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Foundational Theories on Racism, Rhetoric, Language, and Pedagogy
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THE RHETORICS OF RACISM

A Historical Sketch

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I want to make a convoluted claim. The claim is that though there has always been a distinction that contemporary eyes might view as racism, racism is relatively new. There have always been ways of distinguishing the usses from the thems and of ranking the usses as superior to the thems, but racism in the ways we tend to think of the concept hasn’t always been the means whereby that discrimination has been made. A claim I don’t wish to make is that there has been some evolution or devolution that has led to racism. Whereas George Frederickson sees something of a circle—a bigotry that begins as theological, develops into the biological, and returns to the theological in contemporary times—I will argue that the matter is more like Antonio Gramsci’s sedimentations, that elements from prior historic blocs are never quite lost. I argue that the first distinctions were rhetorical, even prior to the theological, and that today’s racism, though very clearly having material, economic effects, is again more steeped in the rhetorical, though now containing the sedimentations of the theological, geographical, biological, and the like. This, in effect, is an argument laid out as sketch of racism of the West.

NOMOS AND THE BARBARIAN

A standard gambit in the classroom is to assert that it’s no coincidence that racism, the Enlightenment, capitalism, and trans-hemispheric expansion all coincide. Some student will invariably say something like, “Wait a minute! Are you saying racism is two hundred years old?” To which I’ll say something about maybe 500 years but formalized about two hundred years ago, yeah. And then, some really smart student will bring up classical Athens.
The argument is that the Athenians had their own brand of bigotry. And that's true. That's what gave rise to imperialism and to slavery, but Athens's form of bigotry wasn't tied to more contemporary notions of "race." Though the "Greeks" did distinguish by means of something like phenotype, those visual, physical markers are not what distinguished superior from inferior, civilized from barbarian. There might not have been a unified Greek state (giving rise to my use of scare quotes), but there was a unified distinction, likely reified by way of the Delian League, so that those holding allegiance to the central political power of Athens—by way of language—would be separated from the barbarian. It will take the Romans to convert the word barbarian to a physical reference—the wearers of beards, hairy ones. But the Greeks coined the word from the Chinese, according to Edith Hall (1989, 4), a term originally onomatopoetic for nonsense speech, a Chinese version of blah-blah-blah. And Frank Snowden (1970), in *Blacks in Antiquity*, pointed out some time ago that though Athenians recognized the physical characteristics of sub-Saharan Africans as those with burnt faces—Ethiopians—that was only an identifier of place: the burnt-faced ones were the people from that place down there. In *Before Color Prejudice*, Snowden (1983) notes that though there were all kinds of associations between blackness and evil, none of those references carried over to people. For the Athenians, the measure of superiority was language, the language to rise above *physis*, the language of *nomos*, the language of *arête*, terms we have come to associate solely with the Elder Sophists, thanks to John Poulakos (1983), Harold Barrett (1987), and others, but which applied to the whole of Greek culture as centered in the Athenian city-state. We can infer as much from George Kennedy's (1991) choice of a subtitle to his version of Aristotle's rhetoric: *A Theory of Civic Discourse*. No one would claim Aristotle was a sophist. It was in these terms, *physis, nomos, arête*—the uses of language to create and to maintain a political order that would rise above our natures—that Athenian culture saw its superiority to those who could only speak as by nature, not by gift of reason. The barbarian was barbarian by nature of discourse, of rhetoric, of politics, not by what we have come to see as "race."

The closest the Romans come to a notion of race is the *gens*, a community bound by a common ancestry. But here again, the distinction is not based on physiognomy or by some base nature. The distinction remains rhetorical and political—*civitas* as gifted-in-speech. Cicero (1918) might write to Atticus that he "not obtain [his] slaves from Britain because they are so stupid and so utterly incapable of being taught that they are not..."
fit to form a part of the household of Athens” (4.15), but in so saying, there is no overtly racialized distinction; it is a political one: unlearned, not given to the rational in that Aristotelian sense. Barbarians couldn’t enter into the rhetoric of rising above nature by the creation of the city or even by the cutting of hair. They displayed a poor politic. Unkempt and unlearned though they might have been, they weren’t colored.

**NOMOS V. ECCLESIA**

I tell the students that we are still Rome, that we still deal in Roman time. That we have conflated the Emperor and the Praetor even as we did away with the King, that we still deal in Senators and a Republic that was intentionally modeled after Cicero but which became the Empire. But like the empire of Rome, it gives way to religion: The Left Behind novels about the rapture and an overtly Christian (in that American, non-Catholic sense) president coins an educational program “No Child Left Behind.” I’m not denigrating religion and religious beliefs. That’s not mine to do. I’m attempting to demonstrate historical parallels and San Juan’s (2002) assertion that the theology of the times is nationalism. I’m not sure I accept that, but it’s good for classroom talk.

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The canon of rhetoric and of empire sees the time of Cicero as the time of change, from a city-state dominated by a *respublica* to a greater attention to imperial accumulation. The greater the geographic expansion, the greater the suggestion that there might not be a common beginning to all, so that all might not be able to attend to speech-dominated politics. And with the change in the political system and its political economy comes a change in ideology. Vergil becomes the poet of the Republic, but he’s cast in greater and greater Christian terms, the Good of Rome vs. the Evil of the Other. Eventually, the shift becomes paradigmatic: from politics/philosophy/rhetoric to religion. There are those who accept the faith (Judeo and Christian both as “the faith” at this point), and there are those who do not. Those who do not accept the faith are called *ethnicis* by Paul (Hannahford 1996, 88). The complete rejection of the political comes from the Jewish general Flavius Josephus (around the first century CE). Augustine (1987), however, tries not to discard his learning of rhetoric and its political, civic implications, providing for the priority in faith, the recognition of an institution of the Church, and the possibility for politics, a kind of
philosophical/theological agreement between Church and State that he lays out in *The City of God*.

Then things start to change, as Islam rises, and Jews travel Europe, particularly Spain and southern France. In 711, Tarik ibn Ziyad travels from Morocco into Spain, the great rock taking his name—Jabal Tariq (Tariq's Mountain), corrupted into Gibraltar. A hierarchy of religions—and thereby their followers—takes hold. Superiority belongs to the Christians, followed by the Jews, followed by Muslims. Although the intellectual world embraces the scholars of the three faiths as they study mathematics, logic, and the works of Aristotle, the rising power of the Papacy begins the denigration of a people for reasons that are no longer as clear as the use of language to create and maintain a political.

