence of its distinctiveness. However, the most obvious differences do not involve syntax but the lexical distinctiveness of AAVE verbs:

1. There go the pencil. (AAVE)
2. There is the pencil. (SE)

In SE, *go* is limited to objects which are beginning to move or act (*There goes Bill; There goes our bus*); in AAVE, however, *go* can be used to denote location of the object.

Specialists point out this semantic-lexical dialect peculiarity is no more striking than the lexical variety of the noun *soda*, which may or may not denote a drink containing ice cream, depending on regional factors (Martin and Wolfram 12).

AAVE has many verb forms matching other varieties of English forms—the AAVE detransitivizing of a verb (“The team beat!”) is similar to the SE (“The team rules!”)—but there exists a number of cases in which lexical verbs of AAVE may differ from other varieties. The shift of adjectives into verbs (“The students ruded them in line.”) is stylized in other varieties of English, but it remains a pronounced technique in AAVE (Martin and Wolfram 13). AAVE contains a number of features which may suggest similarity to other varieties of English, but, in fact, conceal fundamental differences. AAVE use of *been*, in which the verb is stressed (*The man been married*), demonstrates distinct interpretations English speakers assign to the verb. Anglo-American English speakers would understand the sentence to mean a man had been married at one point, but no longer is. AAVE speakers generally would understand the same sentence to mean a man has been married, and still is. This example of *camouflaging* (in which a vernacular form closely resembles a standard form while being different in structure or meaning) points to distinct AAVE verb constructions (such as the “indignant *come*” —*They come talking trash about him*—and the *tell say* construction—*They tell him say, “You better not go there”*). Structural appearances may be misleading with respect to the sentence components in AAVE; in some cases, the lexical differences between English varieties may be stressed more so than the structural differences signify; likewise, similarities between sentence constructions may allow significant sentence components to be overlooked. The study of syntactical differences between AAVE and other English varieties is exhaustive, and, for the sake of brevity, I will limit the discussion to some of the more commonly occurring grammatical features (shown in Table 1) and segmental features (Table 2).

Table 1

Commonly Occurring Grammatical Features of AAVE		
<i>Feature</i>	<i>Function</i>	<i>Example</i>
Absence of copula	Occurs in constructions showing present-tense states and action	<i>He tall.</i> “He’s tall.”
Habitual <i>be</i>	Shows an unusual or regular activity or state	<i>He be at the store.</i> “He is usually at the store.”
Stressed <i>BIN</i>	Marks remote past; shows that an action happened or state came into being a long time ago	<i>She BIN married.</i> “She’s been married a long time and still is married.”
Completive <i>done</i>	Emphasizes the completed nature of an action	<i>He done did his his homework.</i> “He has already finished his homework.”
<i>Be done</i>	Resultative or future/conditional perfect	<i>He done walked before he crawled.</i> “He will have walked before he crawls.”
Absence of –s tense inflection	Occurs in third-person singular present tense	<i>He go home late every day.</i> “He goes home late every day.”
Double tense marking	Past tense or past participle suffix	<i>He swepted the floor.</i> “He swept the floor.”
Negative concord	Negates the auxiliary verb and all indefinite pronouns in the sentence	<i>Can’t nobody make none.</i> “Nobody can make any.”
Existential <i>it</i>	Pleonastic	<i>It’s a fly in my soup.</i> “There’s a fly in my soup.”
Complementizer <i>say</i>	Introduces a quotation	<i>I told him say, “You should go home”.</i> “I told him “You should go home.””
Raising of auxiliaries	Occurs in question	<i>What time it is?.</i> “What time is it?”
<i>They</i> as possessive	Occurs in constructions showing possession	<i>This is they house.</i> “This is their house.”

(Table 1 adapted from Rahman 146)

One of the most noticed characteristics of AAVE is the use of negative concord—the use of two or more negative morphemes (the smallest linguistic unit) to indicate single negation. SAE relies on the logical structural form using only one negative operator to negate a clause:

He does not have a car.

SAE also allows for optional negative polarity items (a quantifier word or word phrase acting in the scope of the negative):

He does not have any cars.

He went out into the cold without any clothes.

AAVE, comparatively, allows for multiple negations:

He doesn't got no car.

He went out into the cold without no clothes or nothing.

Double negation occurs in SAE, but should not be confused with the negative concord in AAVE:

a. *I didn't say nothing—I just sat there.*

b. *I didn't say nothing—I just said it softly.*

The AAVE double negation in the first example can be paraphrased in SAE as *I didn't say anything*. The SAE double negation in the second example relies upon stressing the second negation, in which the meaning is *I did say something, you just didn't hear me*.

While AAVE tends to use redundant negations than Anglo-American speakers, the grammar of AAVE does not require the use of the negatives in every location (*I said nothing*), just as SAE does not require use of negative polarity items in every location (*He went out into the cold without anything*.)

While negative elements can occur in both the main clause and embedded subordinate clauses, negation must occur in at least one position from which it can negate the sentence:

He ain't got no car.

No way you gonna get outta here with no half-ton truck.

Nobody said nothing about going to no picnic.

The formation of negative chains—of multiple negations within one sentence—in AAVE allows for more than one negative morpheme per negative sentence, distinguishing it from other English varieties not allowing for double concord.

In most varieties of English, *there* acts as a dummy subject to announce the existence of a noun which has not already been established. The logical subject of such a sentence is the noun phrase that follows the dummy subject:

There's no one who has anything to say.

There are not three people in the room who have heard of her.

There's someone making noise in the attic.

In some structures, AAVE speakers use *it* or *they* in place of *there* as the expletive subject:

They ain't nobody round here got nothing to say.

They ain't three people in the room ever heard of her.

They's someone making noise in the attic.

Such negative inversion structures may act as declarative sentences, even when sounding like a question (*Didn't nobody laugh*). In other instances, negative inversion sentences nullify the subject of the sentence (*Went to the store*, as opposed to SE *She went to the store*; or, *Three men in the office want to see you*, as opposed to *There are three men in the office who want to see you*) (Martin 27).

A range of segmental features (phonological features that can be extracted from a linear series of sounds in the context of speech) can contribute to constructing and conveying African American identity.

Table 2

Commonly Occurring Segmental Features in AAVE	
Feature	Example
Momophthongization of /ay/	bah, “buy”
Deletion of postvocalic /r/	motha, “mother”
Realization of word-initial /ð/ as [d]	dis, “this”
Word-final consonant cluster reduction	col, “cold”
Vocalization of postvocalic /l/	personow, “personal”
Merger of /l/ and /ɛ/ before nasals	pin, “pen”
Realization of /ɪŋ/ as /in/	lookin, “looking”

(Table 2 adapted from Rahman 147)

With a wide range of features, AAVE speakers do not necessarily use all of the available features at any time, and no speaker uses exclusively AAVE variants. Research shows speakers who generally use SAE grammars switch to AAVE features when talking on issues of particular concern—such as their children. The change is “marked by a more varied intonation, a step up in pace of discussion, and the use of more vernacular grammatical and phonological forms and examples (Rahman 148). Jacquelyn Rahman’s study finds a strong correlation between the use of certain AAVE grammatical and phonological features and strong judgments of ethnicity and levels of standardness: increased demonstration of ethnicity through speech translates into lower judgments of standardness, where use of standard grammar and speech that avoids features that of non-standard English varieties resulted in judgments of higher standardness (153-64). Judging levels of standardness translates to judging the ideological fit between perceived social functions of grammatical systems and social meanings surrounding the phonological features used to communicate the grammatical features. Speakers using both the grammar and phonology of AAVE may be judged as having a lower level of standardness than speakers of SAE, but the implication is a

strong affiliation with community. Recent attention has been given to sociolinguistic factors determining choices speaker make in expressing a specific identity. Language may change for different situations, audiences, and attitudes the speaker wishes to express, with the speaker strengthening or weakening features for effect in constructing identity. Research suggests speakers vary dialect in creating identity to negotiate the social context of the environment, with many older middle-class African Americans publicly rejecting AAVE while younger working-class African Americans accept AAVE and reject SAE (Rahman 171). Looking past the lexical choices of language, the issue becomes a question of logic and meaning.