People begin to be described as beyond the rational, as not human. According to Heinrich Graetz (2005), the beginning of the end for Jews and Muslims in Europe is tied to Pope Innocent III—particularly two events (one of which takes place on 9/11—September of the year 1211). Prior to 1209 and 1211, Innocent had given some dispensation to Jews, ordering that they not be subject to arbitrary punishment. But he becomes upset that kings of Spain (Pedro of Aragon and Alfonso of Castile, in particular) are a little too kind to the Jews. Having had Jews among them for nearly a thousand years and recognizing the intellectual and economic contributions of the Jews, these kings provided no special treatment to the Jews; they were Aragonians and Castilians, Spaniards. That lack of special treatment came to be seen by Innocent as very special treatment, however. Not to recognize their lack of Christian faith is for Innocent a heresy. Accordingly he issues an order that no one is to mix with the Jew—in every sense of "mix"—under threat of excommunication. In 1208, he declares that “the Jews, like the fratricide Cain, are doomed to wander about the earth as fugitives and vagabonds, and their faces must be covered in insult” (Graetz 2005, 516). Herein begins the Othering with a Biblical precedent. Jews become associated with Cain. Later, others will be associated with Ham.

According to Graetz (2005) this order from Innocent led to two events that would change how Jews are regarded. The first takes place in July 1209. News had come to Innocent that there was a community in southern France (Albigenses) that was accepting readings of the Bible influenced by Jewish exegesis rather than Papal interpretations. Such heresy gives rise to slaughter, with the Pope ordering his military to kill all the people of Béziers, all, leaving it to God to do the rewarding and condemning of the souls that would be freed from their bodies.
Then in September 1211, Abu Yusuf Ya’qub al-Mansur invades southern Spain from his base in Algiers. King Alfonso seeks the assistance of Innocent, who sends the leader of the massacre at Béziers, the cleric Arnold, to help, along with the largest military force gathered in Western history to that time. The Castilian and Papal forces are nevertheless defeated. But during that battle at Salvatierra, Arnold is offended by the kind of special treatment he witnesses Jews continuing to receive in Castile. He thereby takes it upon himself to slaughter Jews as part of his attack on the Moors, not unlike the later war that took place in response to the contemporary attacks of 9/11.

Over the next two hundred years, Jews and Arabs continue to live in Spain, with the poorer elements living in Arab aljamas or Jewish barrios. After mob attacks, many Jews and Muslims convert to Catholic Christianity (there was no other kind yet). The monarchies are okay with this, since they see the intellectual and economic gains to be had by the converts, but there is suspicion by many clerics and “intellectuals,” who believe that the converts are only pretending, that they are still following their prior religious teachings and conducting their prior religious rituals in secret. Eventually, Jews are forced to convert; children are taken from their parents to be baptized; parents convert to regain their children. But suspicions remain, so that by the beginning of the fifteenth century in Spain, the neo-Christians of Jewish ancestry are more hated than the unconverted Jews or Muslims.

And there remained the bad blood from the widely held belief (though not by the Papacy) that the Jews were responsible for the Black Death, that Jews had been poisoning the water throughout Europe (rather like the anthrax scare of 9/11), a belief that traveled as far north as Switzerland. Jews were captured, tortured (water boarding first explained as a method born at the trials of the Black Death and explained as a method of extracting confessions during the Inquisition), with many confessing to creating the Black Death (even as Jews died alongside Christians) and pointing to co-conspirators.

Even in times of peace among Christians and Jews throughout Europe, from the thirteenth century till their expulsion at the end of the fifteenth century, Jews were either mandated to wear certain clothes—the Muslims requiring the Jews to wear distinctly different turbans from those worn by Muslims or to wear yellow robes, not white; the Christians mandating that Jews wear a badge in the shape of a star. By 1492, Queen Isabela and King Fernando of Castile and Aragón demand
the expulsion of all Jews and Muslims from their lands, effectively expelling Jews and Muslims from the Iberian Peninsula. Political discourse had been supplanted by religious discourse, debate by the mandates of a Pope, a King, a Queen, and a tyrannical tribunal, the Inquisition. Nomos was no longer the rule. Physis had not yet become the physiognomy in the racialized sense, but the decision had been made that those who were made to wear badges of disgrace were disgraced not just by belief but by blood—the sons and daughters of Cain.

FROM FAITH TO THE FANTASTICAL AND PRESCIENCE

The hermeticists sought to duplicate the liquid referred to in the Bible that Moses had received by striking a rock—manna—the secret food that allowed the Ancients of the Bible to live many hundreds of years, like Abraham and Moses. Hermeticism believed all things sprung from a prima materia, a Philosopher’s Stone. It was also believed that one can begin with lead, turn it into gold, turn gold into potable gold, and that in turn would lead to the Elixer of the Sages—that food that would make for long life or else for the purer form of being which is spirit. The closest they came was booze—still called distilled spirits to this day. I tell students they must have thought they had changed into something invincible—at least for a couple of hours, after which they needed to invent aspirin.

Ivan Hannaford (1996) argues that in the time between the marking and expulsion of Jews and the creation of the term race in a relatively modern understanding, interest in Hermeticism and the Cabala of the European late middle ages and early Renaissance began the new divisions of humanity into types. Hermeticism provided that though all matter derives from a common matter that evolves into higher forms—a kind of early version of evolution and a source for the neoplatonic chain of being—the elements (earth, wind, fire, and water) and demons can corrupt certain forms. The Cabalists take the teachings of Hermeticism and add elements of ancient numerology to the system, an esoteric mix of magic, the zodiac, and alchemy to arrive at new readings of the Talmud and of the Bible that explain differences in psychology and physiognomy in humankind through differences in eyes, nostrils, and skin color—or even to explain the man-beast mixes described by travelers and by depictions and descriptions of the not quite human: dog-headed Jews and wolf-headed Muslims, for example. Through these mixes, Hannaford explains, through these precursors to science as we
understand it (alchemy leading to physics and chemistry), there arises the right sons (and possibly daughters, but never directly said) of God and the Others, the outliers, the sons of Cain (Canaans with dog heads, etymologically the source for the word *canine*) and the sons of Ham.

In like manner, David Brion Davis (1997) refers to Jennifer Morgan’s “Some Could Suckle Over Their Shoulder”: Male Travelers, Female Bodies, and the Gendering of Racial Ideology, 1500–1770 to describe how black women during the Renaissance, when removed from the African continent by being in the Cape Verde Islands, say, were thought objects of beauty to the European (with “object” a clear rhetorical choice here), but when on the African continent, the black woman was rendered a beast, with breasts hanging so low as to be confused with an additional pair of legs, the male European traveler describing her as naked, promiscuous, given to sleeping with aplan, even giving childbirth without experiencing pain. The bestialization of “lower orders” (which included women of color, “sodomites,” and Jews) becomes a rhetorical trope—from Aristotle’s assertion that “the ox was the poor man’s slave” to the Christian depiction of Jews as “horned beasts, swine, and vermin” (Davis 1997, 12). Shakespeare describes the Moor Othello as black (with Laurence Fishburne taking the lead role in the 1995 film rendering), though Othello is a Turk, not a contemporary “black,” the moor by Shakespeare’s time suggesting a person of mixed racial heritage: the Spaniard mixed with Arab and North African Berber, the reason why Hegel will later construct a history that will place Spain with Africa rather than Western Europe. As I’ll reference below, this is a legacy that continues, as I think of even a well-meaning William Labov (1972) not making the distinctions others like Ana Celia Zentella (1988) will between the Puerto Rican’s English vernacular and Black English Vernacular in the ghettos of Manhattan, of Harlem and Spanish Harlem. And perhaps the greatest representation of this mix of the Hermetic, the Cabalistic, the traveler, the beast-in-the-other, is Caliban, the Caribbean man-beast born of a devil and a human whose name is an anagram of the Spanish *canibal*, cannibal.

**THE NEW WORLD, THE NEW SCIENCE, AND THE RISE OF RACE**

I used to like using Ronald Takaki’s (1993) *A Different Mirror* in first-year comp classes to demonstrate the arbitrariness of language and the equally arbitrary matter of “race.” Takaki points out that what made the American Indians noble savages was the bigotry of the race called Irish, who were, by implication, ignoble savages. These noble savages
were black people. But then came the African slaves when the American Indian slaves died, committed suicide, or ran, or rebelled. The Africans were much darker, so they became black, the Indians became red, and eventually the Irish (who really are red, often), became white.

World exploration gives rise to the word race, no longer confined to establishing ancestral lines of nobility, now conflated with ethnic, originally the term to describe the non-Christian. The “philosophical,” theosophical, theological, and scientifical (not quite scientific) become clearly conflated with the economic—the need for imperial expansion and profit—with the full fruit of racism. W.E.B. DuBois (1962), for example, in Black Reconstruction in America, is at pains to describe the political economy that necessitated the idea of the inferiority of black folk. He argues that the American Southerner was pushed into slavery by the economics of Northern and European industry, so that the Southern slave master “was therefore not deliberately cruel to his slaves, but had had to raise cotton enough to satisfy his pretensions and self-indulgence, even if it brutalized and commercialized his slave labor” (37). Though there is a clear irony to this, DuBois is presenting an economic explanation for slavery. In this same passage, DuBois goes on to say that

slavery was the economic lag of the 16th century carried over into the 19th century and bringing by contrast and by friction moral lapses and political difficulties. It has been estimated that the Southern states had in 1860 three billion dollars invested in slaves, which meant that slaves and land represented the mass of their capital. Being generally convinced that Negroes could only labor as slaves, it was easy for them to become further persuaded that slaves were better off than white workers and that the South had a better labor system than the North, with extraordinary possibilities in industrial and social development. (37)

DuBois relates an economy that gives rise to a politic which is represented rhetorically, as matters of persuasion. DuBois later details the discussions that take place in the press and within the legislature to rectify the problem of the poor white workers, making it necessary, he argues, for the African American to be reduced to subhuman status. From 1897, when DuBois spoke on “The Concept of Race,” to his 1962 revision of an older essay on Africa, colonialism, and racism, DuBois remained attached to the idea that racism finds its roots in capitalism and imperialism.
By the eighteenth century, a new paradigm comes to the fore. The paradigm of rhetoric as physis, arete, nomos and the civic that had given way to the paradigm of ecclesia, is replaced by the rational. Kant, by the end of the eighteenth century, has a new explanation for the inferiors who are subjugated. In answering the question “What is Enlightenment?” he explains that

Enlightenment (Aufklärung) is the exit of humanity by itself from a state of culpable immaturity (verschuldeten Unmündigkeit). . . . Laziness and cowardliness are the causes which bind the great part of humanity in this frivolous state of immaturity. (quoted in Dussel 1995, 20)

A few years later, Hegel will write that

Universal history goes from East to West. Europe is absolutely the end of universal history. Asia is the beginning. Africa is in general a closed land, and it maintains this fundamental character. It is characteristic of the blacks that their consciousness has not yet even arrived at the intuition of any objectivity. . . . He is a human being in the rough. This mode of being of the Africans explains the fact that it is extraordinarily easy to make them fanatics. The Reign of the Spirit is among them so poor and the Spirit in itself so intense . . . that a representation that is inculcated in them suffices them not to respect anything and to destroy everything. (quoted in Dussel 1995, 22)

And as for Spain, which had harbored Jews for a millennium and Arabs of North Africa for nearly eight hundred years, it is the place where

one meets the lands of Morocco, Fas (not Fez), Algeria, Tunis, Tripoli. One can say that this part does not properly belong to Africa, but more to Spain, with which it forms a common basin. De Pradt says for this reason that when one is in Spain one is already in Africa. This part of the world . . . forms a niche which is limited to sharing the destiny of the great ones, a destiny which is decided in other parts. It is not called upon to acquire its own proper figure. (quoted in Dussel, 21–24)

A new philosophical base describes ethnocentricity in the contemporary sense, marked not only by Kant and Hegel but also by their predecessors in Bacon, Newton, Hobbes, and Locke. But it is science that finally puts forth races in a more contemporary sense. A number of arguments about ancestral lines of different peoples had been taking shape from the sixteenth century, while within the sciences Aristotle’s taxonomical ways had been absorbed by those who would provide descriptions, first of flora, then of fauna, perhaps best demonstrated
by the works of John Ray, who classified plants, fish, birds, serpents, and mammals in a number of works toward the end of the seventeenth century. By the late eighteenth century, Johann Friedrich Blumenbach (1769), the father of physical anthropology, “fixes” prior schemes to arrive at the first set of racial classifications. By his third edition of The Natural Varieties of Mankind, he had arrived at five races based on his studies of skulls more than skin color. The five races are

- Caucasian
- American (as in American Indian)
- Mongolian (Asiatic in an earlier edition of Varieties)
- Malay
- Ethiopian

Of these, the most beautiful are the Caucasians, people described as of light brown skin with black wavy or curly hair. American Indians form a transition from Mongolian to Caucasian. And the Malay form a transition from Caucasian to Ethiopian. The rest is a slippery slope: Darwin to Edmund Spenser to the British looking to be master races to the German creation of the Aryan as a Northern tribe that had invaded the lands of the South, where we know of the Aryans as Iranian and Indian, to the reinvigorated hatred of the Jews, along with Gypsies, to the attempted genocide of World War II. In the U.S. there is the Chinese Exclusion Act, Jim Crow, the forced expulsion of Mexican and Mexican Americans during the 1930s, and the continued colonization of American Samoa, Guam, the Marshall Islands, Micronesia, the Northern Marianas, Palau, the U.S. Virgin Islands, and Puerto Rico—to this day.