Two interviews conducted by John Lewis—the first with Larry (a fifteen-year-old member of a street gang, employing AAVE rhetorical style), and the second with Charles (an upper-middle class, college-educated black man)—set side by side show the relationship between the structure of what is considered “bad” language and “standard” language:

- JL: What happens to you after you die? Do you know?
 Larry: Yeah, I know.
 JL: What?
 Larry: After they put you in the ground, your body turns into—ah—bones, an’ shit.
 JL: What happens to your spirit?
 Larry: Your spirit—soon as you die, your spirit leaves you.
 JL: And where does the spirit go?
 Larry: It depends.
 JL: On what?
 Larry: You know, like some people say if you’re good an’ shit, your spirit doin’ t’ heaven...’n; if you bad, your spirit goin’ to hell. Well, bullshit! Your spirit goin’ to hell anyway, good or bad.
 JL: Why?
 Larry: Why? ‘Cause, you see, doesn’ nobody really know that it’s a God, y’know, ‘cause, I mean, I have seen black gods, pink gods, white gods, all color gods, and don’t nobody know it’s really a God. An’ when they be sayin’ if you good, you goin’ t’heaven, tha’s bullshit, ‘cause you ain’t goin’ to no heaven, ‘cause it ain’t no heaven for you to go to. (Labov 63)

Larry’s grammar shows a high concentration of AAVE characteristics, such as negative inversion (“don’t nobody know”), negative concord (“you ain’t goin’ to no heaven”),

invariant be (“when they be sayin’”), dummy *it* for SE *there* (“it ain’t no heaven”), optional copula deletion (“if you’re good. . . if you bad”), and full forms of auxiliaries (“I have seen”)

In the second interview, Charles answers Lewis’ question about a similar abstract theme:

- JL: Do you know anything that someone can do, to have someone who has passed on visit him in a dream?
- Char: Well, I even heard my parents say that there is such a thing as something in dreams, some things like that, and sometimes dream do come true. I have personally never had a dream come true. I’ve never dreamt that somebody was dying and they actually died, or that I was going to have ten dollars the next day and somehow I got ten dollars in my pocket. I don’t particularly believe in that, I don’t think it’s true. I do feel, though, that there is such a thing as—ah—witchcraft. I do feel that in certain cultures there is such a thing as witchcraft, or some sort of science of witchcraft; I don’t think that it’s just a matter of believing hard enough that there is such a thing as witchcraft. I do believe that there is such a thing that a person can put himself into a state of mind, or that—er—something could be given to them to intoxicate them in a certain—to a certain frame of mind—that—that could actually be considered witchcraft. (Labov 64)

The difference in grammatical structure is obvious; however, it is how these grammatical differences are viewed and evaluated which plays the critical role in the academic setting. Larry displays a high percentage of AAVE features that would cause him to be judged as having lower standardness, while Charles’ use of SAE features suggest a higher level of standardness. However, ignoring the grammatical features and focusing on ideas being expressed, we find Larry confidently communicates his beliefs on the afterlife, whereas Charles’ response meanders—distracted by a series of stutters (“ah” and “er”)—without offering the authoritative belief of Larry’s response.

The lexicon of AAVE reflects the dynamic, colorful span of language used by African Americans: unique English words and expressions among the community—from the young to the old; from rap artists to Baptists; from political activists to street people. Through the explosion of African American culture into contemporary mainstream culture, we are now familiar with the *Crips* and *Bloods* (Los Angeles gangs), who have taught us

about *AKs* and *Nines* (assault rifles and semi-automatic pistols, respectively); youth now hang with their *homies*; and when we talk about the superior value of something, it is no longer good, but *bad*; and *cribs* are no longer associated with babies, but a home or apartment where we live. The lexicon of the Black speech community crosses boundaries—sex, age, social class, religion: Black lexicon is comprised of idioms, phrases, terms, and other linguistic contributions from various smaller communities within the larger African American community. The language of these sub-communities reflect the African American experience—an evolution of culture embracing its heritage. Thus, it is a logical development for Hip Hop culture to reintroduce language from previous generations even while including its own distinctive contemporary lingo regardless of race. For example, the concept of *cool* might not seem to be a race-conscious idea, but it’s modern use—used to suggest a calm emotional state—has its origins in health issues of African Americans. In the days of lynch mobs—and, more recently, police brutality—a disempowered group facing the possibility of death could not afford to be “hot”: to increase body temperature by showing rage and anger could literally be dangerous to an African American’s health. Therefore, one needed to suppress anger and rage—that is, one needed to remain cool as a survival strategy (Smitherman, *Black* 206). This concept has survived numerous lexical changes: African American youth talk about *chillin*, while their parents refer to *keepin yo cool*, and their grandparents might use the term *copasetic* to refer to being cool.

1.3 AAVE/SE in Conflict

Thomas Kochman, addressing “black and white styles in conflict” in an extensive study, defines the conflict through what language does:

The black mode. . . is high-keyed, animated, interpersonal, and confrontational. The white mode. . . is relatively low-keyed, dispassionate, impersonal, and nonchallenging. The first is characteristic of involvement; it is heated, loud, and generates affect. The second is characteristic of detachment and is cool, quiet, and without affect. (18)

Kochman’s description of “black mode” affecting audience and inviting involvement is evidenced in African American culture, from the call-and-response of religious services to the participatory encouragement of music. Explaining the differences between white and black men in context of “lovers and fighters”, an unidentified African American male sets up the conflict Kochman identifies:

White folks is alright when dey gits in de bank and on de law bench, but dey sho’ kin lie about wimmen folks. . . White mens say they goes clear round de world and wins all de wimmen folks way from they men folks. Dat’s a lie too. They don’t win nothing, they buys em. Now de way I figgers it, if a woman don’t want me enough to be wid me, ‘thout I got to pay her, she kin rock right on, but these here white men don’t know what to do wid a woman when they gits her—dat’s how come they gives they wimmen so much. . . Now me, I keeps me some wimmens all de time. . . Course I don’t run round like heap uh men folks. But if my ole lady go way from me and stay more’n two weeks, I got to git me somebody, ain’t I? (19)

If we substitute the original AAVE text with SAE, the discrepancy in language displays the lack of animated passion in a discussion on adultery:

White men do alright when they are in banks and on the law bench, but they sure can lie about women. White men say they go clear around the world and win all women away from their men. That is a lie, too. They don’t win anything; they buy them. The way I figure it, is a woman doesn’t want me enough to be with me, without me having to pay her, she can move along; but white men don’t know what to do with a woman when they get her—that’s why they give women so much. Now me, I keep some women all the time. . . Of course, I don’t run around like most men. But, if my wife goes away for more than two weeks, I have to get me somebody. Don’t I?