**THE NEW RACISM**

By the end of World War II, the presumption of white supremacy could no longer be tolerated. The biological determinism born of the Age of Enlightenment and necessary for the continued functioning of imperialist capitalism no longer resounded as a given. Something else has to come to take its place. While “race” is given less and less credence, the process of racialization continues, the rhetorical creation of racial identities (though Michael Omi and Howard Winant [1994] say it’s the discursive creation, but that confines us to the Foucauldian notion of discourse). The rhetorical tropes that define this new form of racism—racialization—are seen in the terms “ethnicity” and “civilization.”
Ethnicity was first the term to describe non-Christian Jews and Arabs in Europe. But the term eventually elided into the single term race-and-ethnicity, suggesting a race that is not necessarily visible as a race yet subject to the same treatments as those of a recognized race. Latinos and Latinas, who comprise all races and mixes of races as commonly understood, form a prime example of a race-and-ethnicity. The term ethnicity began reappearing in the 1920s in a move to justify continued colonial holdings among the U.S. and Western Europe. By the end of World War II, few colonies remained among the Europeans, so that it became necessary to hearken back to the inherent inferiority of racism without reference to race or to colonial status. Within the U.S., the term received its most complete treatment in Nathan Glazer and Daniel P. Moynihan's *Beyond the Melting Pot: The Negroes, Puerto Ricans, Jews, Italians, and Irish of New York City*, first published in 1963, with a second edition in 1970. In their book, Glazer and Moynihan describe ethnic groups as those who do not necessarily assimilate as a matter choice rather than bigotry. According to Glazer and Moynihan,

Ethnic groups, . . . even after distinctive language, customs, and culture are lost . . . are continually recreated by new experiences in America. The mere existence of a name itself is perhaps sufficient to form group character in new situations, for the name associates an individual, who actually can be anything, with a certain past, country, or race. (quoted in Omi and Winant 1994, 18)

Rather than full assimilation, ethnicities form *interest groups*. Glazer and Moynihan continue:

But as a matter of fact, someone who is Irish or Jewish or Italian generally has other traits than the mere existence of the name that associates him [sic] with other people attached to the group. A man is connected to his group by ties of family and friendship. But he is also connected by ties of *interest*. The ethnic groups in New York are also *interest groups*. (18)

The problems that ethnic groups then face become the sedimentations of conflicting group interests. In 1975, Glazer and Moynihan write that "ethnic groups bring different norms to bear on common circumstances with consequent different levels of success—hence group differences in status," so any group that fails does so by virtue of flaws in the group's "norms," as in the stereotypical contention that the dropout rate among Chicanos and Latinos is so high because Latino culture does not prize education like other groups do (Omi and Winant 1994, 21).
Since 2001, the term *civilization* has found a resurgence, a way of addressing neocolonial, geopolitical, and economic conflicts arising from the September 2001 aircraft-as-bomb attack on the twin towers of the New York City World Trade Center. In his article “The Clash of Civilizations?” Samuel P. Huntington (1993) offers the hypothesis that the fundamental source of conflict in this new world will not be primarily ideological or primarily economic. The great divisions among humankind and the dominating source of conflict will be cultural. Nation states will remain the most powerful actors in world affairs, but the principal conflicts of global politics will occur between nations and groups of different civilizations. The clash of civilizations will dominate global politics. The fault lines between civilizations will be the battle lines of the future. (22)

In *The Clash of Civilizations and the Remaking of World Order*, Huntington (1998) then provides a taxonomy of contemporary world “civilizations,” titled in such a way that the precursors of modern racism and modern racism itself are now intermeshed. The civilizations are:

- Western
- Latin American
- African
- Islamic
- Sinic
- Hindu
- Orthodox
- Buddhist
- Japanese (26)

The natural order of things is rendered as neither *ecclesia* nor race nor *nomos*. *Civitas* is rendered not as speech but as “civilizations” and the cultures those civilizations contain. The natural order of things, then, becomes the “need” to resist contamination by those other cultures.

A section of *The Clash of Civilizations and the Remaking of World Order* begins by reducing U.S. immigration as coming from two civilizations, the Sinic and the Latin American, more specifically Asians and Mexicans, and even more specifically Filipinos and Mexicans. Huntington then writes:
While Europeans see the immigration threat as Muslim or Arab, Americans see it as both Latin American and Asian but primarily as Mexican. . . . The central issue will remain the degree to which Hispanics are assimilated into American society as previous immigrant groups have been. . . . Mexicans walk across a border or wade across a river. This plus the increasing ease of transportation and communication enables them to maintain close contacts and identity with their communities. Second, Mexican immigrants are concentrated in the southwestern United States and form part of continuous Mexican society stretching from Yucatan to Colorado. Third, some evidence suggests that resistance to assimilation is stronger among Mexican migrants than it was with other immigrant groups. . . . Fourth, the area settled by Mexican migrants was annexed by the United States after it defeated Mexico in the nineteenth century. . . . In due course, the results of American military expansion in the nineteenth century could be threatened and possibly reversed by Mexican demographic expansion in the twenty-first century. (1998, 205–206)

Huntington expands this view in a 2004 book titled Who Are We: The Challenges to America’s National Identity. Racism, he argues, is no longer an American problem:

One of the greatest achievements, perhaps the greatest achievement, of America is the extent to which it has eliminated the racial and ethnic components that historically were central to its identity and has become a multi-ethnic, multicultural society in which individuals are to be judged on their merits. (2004b, xvii)

The problem, writes Huntington, is that when civilizations clash, national identities are jeopardized, at risk of being taken over by a people whose values contain a “lack of ambition,” taken over by a people for whom the “acceptance of poverty as a virtue [is] necessary for entry into Heaven.” The only way that Mexicans will not ruin America’s national identity is for them to embrace the Anglo-Protestant ethos, its American dream, able to “share in that dream and in that society only if they dream in English” (2004a, 36). As of 1999, twenty-five states—half the country—have now established English-only laws, as if laws can accelerate cognitive processes, and anti-immigrant hysteria.

Yet the 2008 election of a black American lends truth to Huntington’s assertions. Barak Obama, mixed Kenyan black and American white, a man of the working class who ascended through Harvard, is elected by a clear majority of Americans. Yet the headline for the July 13, 2009, New York Times notes the racial disparity in unemployment, with New York
City black citizens losing jobs at four times the rate of whites (McGeehan and Warren). Tim Wise reports on July 15, 2009, that a Philadelphia swim club expelled sixty children of color from its pool. When pressed, the president of the swim club, John Duesler, wrote that the admittance of the sixty mainly black urban children would “change the complexion and atmosphere” of the club. Mr. Duesler was a supporter of President Obama who had helped to coordinate a blood drive to celebrate Obama’s presidential inauguration.

Sociologist Eduardo Bonilla-Silva (2006) uses framing analysis to describe the ways in which college students and others continue to betray racist conceptions through their talk. His method arises from Erving Goffman’s framing, essentially looking at rhetorical tropes displayed through narrative. Although Bonilla-Silva tweaks his frames from publication to publication, they amount to four:

- abstract liberalism: every man for himself, and may the best man win; fair competition without regard (or mention) of race or ethnicity; lack of qualified candidates of color without regard to the causes for those lack of qualifications.
- naturalization: it’s only natural that they would hang out with their own kind; it’s only natural that students of color would not attend a rural university; it’s just the way things are.
- cultural racism/bioligization of racism: they’re culturally predisposed to athletics; they’re culturally predisposed to partying rather than hard work (written about Puerto Ricans in a book titled Latinos); they’re culturally predisposed to having a lot of babies.
- minimization: of course there is still racism, but it isn’t as bad as it once was.

In a 2007 version of a class on The Rhetoric of Racism, I introduce students to Bonilla-Silva. Students don’t care for his tone, for his lack of “objectivity.” I never call the students on their own uses of these tropes. I always assure them that the class isn’t about them; it’s about us all, about the language we are presented with and use. I ask them to read newspapers, extend beyond CNN and the Discovery Channel, to keep their ears open. This lists things students discovered during that one semester:

- Celebrity Racism: Mel Gibson, Michael Richards, Don Imus, Dog the Bounty Hunter;
• Jena 6: nooses around the country, including Columbia University;
• Charleston, West Virginia: the rape and torture of a young black woman by six white people;
• The Border Fence: antibrown immigration hysteria;
• The Border Fence: College Republicans on our campus erect a fence; two faculty engage the students; the faculty show up on YouTube and Fox News;
• Dr. James Watson: Nobel Prize Winner, codiscoverer of DNA, espousing the inherent biological inferiority of black people;
• Supreme Court decisions on school integration in which justices make convoluted explanations against recognizing ongoing racial inequality in education;
• Resistance Records and RaHoWa (i.e., Racial Holy War);
• Prussian Blue: thirteen-year-old girls performing neo-Nazi music and receiving national broadcast attention;
• The Knights Party: the new face of the Ku Klux Klan (literally);
• Lewiston, Idaho, outside the Nez Percé Reservation, forty-five miles from our campus: a thirteen-year-old American Indian girl is beaten for asking four or five young men, “What about Native pride?”;
• Islamo Fascism Week on our campus.

Students not only record these events, but they record how the events are presented—or not presented—by the news media, the ways in which reporters or the police or local politicians are quick to dismiss each event as an aberration. The great caution of the “post-racial era” touted by the election of Barak Obama, the iconic representation of a now color-blind society, is that it threatens to silence the racism that still exists, even if its form has changed yet again.

REFERENCES


2

THE “STANDARD ENGLISH” FAIRY TALE

A Rhetorical Analysis of Racist Pedagogies and Commonplace Assumptions about Language Diversity

Laura Greenfield

In a recent first-year seminar on language diversity in contemporary America, I began the term by having students read the first chapter in Rosina Lippi-Green’s (1997) English with an Accent, in which the author presents five “linguistic facts of life” for novice linguists to consider. I chose this text precisely to help the students in the course begin our discussions with a common set of premises—a grounding in assumptions about the nature of language upon which almost all linguists, regardless of their politics or subspecialties, agree. I broke the students into small groups and asked each group to tackle one of the “linguistic facts of life” presented by Lippi-Green, report back to the class in their own words the linguistic truisms, and illustrate that point with a relevant observation they could glean from their own experiences. These truisms included:

- All spoken language changes over time.
- All spoken languages are equal in linguistic terms.
- Grammaticality and communicative effectiveness are distinct and independent issues.
- Written language and spoken language are historically, structurally, and functionally fundamentally different creatures.
- Variation is intrinsic to all spoken language at every level. (10)

As we moved from group to group, some students struggling more than others, some making not-so-quiet whispers to one another such as “So she’s saying we don’t know anything if we disagree with these points?” (well, yes), some needing some clarification from me in order to decipher the text, it became quickly apparent that this process would not simply be a matter of reading Lippi-Green’s report on the present state...
of linguistic knowledge and moving forward in agreement in order to interrogate more complex issues. In fact, as Lippi-Green herself notes, “The least disputed issues around language structure and function, the ones linguists argue about least, are those which are most often challenged by nonlinguists, and with the greatest vehemence and emotion” (9). A relatively open-minded and linguistically diverse bunch themselves, many of the students were willing to participate in what was for them a bit of a suspension of disbelief and move forward tentatively as though these statements were indeed true. Importantly, one student towards the end of the activity raised her hand and asked something to the effect of, “If all linguists are in agreement about these phenomena, why is it that most people in general don’t know about them or disagree with them?” It was an excellent question, and while it took me a second to collect my thoughts and fumble through an answer for her, my own more focused reflection on such a question after class helped me clarify an argument I have been striving to develop throughout much of my academic career. Why do many people hold opinions in such stark contrast to linguistic evidence?

I argue that the “new racism” described in this volume by Victor Villanueva (26)—a “racism that still exists, even if its form has changed”—is deeply entrenched in our discourses about languages. As I will show in this chapter, the unresolved racism in the U.S. education system has given way to a particular rhetoric about language diversity and education that has drastically skewed our understandings of linguistic phenomena. While linguists agree upon a basic set of premises about the nature of language, the general public and even the most well-meaning educators hold beliefs in stark contrast to this knowledge. Our assumptions about language are guided more often by a rhetoric that feeds on our unconscious racism than they are by our intellectual understanding of linguistic fact. (The unconscious emotional impulses driving racist beliefs may explain why many people, when confronted with the seemingly mundane observations of linguists, react with extreme skepticism, disbelief, and even anger.)