Although the original text conveys the passion of an animated lover, the rewritten text more closely resembles detached speech more likely to appear in textbooks.

The bulk of the lexicon—the surface structure of hybrid or pidgin dialects—can be traced to European language bases. But the deep structure—the phonetic, phonological, and morpho-syntactical systems—of AAVE is rooted in a system akin to African language systems. With such strong ties to language of past generations, one must remember the root of African American culture and how enslavement almost wiped out all traces of African languages and cultures.

Learning English, learning to speak a foreign tongue, was one way enslaved Africans began to reclaim their personal power within a context of domination. Possessing a shared language, slaves could create a community of political solidarity. However, slaves also understood the need to understand and speak their oppressor's language in order to reclaim a sense of equality and use the shared language against their oppressors. Africans altered English, transformed it into a new speech taking broken bits of the language and making of them a counter-language, putting together words in a way that caused the colonizer to have to rethink the meaning of the English language. English words were used incorrectly, creating grammatical constructions differing from the structures of the oppressors—but not the structures of the slaves' ancestral language. Using English incorrectly was a spirit of rebellion that claimed language as a means of resistance, making English into something more than the language of the oppressor. By transforming English, by making a culture of resistance to the oppressor, Africans created a privileged speech that could say more than was permissible within the confines of Standard English. Not only does the power of speech enable resistance, creation of innovative speech creates different ways of thinking and

knowing that were crucial to creating a counter-hegemonic worldview. Africans in American adopted some Eurocentric patterns, and African patterns of language and culture were modified—but they were not erased.

The uniqueness of AAVE is evident in three areas: 1) patterns of grammar and pronunciation; 2) verbal rituals from oral tradition and its continued importance in African cultures; and 3) the lexicon, developed by giving special meaning to English words—a practice going back to the days of enslavement and a need for a form of communication among slaves that could be understood only by those in the slave community.

Chapter Two: AAVE in Academia

Teachers' attitudes toward AAVE, strongly influenced by the courts' decisions in Ann Arbor and Oakland, have long been to discredit the language as “disgusting street slang,” “incorrect and substandard,” “nothing more than ignorance,” “bastardized English,” and “this utmost ridiculous made-up language” (Christensen 249). The most common attitude toward “wrong” language is, according to Peter Elbow “to want to get rid of it” (360). The same people who argue nonstandard varieties of English must go are the one who see the process as belonging to teachers whose job is to improve students' language. The push for proper grammar in the classroom originates back to the open admission policies in the years following the Civil War as more and more young people from non-elite background sought to access academic privileges of the upper-class. Between 1865 and 1895, the mechanics of correct grammar—including punctuation, spelling, and capitalization (mechanics which would not have been found in textbooks prior to 1850)—took precedence in classes devoted to rhetorical instruction and writing. After World War II, another wave of students entered

higher education, followed by a newer populace of students with further open admissions in the 1960s (Elbow, 361). With the flux of new students—continuing today as the traditional classroom is no longer white, but a mix of races from differing socio-economic backgrounds—the daily language in classrooms is seldom the standard language of prestige.

2.1 Attitudes Toward AAVE

“Language,” bell hooks suggests, “disrupts, refuses to be contained within boundaries. It speaks itself against our will, in words and thoughts that intrude, even violate the most private spaces of mind and body” (hooks, *Teaching Community* 167). If language has the potential to empower the individual who uses it, it must also have the potential to disempower those who are just learning to speak and understand language, who are learning to use language as a means of making oneself subject. Language, therefore, has the potential to dominate—to be the language of the oppressor. SAE—the language of an elite minority—has its roots as the language of the oppressor as far back as Europeans first stepped onto foreign soil and conquered Native Americans. SAE has long been the language of conquest and domination, of speaking against foreign vernaculars, against the ruptured and broken speech of a dispossessed and displaced people. The English taught in academia is, as hooks defines, “the mask which hides the loss of so many tongues. . . a weapon that can shame, humiliate, colonize” (hooks, *Teaching Community* 168). When academia dismisses non-standard English, it continues to silence not just other “tongues”, but silence learning. By allowing room only for Standard English, teachers ask students to use a vernacular that limits availability of expression—that silences and censors. Students speaking non-standard forms

of English are required to translate from their native tongue to reach a more inclusive audience.

Yet inclusivity has long been directed towards embracing only the goals of a limited targeted audience. Until the social transformation of the 1960s and 1970s, pedagogical mandates largely pointed to issues of gender and sexism, ageism, homophobia, ableism, class elitism, and linguicism in academia. The transformation initiated by the Black Liberation Movement of the 70s affected all groups which had previously been marginalized and disempowered. In academia, this transformation produced changes in curriculum to reflect the changes in diversity of the classroom—including general education and required courses, such as first year composition courses (FYC). The syllabi for these courses now included texts and readings from African American, feminist, gay/lesbian, and other writers who had long been ignored by these courses. By implementing a pedagogy that embraced topics dealing with race, gender, sexual orientation, and class, the standard syllabi (representing the “DWMs”: Dead White Males) was revised to create potential conflict by introducing topics stimulating critical dialogue, interrogation, exploration, and investigation of diversity issues.

What academia must recognize, as Elbow claims, is speech and writing are different dialects: “Standard English is no one’s mother tongue” (361). Although writing standards are created by the people in power, daily spoken language cannot be limited to one standard, but must be recognized as representing the multiple communities that make up a larger community. Language is a reflection of who the speaker is; by attempting to cover up language, we cover up the means of encouraging discussion through a diversity of perspectives. As an African American TA interviewed by Austin Jackson and Geneva

Smitherman notes, all students “need to see that other ways of speaking besides their own can be used to communicate intelligent thought” (50).

A long-held theory blames the lower academic success of blacks on genetic deficits. However, a position held by linguists locates the problem not in the children, but in the relationship between children and a school system designed to have black children fail. Inner-city children do not have inferior mothers, language, or experience; rather, the language, community style, and ways of living differ dramatically from the structure found in standard classrooms, and this difference is not always recognized or understood by teachers. Too often, linguists argue, SE is the beginning of the educational process, not the end result. Research carried out by Labov in South Central Harlem from 1965 to 1968 described the differences between the Standard English of the classroom and the vernacular language used by members of the street culture. Results of the study indicate a consistent grammar, essentially the same as being used in other cities around the United States: Detroit, Chicago, Philadelphia, Washington, San Francisco, Los Angeles, and New Orleans. Although the AAVE style researched in this study was found to be consistent with AAVE in other cities, Black Americans are not regulated to a single dialect, but a wide range of language forms. However consistent AAVE may be, schools determined the children using the dialect to show a language deficit, attributed to an impoverished environment in their early years. This “verbal deprivation” suggests “black children from the ghetto area. . . receive little verbal stimulation. . . hear very little informed language, and as a result are impoverished in their means of verbal expression” (Labov 59). The danger of accepting this verbal deprivation theory diverts attention from the defects of the educational system, placing attention on imagined defects of a culture based on insufficient studies.