Racism, as Villanueva’s historical account in this collection shows, is—though material in its effects—a function of rhetoric. Working from this assumption, I intend to dig beneath the rhetoric contemporary writing teachers and writing center tutors use to rationalize inherently racist pedagogies surrounding language diversity. To demonstrate the racism in many common assumptions about language difference, I will work
through the “linguistic facts of life” outlined by Lippi-Green (1997) and analyze how racism is the catalyst for our skepticism and rejection of these facts. At stake, ultimately, are the ethics of our teaching and tutoring. For if most educators allow their unchecked racism to guide their beliefs about language, it stands to reason that the teaching and tutoring practices long advocated in the fields of composition and rhetoric and writing center studies that are premised on these attitudes are necessarily racist, too. Included in this indictment are those contemporary pedagogies—especially those contemporary pedagogies—celebrated by those of us who fancy ourselves “progressive” in the world of teaching and tutoring writing.

Of all the assumptions upon which linguists agree, the notion that “all spoken languages are equal in linguistic terms” (Lippi-Green 1997, 10) is easily at the root of the most significant disagreements among nonlinguists. Specifically, many people believe that certain languages are superior to others. This belief is perhaps the most fundamental false premise upon which racist arguments are built. Because they observe that all spoken language changes over time and is able to adapt to the needs of its speakers, linguists reject the idea that languages can be arranged in any sort of hierarchy of intelligence. Nevertheless, the general public regularly insists upon the inherent superiority of specific languages and varieties, failing to understand that “correctness” is a socially prescribed modifier, and systematically bases policies and practices on those mistaken judgments.

Most people in the United States generally believe that “Standard English” is the most proper, sophisticated, and clear way to speak English. We all may recognize the prevalence of that kind of assumption as it is expressed in our informal conversations with family and friends and, likely, as it creeps into our own thoughts now and again as a result of our social conditioning. We may, for example, have witnessed a person being ridiculed for what a listener describes as her “broken” English, or have privately joked with friends by putting on an accent in a performance meant to belittle someone out of earshot. Less overtly negative, most of us have had—or have been—teachers or parents who have insisted upon the need to speak what has been termed “proper” English in certain contexts, with the rationale that in order to be taken seriously and be successful in life a person must know how to speak “correctly.” Imagined as the original English, the pure English, the epitome of sophisticated language use, or—practically speaking—the
most natural choice of a common denominator for widespread communication across diverse communities, “Standard English,” ultimately, is invoked as that ideal, superior language. The assumption that “Standard English” is superior to other English varieties is also prevalent among language educators in the United States, spanning pre-K to graduate levels. In a conversation about dialect diversity several years ago, for example, a fellow university composition instructor asked why people would refer to “Standard English” as one of many dialects of English—“Isn’t it just correct English?” she wanted to know. Similarly, on a writing center listserv, several widely influential writing center directors posted the following statements: “What do we mean when we say all language variants are equally valuable? Just exactly how is that so? If we say that, are we convincing? Are we right? How do we know?” and “Maybe one day someone will show the world that Street English or Cajun or Gullah is also up to the task [of communicating as well as ‘Standard English’].”

These kinds of statements, which summarily overlook and stand in clear contradiction to decades of linguistic research, exemplify a common tendency to assign, in ignorance, dismissive labels such as “Street English” to rule-based language systems spoken most recognizably by people of color. Here is where my first argument about race comes in: the language varieties deemed inferior in the United States (so much so that they are often dismissed not simply as inferior varieties but not as varieties at all—just as conglomerations of slang, street talk, or poor English) tend to be the languages whose origins can be traced to periods in American history when communities of racially oppressed people used these languages to enact agency. It is no coincidence that the languages spoken by racially oppressed people are considered to be inferior in every respect to the languages spoken predominantly by those who wield systemic power: namely, middle- and upper-class white people.

Geneva Smitherman’s prolific work, for example, demonstrates in painstaking detail how Ebonics, contrary to popular opinion, is not the uneducated slang of young black rappers, but a sophisticated and rule-based language group with origins in the transatlantic slave trade. Ebonics comprises multiple ways of speaking that have, for centuries, been a means of survival, solidarity, and resistance for enslaved and the descendants of enslaved Africans spanning at least three continents. By clearly laying out the rules of its grammatical, lexical, phonological, and rhetorical structures, Smitherman (2001) shows that Ebonics is “emphatically not ‘broken’ English, nor ‘sloppy’ speech” (19) nor a
result of “linguistic deficiencies” or ignorance (Taylor 1998, 36), but instead comprises rule-governed and logical language systems. John Rickford and Russell Rickford (2000), likewise, demonstrate in a comprehensive analysis of how Ebonics is used in a vast range of spheres—by “novelists, playwrights, poets, preachers, prayer-yers, comedians, actors, screenwriters, singers, toasters, rappers, and ordinary folk”—that it is not only, in the dismissive terms of the aforementioned listserv poster, “up to the task” of communicating meaningfully among speakers, but that it is able to do so with a significant sense of historical, cultural, and personal importance. Rickford and Rickford affirm that the use of this “spoken soul” resonates with its speakers as “a symbol of identity” and by “touching some timbre within and capturing a vital core of experience that [has] to be addressed just so” (222). As Lisa Delpit (2002) eloquently describes, “Our home language is as viscerally tied to our beings as existence itself—as the sweet sounds of love accompany our first milk” (xvii).

Another language, Hawaiian Creole English (also known locally as “Pidgin English”), similarly has its origins in the history of American racial strife; scholars of this language have traced its roots to the descendents of Asian, Polynesian, and European sugarcane plantation workers in Hawaii who created a pidgin language system to facilitate their collective survival in an oppressive period of white colonization. Commonly dismissed as “broken English,” Hawaiian Creole English, as demonstrated by Kent Sakoda and John Siegel (2003) in their grammar handbook, is in fact highly governed by logical rules. Scholar and author Lee Tonouchi (2004) has demonstrated effectively in his writings that despite prejudice against the language and its speakers, it is nevertheless capable of communicating meaningfully in diverse contexts; Tonouchi has published (with great critical acclaim) both creative fiction and academic scholarship in Hawaiian Creole English, not the least of which is his master’s thesis and an intellectually rigorous article in College English. Tellingly, in recent years, the publication of Da Jesus Book (2000), a translation of the New Testament into Hawaiian Creole English, has been met with widespread appreciation among Hawaiian Creole English-speaking Christians and others alike; as reader comments on online retail sites such as Amazon.com indicate, purchasers of the text praise it for its accuracy, usefulness in Bible-study groups, ability to afford readers a greater emotional connection than do other translations, and inspiration for families.
Examples of other American languages that have been simultaneously created and marginalized by their racial histories (such as Chicano English), can be found in existing scholarship, so I will not attempt to account for them all here. Rather, I will draw the following conclusion: given the definitive nature by which linguists agree that all spoken languages are equal in linguistic terms, and given the decades of research in sociolinguistics that show how languages operate with significant personal, psychological, social, cultural, historical, symbolic, and even visceral value among their speakers, and given the striking inability of most people to accept such a truism when considering those languages that have historically afforded agency to people of color, it becomes clear that racism—not unbiased unfamiliarity with linguistics—is the driving force behind their rejection of linguistic evidence.