Martin Duetsch put forth the notion of a “cultural deprivation”—that black children are said to lack the favorable factors in their home environment which enable middle-class children to do well in school. These favorable conditions include the development, through verbally interacting with adults, of various cognitive skills, including the ability to reason abstractly, to speak fluently, and to focus on long-range goals. The basis for these findings, however, is limited in the questions asked in gathering research and the means of gathering data from children. One example shows an conversation between a black child and a white interviewer asking the child to “tell [the interviewer] everything you can about this” (as cited in Labov 61). The vague questions from the interviewer, the unfamiliar environment in which the interview takes place, and the differences in race allow for a series of monosyllabic responses from the child. The interviewee’s inability to produce responses matching SE allows for psychologist Basil Bernstein to claim “much of lower-class language consists of a kind of incidental emotional accompaniment” amounting to “nothing more than a series of emotional cries. . . as if the children had no language at all” (as cited in Labov 60). Such research allows for claims of AAVE to be merely an underdeveloped version of Standard English; however, the environment of such tests limits true responses from the interviewees.

Another series of tests shows similar results, even when the interviewer is a black man who has spent over a year with the participants in the study. However, slight changes to the environment and introduction of a less formal interview allowed the same participant to demonstrate a style of speech more closely related to the structure of SE. In a second in a series of interviews, the interviewer 1) brought along a bag of chips, 2) brought along the participant’s best friend, 3) sat on the floor, reducing the difference in height between the interviewer and participant, and 4) introduced taboo words and taboo topics, suggesting any

language was acceptable in the interview. These changes to the testing environment result in changes in the participant's verbal responses; the previous nonverbal participant shows no difficulty in using the English language to express himself, proposing—contradictory to Bernstein's theory—social situations as the most powerful determinant of verbal behavior, and that adults must enter into the right social relation with a child to discover the child's verbal ability. This, however, is what many schools and teachers cannot do (as cited in Labov, 371).

There are, undoubtedly, numerous verbal skills children in inner-cities must learn in order to perform well according to school standards, and many of the skills characteristic of middle-class verbal behavior: Precision in spelling, practice in managing abstract symbols, the ability to explicitly state the meaning of words, and possessing a rich vocabulary are deemed important acquisitions by the standards of academia. However, given the complex syntax sometimes displayed by middle-class students, the question becomes how much of what is accepted as Standard English in school is needed to analyze, and how much is simply a matter of style? The classroom of academia can be modeled to correct poor grammar, but in regulating communication we may be standardizing written communication, but that does not mean speakers of nonstandard English will necessarily give in; by forcing correct grammar into writing, Elbow suggests some writers will build “anger and resentment into the very act of writing” (1998, p. 63). Writing must allow for the writer to demonstrate a vast array of stylistic choices which mirror understanding, analysis, and logic in conveying ideas. The writing classroom should not be limited to the standards of one language, but allow for the possibilities found in all language styles.

Bernstein's theory of AAVE style indicating a deficit of language ability fails to include an analysis of style. Although he sees monosyllabic responses as indicators of inability to communicate clearly, other studies demonstrate the many ways in which working and lower-class speakers are more effective narrators, reasoners, and debaters than many middle-class speakers whose use of SE causes their conveyance to become lost in a mass of irrelevant details: it can be argued that SE leads to pretension, while AAVE leads to precision (as cited in Labov, 373). The two interviews by John Lewis demonstrate the theory AAVE speakers may be more precise than their middle-class counterparts. Aside from one example of SE (the use of "doesn't" instead of AAVE "don't"), Larry's rhetorical style demonstrates the ability of AAVE to sum up complex arguments in a few words; his opinion isn't muddled by unnecessary qualifiers or pretensions. Larry doesn't wander or insert meaningless verbiage; instead, his style counters claims that nonstandard vernacular is not suited for dealing with abstract or hypothetical questions. Compared to Larry's short responses, Charles' response—while demonstrating the English accepted by academia as the Standard English—comes across as more moderate and tempered. Charles qualifies his opinions, attempting to avoid any perceived understatement or overstatement. However, use of such stylistic devices—modifying, qualifying, padding, or repeating words—does little more than extend his verbosity. The second half of his response can be limited to five words: But I believe in witchcraft. Instead of relying on the simplicity of that statement, Charles justifies his belief with an additional one hundred words. The presumption Charles is a good speaker is simply a result of our being conditioned to accept verbosity as intelligence.

Analyzing the differences in Larry's and Charles' speech patterns turns attention again to Bernstein's theory implying inner-city children who speak in monosyllabic

utterances lack a language. As seen in the series of interviews, the assumption should not be directed to the speaker, but to the interviewer and the possibility the interviewer—representatives of linguistic authority—does not understand the rules of grammar. Arnetta Ball, a researcher at the front lines of AAVE, finds that students have a greater tendency to use and prefer narrative and circumlocutionary modes for presenting their thinking (Elbow 70). Most nonmainstream or stigmatized dialects of English are oral and not written. Therefore, the journey for speaker of nonstandard dialects may not be from one form of language to another, rather from the oral mode of thinking and rhetoric to the written modes of thinking and rhetoric. Arnetta Ball writes: “Speakers of AAVE...because of their cultural and linguistic experiences, rely on oral discourse features” and have “vernacular-based preferences in expository patterns (as cited in Elbow 72). Elbow further suggests that academia allow for students to write out their oral thinking and rhetoric as it comes to the tongue as a means of shifting from oral modes to the written modes of thinking. However, the practice of correcting the “bad” grammar of nonstandard language varieties focuses on stylistic choices, ignoring the logic and ideas stated in a response. Correcting bad grammar does nothing to improve a child’s cognitive skills; rather, our attempts to correct nonstandard English forms is an attempt to produce slightly different forms of a language the child always uses. AAVE features need to be recognized for the ability of speakers to phrase an idea in an original way—using metaphors or images to convey ideas in fresh language, even if the language is not structured correctly according to SE. If educators continue to correct the everyday language of a community every time AAVE is used, those speakers risk being compartmentalized and isolated as not being logical thinkers.

Instead of furthering the compartmentalization of critical thinkers into those how use SE and those who use nonstandard forms, Elbow offers solutions as how to integrate understanding of dialects in order for the writing classroom to be “a safer place for such language than most sites of language use—a place where...students can put out of mind any worries about whether anyone might consider their language wrong or incorrect” (361). As long as we believe and teach the only acceptable English is what is recognized as Standard English, “we create an obstacle that we simply don’t need for clear and effective communication” (Balester 201). If the goal of academia is to prepare students for success in rational thinking, continuing to ignore logic because the *structure* of communication is deemed improper will only continue to divide success rates based on linguistic choices.

Labov points out, “There is a close parallel between residential segregation and linguistic segregation, and between residential segregation and educational failure” (as cited in Quinn 481). Segregation, however, is not to imply blacks isolated from whites, as the problem with acquiring standard English stems from blacks being isolated from—or removing themselves from—successful blacks. As localized dialect represents the language of a community, acquisition of SE among blacks indicates removing oneself from the community; maintaining a dialect that employs AAVE structures suggests a tie to the community. In the classroom, therefore, the students who fail often are the leaders of the students. The ones who receive good grades are the ones who have removed themselves linguistically from the community. “Many education programs,” Labov notes, “have the effect of changing children’s social behaviors so they can no longer keep the friends they used to have” (as cited in Quinn 481). Children who change their pronunciation and vocabulary are marked as being socially different than others within the community, leaving

behind their community and black identity. As societies continue to maintain a division between those who use AAVE and SE, we risk forcing blacks to drift further and further from the mainstream. The more social isolation, the more likely social problems will continue. The answer, Labov asserts, is closer integration of schools, across suburban lines: “The way will then be open for the group (both white and black) to shift as a whole, with the convergence that is the result of mutual influence” (as qtd. in Quinn 482). The best way to help students build literacy skills is to build on strengths, and teachers should cherish language differences, realizing the difference between tolerance and acceptance. With an exchange of socially significant symbols, black children will learn from white children, and vice versa, and the present trend towards separation may be reversed. As bell hooks proposes in *Teaching to Transgress*, teachers should “encourage students to use their first language and translate it so they do not feel that seeking higher education will necessarily estrange them from that language and culture they know most intimately” (172). This call for acknowledging and celebrating diverse voice in the classroom—in both speech and writing—is necessary to disrupt the dominance of Standard English. We must challenge conventional ways of thinking about language, creating spaces where diverse voices can speak in words other than Standard English.