The belief that “Standard English” is an inherently superior language has been used to justify pedagogies that insist upon the teaching of only “Standard English” in writing classrooms and writing centers (and indeed across the curriculum). Such pedagogies, when built upon this faulty assumption, implicitly privilege a racist view of history rather than an intellectually sound understanding of linguistic phenomena.

Many of my students do not identify as racist but nevertheless find much of the histories and detailed descriptions of the grammar of languages such as Ebonics or Hawaiian Creole English that we discuss in class to be new—perhaps enlightening—information. Many are surprised by this newfound understanding and often feel frustrated that they have been cheated by having had this information withheld from them all their lives by mainstream society, by their teachers. Why didn’t someone tell them sooner? they want to know. While it is easy to see the education system as responsible (and certainly, as educators, a great deal of this responsibility does belong to us), I also wonder why people require a detailed history and explanation of certain languages and not others in order to believe in good faith that they are legitimate. Many of my students have never studied French, or German, or Latin, yet despite knowing nothing of the etymologies or structures of those languages, they have never questioned their legitimacy. Yet their default assumption about Ebonics, for example, is that it is street slang—a degradation of proper English; and this position is often hard to unsettle, even in the face of what should be incontrovertible evidence.

Many of us, in contrast, might be quite confident, and in fact perhaps feel a little morally superior to those kinds of students, in our ability to
dismiss the notion that "Standard English" is somehow better than other language varieties. By virtue of your interest in reading this book, I am going to afford the reader the benefit of the doubt that this kind of relationship between racism and language comes as no great revelation; scholars have made this claim repeatedly in the literature prior to my doing so. I will proceed with the belief that readers share the knowledge that certain language varieties (specifically, in the context of this book, varieties that people of color have used historically to wield power in the face of oppression) are linguistically equal to "Standard English." What I plan to unpack now, instead, is how despite a recognition of the legitimacy of different varieties of speech, our other beliefs about language—specifically, our assumptions about what "Standard English" even is—in fact fly in the face of other linguistic truisms. Importantly, I will show how racism drives and thrives on contemporary pedagogies developed even by those of us who believe different varieties to be equal. Many educators who reject the idea of the superiority of "Standard English" instead celebrate what they interpret to be the antiracist alternative: respect students’ home languages while teaching “Standard English” in the classroom or writing center, not as a superior language but as a ticket for survival and success in American society. The remainder of this chapter, in contrast, explains why such a pedagogy, despite the best of intentions, is not only linguistically flawed, but inherently racist.

My claim draws on this assumption: Living languages cannot be standardized. The only standard languages—languages with finite boundaries and comprehensively accountable features—are dead languages. Any linguist wishing to dispute this would have a hard time producing empirical evidence to the contrary. My claim, therefore, is this: There is no such thing as "Standard English." Nevertheless, white American society has a deep investment in perpetuating the myth that "Standard English" is real; the idea of a standard language as an equal-opportunity tool for advancement works as a perfect foil for the institutionalized racism actually to blame for contemporary racial inequities. As a rhetorical tool, the evocation of a "Standard English" and all of its corollary linguistic impossibilities gives the false impression that the language practices of individual people of color, rather than the racist practices of American institutions, are responsible for these inequities. I will explain just how this is so.

To be sure, as Lippi-Green (1997) points out, "Written language and spoken language are historically, structurally, and functionally
fundamentally different creatures” (10). While it is tempting to imagine speaking and writing simply to be two vehicles for communicating in the same language (writing is often considered the same thing as speech transcribed), linguists provide extensive evidence to the contrary. Spoken language is an innate, social, context-bound, and ephemeral activity that draws on paralinguistic features and is capable of resolving confusion; written language is a learned, socially removed, decontextualized, and permanent activity that relies exclusively on words and symbols (20). I mention this “linguistic fact of life” for two reasons. First, the premise that living languages cannot be standardized must be qualified by the acknowledgment that written languages and spoken languages enjoy different relationships with standardization. Written language, in its quest to communicate across space and time, is perhaps more invested in the goal of standardization than is spoken language, which generally serves a comparably more contextualized, temporal function. Nevertheless, even written language, which by nature provides a fixed document of itself, cannot avoid variation and change: the creation of a new text, even that which seeks (with a certain degree of futility) to employ a common grammar or draw from a common lexicon, by virtue of being a new text (and a new idea) invests that grammar and those words with new meaning; likewise, each time an old document is read and interpreted in a new context, any stable meaning of the text’s language is dissolved. Second, while I argue that standardization is impossible for living languages both written and spoken, the differences between these two forms of communication tend to be overlooked by the contemporary educators I critique in this essay. Importantly, the false conflation of these two forms in fact helps perpetuate racist assumptions. I will demonstrate this more explicitly at the end of the essay, but I invite you to take note along the way of how often the scholars and teachers I criticize draw on examples of spoken language to make their own arguments about written language without accounting for the inherent incongruence between the two.