2.2 Teachers’ Responsibility in the Classroom:

Our introduction to academia begins early in childhood, with teachers offering ways for us to exercise our minds to engage with the world around us. As we mature as thinkers—learning and applying basic developmental skills—the agenda of the school reverts to something more primitive: To generalize the current state of academia, the school’s agenda is

to use students' scores on standardized tests (AP, SAT, ACT, etc.) as admission criteria for better colleges. The gap between the school's agenda (to produce a work force maintaining the status quo) and the teacher's agenda (to stimulate tools with which to understand and transform the world around us) must be bridged if education is to function at its full potential. With emphasis on test scores, schools encourage mastering criteria to meet standards preserving the status quo; failure to master particular standards is deemed "inferior" or "substandard" by the same system that earlier encouraged critical thinking. When we define failure on the criteria of those in power, we fail students whose thinking and application of knowledge do not conform to the standards of the minority who holds power. By limiting means of demonstrating knowledge, we restrict opportunities for the future.

The classroom, bell hooks defends, "remains the most radical space of possibility in the academy" (*Teaching to Transgress* 12). The cultural and linguistic diversity expanding in classrooms creates a necessary space for sharing of ideas and beliefs—a space where intellectuals are able to freely engage in conversation—a discourse "that unites the language of critique with the language of possibility," so that students recognize they can make changes to the world in which they emerge (Giroux 128). Unfortunately, recent research shows a majority of students not feeling adequate in entering academic conversations. As schools stress mastering criteria necessary to earn high scores on standardized tests, focus on the mechanics of writing leads students who cannot master SAE to believe they are incapable of contributing to academic discourse: 75% of students interviewed do not see themselves as "good writers," while 65% answered they do not enjoy writing at school (Ball and Lardner 15). Feelings of inadequacy often point to teachers focusing on the mechanics of writing, while students seek teachers' affirmation of students as individual thinkers, not solely as

writers mastering command of SAE. Teachers' unconscious negative attitudes toward non-standard varieties of English continue to act as a barrier to academic achievement by speakers of these varieties. Unfortunately, an overwhelming majority of the teaching force is not from these underrepresented groups, suggesting the need to examine teachers' knowledge, understanding, and misconceptions of non-standard varieties of English. As David Bartholomae points out in "Inventing the University," students have a difficult time entering the academy because they have difficulty establishing their ethos for an audience that has more knowledge than they do and demands students abide by conventions within a discourse they do not understand. When a student whose native language is not SAE enters the academy, it is no surprise he would not see himself as a good writer: to someone who speaks non-standard English, trying to engage in discussion with scholars speaking in coded language stresses the lack of experience and direct knowledge of SAE. We should not be surprised these students feel defeated.

With extensive sociolinguistic research on AAVE since the 1960s, writing and composition teachers have become more aware of the interplay of identities, literacies, and power relations in context of language systems. However, despite decades of information concerning diverse rhetorical traditions and new theoretical approaches to language, it appears these developments have not led most educational institutions to make changes in the linguistic practices in classroom. Institutional routines and individual teachers' habits suggest resistance to application of this knowledge. What we are seeing in and out of the classroom suggests changes need to occur in the space before students enter the classroom. If we believe teachers to be vanguards on issues of justice and freedom, of equity and access, we

need to unlearn classroom practices keeping the status quo less than optimal; we need to re-evaluate and remedy deficits in our understanding of AAVE.

2.3 Solutions in the Classroom

At the end of “Inventing the University,” Bartholomae suggests we begin understanding students by examining individuals’ writing for indication of where students are in the process of composing within the context of society, history, and a culture. To expect students entering college to have mastered the skills of applying SAE in writing is idealistic; instead, we must encourage students to “imagine for themselves the privilege of being ‘insiders’—that is, the privilege both of being inside an established and powerful discourse and of being granted a special right to speak” (283). Unless students are able to see themselves as having a right to enter the discussion, learning is hindered.

Unfortunately, in many first-year composition classes, the perceived task of the instructor is to make sure students conform to the standards of argument, proof, usage, style, and diction—the same standards learned in our own English courses and textbooks. We mold language—and language attitudes—conforming to perceptions of what is acceptable prose. Worse, in teaching these standards to our students and sending them into the world, we continue the language discrimination. We teach rhetorical strategies and styles in hopes of developing critical thinkers; yet we regulate thinking by prescribing to a uniform, narrow variety of English, denying the very power we hope to give our students. Yet, are we, as teachers, to hope changes in textbooks and activity sheets produce the strategies needed to

offer power to all students? Textbooks are beginning to address the continuing diversity of the classroom by moving away from the traditional academic texts, replacing dated examples and strategies with modern writers; yet, these texts remain dedicated to preserving a narrow and mainstream concept of acceptable prose.

The answer lies in not just changing textbooks, but in training teachers to recognize and respect students' languages. As Geneva Smitherman recognizes, learning is a two-way street: for educators to best prepare a diverse student population for success, academia must respect language variety and all Americans should learn a second language (as qtd. in Balester 199). Although it is unfair to blame academia (and FYC classes) for America's uninformed attitudes towards language diversity, it can be held responsible for propagating negative approaches to addressing issues of language diversity. As Smitherman reasons, "mis-educated adults are served up more mis-education in college, they return to the public schools to train and mis-educate youth, and this mind-set is perpetrated for generation" (as qtd. in Balester 200). When the Oakland Unified School District passed its resolution on Ebonics in 1996, the effects of national mis-education echoed the same phobias and insecurities when, in 1979, the Ann Arbor school board was ordered to re-educate teachers and re-evaluate curriculum to recognize AAVE as a rule-governed variety of English. In 1996, as in 1979, the national response was critical of teachers, pointing to teachers' attitudes as a major impediment to student learning. The solution, Ball and Lardner suggest, exists in the intersection of three points of view: "the institutional context of the writing course, the teacher's sense of herself as an actor within that institutional site, and the dialogizing, ambivalent, often resistant perspectives of students" (483). Teacher attitudes alone are not enough to influence society; it is wishful thinking to believe students absorb and mirror our

expectations. Society and attitudes reflected in the media greatly influence public attitudes, and we—as educators—must realize the role we play in modeling attitudes towards language. As long as the attitude exists that the only acceptable English is SAE, we perpetuate a long-standing obstruction inhibiting meaningful learning.

Although syllabi are revised to address varieties of English language, most textbooks—even ones including language varieties—still promote the idea that SAE is the most appropriate and accepted form of English, while furthering the perception that its use in academia or the workplace is unjustifiable. As educators, we need to rethink that position, redefining the writing process to offer students more choices on which to base rhetorical decisions about language use—writing and language choices as rhetorical strategies promoting choice over obedience.

This is not to suggest we rid writing classrooms of teaching the rules of grammar; rather, we need to extend our teaching to include student awareness of their linguistic choices—and those choices must include direct instruction in the conventions of grammar, rhetoric, style, and mechanics of SAE. For example, while writing courses have long held on to the belief SAE forbids all run-ons, fragments, split-infinitives, and other such “incorrect” usages, these same grammatical structures can be very powerful when used for rhetorical effect (such as in the authoritative use of a fragment in a persuasive speech: *What do we want? Peace. When do we want it? NOW!*). Education, Elbow argues, needs to encourage student understanding of their own language code and recognize the power of language in society; we should not feel obligated to force students to conform to the mainstream language, instead, we should feel obligated to give students access to the language of power and prestige (359). While the focus of a FYC class should be on students gaining confidence

as a thinker and learning the consequences of linguistic choices, we cannot completely overlook the mechanics of SAE. However, students who require more guidance with these requirements can usually get help outside of the classroom (with the aid of tutors, writing centers, or friends); within the classroom, attention should be geared towards building confidence in students as critical thinkers.

2.4 Personal Classroom Experience

My experiences in the classroom parallel discussions on approaches to changing the way educators handle language diversity. I entered the academia by way of private schools—free from the government regulations placed within the public sector. Not being required to have earned a teaching certificate, my credentials were limited to a BA in English. Furthermore, I had not taken a single course in education in undergraduate studies; my preparation for teaching occurred through observing teachers' behavior in literature classrooms. Unfortunately, my understanding of English classes was a product of traditional teachers favoring grammar over thinking, influencing my attitude toward the teaching of Standard English. Marking students' essays meant correcting grammar first, allowing for minimal deviation from SAE. With a heavy emphasis on the mechanics of writing to meet a standard, development of individual student's thought was conducted through class discussions or individual conferences. Students who could not write using SAE were often identified as requiring additional assistance, which meant completing an English course in summer school or having to repeat Sophomore English. There would be some discussion of the student's critical thinking skills, but the deciding factor of student success was contingent upon the ability to master SAE in writing.

It was not until eighteen years later, when I entered graduate school, that I was exposed to the issue of language diversity in the classroom. Initial discussion engaged debate on “Inventing the University”—the framework for my thesis. Addressing the student’s role in academia, Bartholomae’s critique of education challenged my philosophical approach to the classroom, forcing me to reexamine my beliefs on what student writing should accomplish. I had spent twenty years believing command of SAE was the primary skill needed for students to enter and be successful in the competitive job market; I had overlooked the importance of these students continuing to develop critical thinking skills which would allow them to feel confident in and make sense of the current world around them. During the same semester of graduate school, a course in Southern authors awakened the connection between what we say and how we say it. I had taught the slave narratives of Frederick Douglas and Olaudah Equiano; the narrative styles of Toni Morrison and August Wilson; and the poetry of Nikki Giovanni and Langston Hughes; and the speeches of Martin Luther King, Jr.; only, I had taught them in the context of reading, ignoring the possibilities these voices could contribute to the study of writing. Although these works continue to be taught, I questioned if instructors are including them to diversify the syllabus (as I had), or to discuss the historical, cultural, and political significance of the language. Much like marginalized groups before them, these individuals used language to construct public identities, defining and socio-political problems and influencing change, producing a body of work that continues to be studied. The inclusion of these works in the contemporary canon of American literature supports the legitimacy of the rhetoric of AAVE.

For far too long, these marginalized voices had been ignored as legitimate literature to be studied. Yet, these writers found a voice in a society influenced by socio-political

constructions of race, gender, and culture, and affected by the subtext of power, privilege, and entitlement. Kimberlee Crenshaw's rhetorical analysis of power and prestige addresses these implications when placed upon cultures deemed to be inferior:

To say that a category such as race. . . is socially constructed is not to say that that category has no significance in the world. On the contrary, a large and continuing project for subordinated people. . . is thinking about the way in which power has clustered around certain categories and is exercised against others. This project attempts to unveil the process of subordination and the various ways in which those processes are experienced by people who are subordinated and people who are privileged by them. It is, then, a project that presumes categories have meaning and consequence. This project's most pressing problem is. . . the particular values attached to [categories] and the way those values foster and create social hierarchies. (375)

By challenging the construction of analytical categories, Crenshaw opens the discussion of new intersections of power and prestige and rhetorical acts, shifting the view of academic discourse away from literature of power and prestige to counter discourses offering new meaning and educational qualities in context of a changing socio-political environment. As educators, we need to challenge traditional literary habits by recognizing, including, and discussing literacies offering differential—but equally powerful—values. Respecting these voices not only reconstructs pre-texturized positions of intellectual discourse, it furthers the intellectual legitimacy of these previously marginalized voices, recreating and redefining intellectual meaning we assign to language.

As I prepared my syllabus for my first semester teaching sections of college composition, I needed to revise my beliefs on what could be accomplished in the classroom and my role in encouraging the success of my students as writers and thinkers. Twenty years of being a grammar purist established a firm commitment to teaching the rules of grammar; now, I was questioning every philosophical approach I used in the classroom. In *The Dream*

Keepers, Gloria Ladson-Billings categorizes research on effective programs motivating African American students in the classroom:

Those designed to remediate or accelerate without attending to the students' social or cultural needs; those designed to resocialize African American students to mainstream behaviors, values, and attitudes at the same time they teach basic skills; and those designed to facilitate student learning by capitulating on the students' own social and cultural background. (10)

Arguing for the “culturally relevant” approach, I revised my syllabus to encourage freedom of expression, taking into account students' individual, group, and cultural differences without the rules of grammar and control of SAE hindering students' writing; these were, after all, students whose scores on the ACT labeled them as unskilled in writing. These students had been assessed throughout their academic career on their ability to master the language of an elite class—not on their ability to demonstrate critical thinking skills. I could continue with what I knew about teaching English—focusing on assignments designed to strengthen academic writing—or, I could engage with my students as part of the learning process, learning as much from them and their ideas, histories, and cultures as they would learn about the writing process. Students' differences could be the strengths used to base academic achievement. Discussing classroom atmosphere, Steven Zemelman and Harvey Daniels propose:

If linguists are right that the social context is the driving force behind literary acquisition, then the social context of your [composition] classroom is the most powerful and important variable you can experiment with. More important than what textbook or speller or dictionary to use; more important than what kind of assignments to give; more important than how you set up cumulative writing folders; more important than the criteria by which you assign kids to peer response groups; more important than “teaching Elbow” versus teaching Bartholomae and Petrosky. More important than anything. (50)

If I hope to foster learning, I first have to create an environment which will allow students to believe they are capable of learning, to draw on and give conviction to their differences: these students have heard for too long that they had *not* learned the skills which would make them competent participants in academic discussions; they need reassurance their beliefs and backgrounds are ground for success. The semester had to begin with writing assignments that focused not on the rules of SAE, but on giving students a confident voice in the classroom. Likewise, students have to approach writing as a natural habit—writing can't be taught unless the student writes a great deal and with some level of pleasure, and that cannot happen unless the student feels comfortable in the writing environment. Elbow establishes a list of conditions needed in order for the student to learn to write (and, eventually write “correctly”) without resentment: educators need to respect the student's dialect and accept it as sophisticated language equal to the superiority of SAE; educators must recognize the student as being linguistically smart, having had practice in understanding multiple dialects and knowing when to code switch (as opposed to most mainstream students who, Elbow suggests, are less linguistically educated and fail to recognize linguistic variation); educators need to make the classroom an environment where a student feels safe using his mother tongue as often, or as little, as he chooses; and, the classroom must be a place where students recognize peers' language as equally sophisticated and powerful (364).

An objection to this approach focuses on the link between culture, language, thinking, and even identity. If we ask students to feel comfortable framing arguments and dialogues in their mother tongue, then how, opponents ask, can we just expect them to edit out the surface features of their dialect to present a final draft meeting mainstream standards? If culture, language, and thinking are linked, then, they challenge, we shouldn't ask students to write in

their mother tongue when it carries a different culture of thinking and rhetoric from what is expected as an end result. Such arguments rely on the assumption we are asking students to move from one language to a completely new language; however, I am arguing students move from one dialect of English to another. The research and studies of Japanese students by Hiroe Kobayashi and Carol Rinnert compared the quality of composition using two approaches: direct composition in English, and writing in Japanese and then translating into English. Students produced higher quality writing when translating:

In the translation versions, these students developed more ideas with explanations and specifics, which captured the reader's attention, and they also used more sophisticated vocabulary and a greater variety of form. These results suggest that composing initially in the first language allows students, especially those of lower language proficiency, easier and freer discovery of meaning. (201)

Many non-standard varieties of English, such as AAVE, are oral and not written; therefore, what we are asking of students is not acquisition of a new language, rather moving from an oral mode of thinking and rhetoric to written modes of thinking and rhetoric. The difficulty in changing students' thinking and writing for academia is not a result of differences in languages, rather their mother tongue is an oral dialect, and we are asking them to transition to a written dialect. This is not drastically different from mainstream English speakers entering our classrooms, having similar tendencies toward an oral based rhetoric and having not mastered the level of writing we expect. Most students entering the first year composition classroom come with the same anxieties and level of preparedness for writing at the college level. If we recognize students as equals in this basic respect, the first step in creating a classroom designed to strengthen composition skills is allowing for all students to feel comfortable sharing without worry about being judged on a language standard few have mastered.

The syllabus was designed around a series of assignments asking students to become “experts” on a story developing in the news; the story had to be chosen by the student, as they would spend four months investigating the issues and players in the story—if students were to feel confident entering the discussion, it was imperative they had an active interest in what they were studying. Prewriting activities and initial assignments asked students to write what they knew about the story, why they had an interest in the story, and how the story affected them in their personal lives. More importantly, the assignments asked them to be creative in how they presented their stories. Uninhibited by the traditional expectations of academic writing, students offered narratives in the form of creative nonfiction, dialogue exchange between the student and subjects in their story, and poetry, among other nontraditional genres of composition writing. Establishing the legitimacy of *how* students present early thoughts (recognizing some students need to phrase an idea in an original way—creating metaphors to give meaning to the thoughts they are initially unable to express in “academic” writing) allows students the opportunity to get their words to make meaning without agonizing over surface level rules. As students discovered their voice was being heard—and not just judged—lessons designed to address understanding of the implications of choosing when to use SAE were integrated into the classroom. Having developed confidence in their knowledge of the subject, students approached discussion of SAE with greater self-assurance than previously. The next step asks students to expand their narrative by explaining specific ideas and giving more details or dialogue. But, I don’t mark or ask for corrections on surface mechanics. Too often, instead of encouraging writing, educators focus on the shortcomings of students’ writing—grammars and lexical differences. Margaret McLaughlin recognizes the best approach in helping develop students’ literacy skills is to

build on strengths and cherish language differences, but warns, “there is a tremendous difference between tolerance and real acceptance” (121). When an instructor rejects language, he emphasizes society’s rejection of that culture; we must remember when we discredit a language in the classroom, we are dismissing that student as a member of academia. Students respond to instructors’ attitudes toward their abilities, and when attitudes are perceived as having low expectations, students perform to meet those expectations. If we desire to have students meet expectations, we must guide them with comments supporting desired outcomes.

As students develop their narratives based on questions and comments I make on their drafts, I ask students to settle on a main issue and begin finding news articles addressing their stories. Students then begin reading and analyzing articles in terms of writing—of being critical of rhetorical choices journalists make in presenting the news. As students examine word choice, the phrasing of headlines, photos accompanying the writing, who is given a voice and whose voice is ignored in the article, and the integrity of the journalist, students freely write their analysis, beginning to recognize the consequences of rhetorical choices. As the semester progresses and attention is given to the mechanics of English, students begin to make connections to their own rhetorical choices. This process gives power to the student, as her focus on writing moves from personal narratives, to critical thinking, to organization, and finally to grammar and spelling. By approaching writing in this process, students may struggle to change patterns of thinking and organizing, but they remain uninhibited in the word choice, syntax, and grammars of their home language, without the worry of having to question or notice these surface features. Coming to compositions classes believing their shortcomings in the surface features of AAVE will keep

them from achieving success, this strategy postpones a major struggle for students, allowing for the progress of what should matter most in the development of students as critical thinkers and writers. Somewhere during the process, students become aware of the choices they make as writers, and that is the point of writing: to give students more choices about language.

Choices concerning usage of rhetorical and linguistic habits of one's mother tongue continue to be at the forefront of discussions on issues of language diversity in the classroom. Whether we should expect speakers of non-standard varieties of English to abandon their mother tongue in the classroom was a question Smitherman examined in research she conducted for the National Assessment of English Proficiency (NAEP). Observing whether there is room for language variation in the classroom, Smitherman analyzed student exams, finding:

For 1984 imaginative and 1984 and 1988 persuasive NAEP essays, a team of experienced writing instructors was able to identify a discernible black discourse style [involving rhetorical and structural features—which they distinguished from black grammar and syntax] and establish criteria for rating the “blackness” of student essays. The team achieved a 90 percent agreement for 867 essays. Results indicated that students who employed a black expressive discourse style received higher NAEP scores than those who did not. (“Blacker” 1)

Her study contradicted findings from two earlier tests (1969 and 1975) which showed no correlation between black discourse style and higher test scores. Smitherman reasoned language and rhetorical norms change over time, and as norms shift from “book” English to “human” English, the “narrativizing, dynamic quality of the African American Verbal Tradition will help students produce lively, image-filled, concrete, readable essays, regardless of rhetorical modality” (2). Her study goes on to suggest there is no correlation between black discourse and the production of AAVE syntax, furthering the argument we

should not be quick to have students of non-standard English dialects abandon all linguistic habits of their culture. When asked to write in SAE, Smitherman discovered students tend to create additional errors in SAE as they overcorrect in an unfamiliar dialect. As grammatical and syntactical deviations of non-standard dialects tend to be less alien than many think, educators need to recognize students writing in their mother tongue will produce writing approaching what is expected with fewer deviations from SAE.

Opponents argue, as non-standard varieties are not meant to be written, asking students to transform their oral rhetoric to written rhetoric is futile if orality is the core of its purpose. However, we must remember that most early literature is the written representation of oral dialects. All modern European languages began as non-standard oral vernaculars. With the development of publishing and printing, these writings became more accessible and, as a result of the distribution, certain dialects became the “standard” as it represented the dialect of a region coming into economical and political power. To allow non-standard varieties to be stripped of their power because of a faulty desire to acknowledge only one variety is to allow cultures to be stripped of their identities. The consequence of dishonoring a student’s mother tongue, Toni Morrison recognizes, is to set up the student for failure:

The worst of all possible things that could happen would be to lose that language. There are certain things I cannot say without recourse to my language. It’s terrible to think that a child with five different present tenses comes to school to be faced with those books that are less than his own language. And then to be told things about his language, which is him, that are sometimes permanently damaging. . . This is a really cruel fallout of racism. (as qtd. in Elbow 78)

The question continues to ask to what extent we allow students to exist in the comfort of their home language. If we allow for one extreme—dismissing the power of non-standard dialects—we risk alienating groups of students in our classrooms; if we allow for the other

extreme—allowing students to rely solely on their mother tongue—we offer students too much choice and risk by offering too little access to the language of power. By allowing students to prewrite and submit early drafts in a language that allows for the development of critical thinking and rhetorical skills, and then allowing for editing surface features on later drafts, I allow students to recognize and practice bridging the gap between the oral and written modes of non-standard and standard varieties of English. Whereas the oral tradition is spontaneous and responds to an immediate context, writing is about revising and editing. By allowing students to write, revise, and revise as often as needed, students are producing stronger drafts while developing confidence in writing—confidence that then allows for them to turn attention to the surface issues of SAE. The First Year Composition Classroom must be a space where students, teachers, and attitudes towards language intersect to promote a healthy respect for all varieties of English if we are to promote skills for success.

However, there continues to exist too many educators who perceive the issue to be the responsibility of the student, failing to recognize the instructor's responsibility in creating a healthy space for learning. Studies show that neither verbal scores on standardized tests (such as the SAT or ACT), nor desire to succeed, nor writing ability in Developmental English classes can predict students' success in succeeding writing courses (McLaughlin 127). The one issue that studies show influence students' success is attitudes towards AAVE. Unfortunately, many educators have a negative attitude toward AAVE and other non-standard varieties of English, and the attitude stems from lack of knowledge in language varieties. The issue of lack of understanding non-standard varieties of English in the classroom had hindered my abilities as an educator—and, unfortunately, twenty years of shortcomings affected my students. Knowing credentials for teaching in the private sector

are lax compared to the certifications and credentials required in the public sector, I was interested in how academia prepared pre-service teachers for the issues of language diversity in the classroom.

An informal survey points to the failings of academia in correcting the issues being discussed. The range of participants included: an educator of 46 years who earned his master's in 1965 to pre-service educators currently completing their B.A.s; educators who have earned a Ph.D. to those currently working towards an M.A.; educators who teach in the private sector and those who teach in the public sector; and educators teaching at the primary, secondary, and tertiary level. Examining educators' backgrounds (including: where they studied; highest degree earned; when they earned their degree; when they began teaching; and educational courses required for degrees), the study revealed that little has been done to train future educators on the issue of language diversity in the classroom: only 10% of those surveyed were required to take any courses in which the issue of language diversity was discussed; of those, only one-third had taken a class specifically designed to address the issue. 13% of those surveyed attended a university which offered electives addressing the issue, but none had elected to take such a class. The study shows classroom discussion of the issue is on the rise: the 10% who had taken a class in which the issue was addressed are either current students or had completed undergraduate work within the past five years. Of the 13% enrolled in a university offering electives addressing the issue, 83% were enrolled within the past seven years. Unfortunately, 87% of those currently acting as educators identified language diversity in the classroom as an issue within their school; and of those, only 17% believed the issue was being addressed to "some extent." The study mirrors trends within the discussion of language diversity: while research and discussion of the issue began

in the 60s, only recently has academia been implementing practices to change the atmosphere and beliefs within the classroom.

Ideally, every educator would be required to have training in sociolinguistics before entering the classroom. Training in this area would wake educators to the influence attitudes towards language has on students' success in the classroom. The District Court ruled in the 1979 Ann Arbor case that a negative attitude towards AAVE represented "a language barrier that impeded the students' educational progress" (Ball and Lardner 471). However, a court-ordered workshop does not seem to be the solution, as being ordered to attend training may produce negative attitudes towards the workshop, advancing the damaging position towards AAVE. Instead, teachers would benefit from practices integrating sociolinguistic knowledge into more encouraging attitudes. In a 1989 study conducted by Hanni Taylor, TOESL methods (contrastive analysis, the audio-lingual method, and the counseling-learning method) were applied to writing instructions for African American students. By applying contrastive analysis to oral and written drills, Taylor was able to help students recognize pattern differences between AAVE and SAE. Furthermore, by analyzing themes in the writing of African American and white writers, students improved writing skills and became proficient in codeswitching and bidialectalism. A final step in Taylor's approach to integrating sociolinguistic knowledge into her pedagogy involved revealing herself as both an instructor and learner, asking students to engage her in using AAVE to help her understand the language (103-131). Teachers who have reported taking general language survey courses, such as Introduction to the English Language "continue to express attitudes of zero tolerance toward language diversity," while students who have taken more specialized courses, such as African American Dialects and American Dialects, tend to

possess attitudes that are “more tolerant toward the use of language variation” in their classrooms (Ball and Muhammad 81). These practices, when used alongside previously mentioned approaches to the writing process, allow for greater success as students and instructors work together towards developing student writing through drafting, waiting until later drafts to begin the evaluative process.

Conclusion

Until attitudes toward SAE shift to include discussion and understanding of all varieties of English, Kermit Campbell reasons that academia’s persistence on the authority of only one code (SAE) deprives speakers of non-standard English varieties of their power while weakening their voices:

Isolated and alienated as they often are in predominately white universities, these students need to feel that, apart from their facility with the conventions of academic discourse, they do belong and are already speakers with place, privilege, or authority. (as qtd. in Balester 207)

Yet, we need to be reminded that speakers of AAVE should not simply learn SAE without positioning themselves within and against the dominant language. That is, we should be teaching conventions of rhetoric and style while guiding students to more extensive understanding of usage so they understand the controversy and diversity within English language varieties. Literacy is privilege, power, and voice. It is how we perceive students as literate individuals and understand how powerful their voice is. Literacy is also access to privilege; we want students to develop a proficiency of SAE in order to gain access to the dominant culture, but we also want to make sure we don’t exclude students’ natural language abilities or dismiss the power of language to communicate in the written mode. We want to expose our students to different varieties of English while creating opportunities for them to

explore their own language. Students, while needing to understand the basic mechanics of a dominant language, must be aware that the dominant language is not the only or even most correct English available. Writing is a process, and if we continue to teach writing as a product, we fail to teach students on the social implications of the choices they make concerning language use. Teaching writing should not be about teaching a dominant style; rather, we must approach teaching writing as teaching an attitude towards language and as a process that encourages choice—choices in respect to diversity and an understanding of the limitations of language. Students should be able to define a writing situation and produce writing that demonstrates the ability to make good choices. As future professionals, students need opportunities to study language and explore the uses of spoken languages at home and in the classroom, and make connections when using written language in research, in fiction, in advertising, in e-mails and text messages, in proposals, and in academic settings. We want students to take responsibility for their language choices, to honor their home languages while honoring the persona they create when writing. How we respond to student writing will continue to be a challenge; yet, we must continue to encourage students to find meaning not in just their writing, but in their voices.

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