Perhaps the next most important premise, for the sake of the discussion that follows, upon which all linguists agree is that “variation is intrinsic to all spoken language at every level” (Lippi-Green 1997, 10). This means that at any given moment across space, spoken language use will vary in terms of lexicon, phonology, and morphology—or, in more recognizable terms, things like vocabulary, pronunciation, and grammatical structure. This may seem apparent when considering that people in my household may be speaking Arabic on the phone with our family
members in North Africa, while students in São Paulo may be conversing in Portuguese with their teacher, while a businesswoman in Seoul may be greeting her clients in Korean; this kind of language variation is easily observable and uncontroverted by the general public—people speak different languages. The observation becomes a bit more nuanced but nevertheless relatively easily grasped by nonlinguists when we take into account that variation is also apparent within a given spoken language group when considered across regions. For example, the Spanish spoken in Spain will differ from the variety spoken in Mexico which will differ from the variety spoken in Cuba—in terms of the use of certain vocabulary words (chaqueta, a perfectly acceptable term meaning “jacket” in Spain, has an entirely different and offensive connotation to some folks in Mexico, for example); the pronunciation of certain sounds (the consonant ñ is spoken in Spain with a slight lisp akin to the English th whereas elsewhere it might sound like a hard s, for example); and grammatical structure (the phrase to give back in Spain, formed with the verb infinitive devolver, may be heard constructed more similarly to English as dar pa’ atrás in the United States or northern Mexico, for example). Even more locally, the Spanish spoken in the United States differs throughout Miami, Southern California, New Mexico, Texas, Chicago, New York, and elsewhere. The variation, however, does not stop here. Even within a community of people that speaks one of these more regional varieties, variation intrinsically occurs, often according to age group, social class, gender, political orientation, and other factors, influenced both by proximity to others and as a means of identification. Even within the smallest subgroup, individuals necessarily use spoken language differently. A small circle of friends who all identify, for example, with speaking Nuyorican English (a language variety that draws heavily on Puerto Rican Spanish influences and the Englishes of New York City), do not speak quite the same as one another. These speakers’ usage will be affected by the subtle differences in influence from the way their parents speak, the way their teachers speak, the way their classmates speak, the way their friends speak, the languages spoken in the various communities they move among, the languages they hear on television, their own physiology, and their particular aesthetic and political preferences. Some of these differences may be subtle and some might be quite pronounced. In short, no two people in this world speak in exactly the same way.

A necessary corollary to these observations is that the idea of a language itself must be an abstraction. While we might think we understand
language to be something concrete, what we have just observed tells us that within that label there is so much diversity it would be impossible to create a finite list of what constitutes it; this is so not simply because such a list would be too extensive and take too many volumes to cover, but because the boundaries among different languages and speakers could never themselves be precisely discerned. Linguists also observe that all spoken language, barring the genocide of the speakers and regardless of efforts to the contrary, changes over time. Given these truths, the terms language, dialect, variety, and other such words intended to organize speech into coherent groupings are in fact themselves arbitrary markings. While numerous scholars have noted that what counts as a “language” and what counts as a “dialect” tend to be a matter of politics rather than linguistics, and that the term variety might be used to avoid getting caught in the middle, such observations fail to account for the larger linguistic picture. Each of these words seeks to do the impossible: give the impression of finite groups across space and time. In this way, the term language diversity is in itself a redundancy, for language is by nature diverse.

Our tendency in contemporary scholarship to use the term language diversity when talking about the place of languages other than “Standard English” in the classroom is problematic, and not just semantically so; rather, it sets the stage for inherently racist pedagogies. Here is why: If we recognize that spoken language is intrinsically variable at all levels and that the idea of a language is necessarily an abstraction, then “Standard English,” the language we purport to teach in school, the language many purport to be superior to other ways of speaking, the language progressive educators insist is necessary to ensure the survival and success of students of color, is also an abstraction. How does racism prevent us from seeing this and how does believing that “Standard English” exists as any kind of measurable entity benefit a racist system? If “Standard English” is imagined to be a finite language system when it is not (as no living language is finite), then people in power can always use it as a socially acceptable measure for making decisions about affording access to people of color, obscuring the racist motivations behind their practices. This is not to say, importantly, that we are imagining that certain ways of speaking are privileged, or that growing up in school we didn’t have teachers who insisted upon specific ways of using English that we were told were correct; indeed, there are ways of speaking that enjoy greater privilege and less stigma than others. Instead, what
is important to recognize is that “Standard English” is not a quantifiable dialect with a finite set of rules and features; in contrast, I argue, “Standard English” is a qualifier ascribed to many ways of speaking (and by extension, though differently, writing) by privileged white people or, perhaps more accurately, any variety of English that has not been associated historically with resistance by communities of color.

We might, then, more accurately replace the term Standard English with the term standardized Englishes to make visible the fact that humans actively select which Englishes will be privileged and to emphasize that many Englishes secretly enjoy this designation. (I should also note that the idea of “Englishes” itself still suggests a certain sort of coherence that is linguistically impossible to demonstrate.) It is also important to consider that just because the term standardized Englishes constitutes a broader realm of language use than the term Standard English connotes, does not mean that people of color do not or cannot claim ownership of and/or identify with any of these “standardized Englishes” as a home language or as a target language. Likewise, it does not mean that white people do not or cannot speak the same languages as people of color. What it does mean is that excluding languages that people of color historically have used as tools of resistance and automatically including languages spoken by privileged white people in the realm of what counts as “Standard English” necessarily creates a system of inequality in which many people of color are expected to be bidialectal or bilingual as a condition for being taken seriously as communicators, whereas privileged white people—regardless of their actual speech—always already speak a language of power. Despite the actual languages spoken by any one individual, the system as a whole is able to maintain itself along racist lines so long as the criteria for what counts as standard are always (invisibly) determined by the race of its speakers.

The evidence of the claim that “Standard English” is an abstraction deliberately and deceptively used to refer to a variety of privileged white speech patterns can be observed in a number of significant phenomena. When we wrack our brains for examples of features we imagine to be rules of a “Standard English” (or when we look at grammar guides that purport to describe proper “Standard English”), we can observe a great deal of variation within what is considered acceptable so long as that variation describes usage that has become common within dominant white communities. Spelling is one example. The alternative spelling of the word color as colour, for instance, is widely accepted as “Standard
English” (because, I argue, its British origins, in the American imagination, position it as a sophisticated substitute); the alternative spelling of the word talking as talkin, in contrast, is not considered “Standard” due to its approximation to some black speech. Pronunciation is another example. It is considered “Standard English” to pronounce sounds out of order from their written form so long as such pronunciation can be found in white speech—the r and t in the word comfortable are regularly swapped without notice as consfierable; in contrast, African Americans who exchange the s and k in the word ask to result in aks are the subject of constant ridicule. Redundancy in markings is another example. It is considered “Standard English” to offer multiple markers of plurality. “She has five daughters” indicates plurality twice. In contrast, a singular marking of plurality, despite clarity in meaning, is not allowed when the usage can be found in the languages of some people of color, as in the phrase “She has five daughter,” an allowable translation found in some varieties of Ebonics. Nevertheless, this prohibition of redundancy is wavered when it benefits a white speaker: it is considered correct “Standard English” to avoid redundancy when it comes to negation. For example, the phrase “You can’t tell me anything” is considered “Standard English” whereas the comparable “You can’t tell me nothing,” which is sometimes used by Ebonics speakers, is not. While one might argue that there is nothing amiss about the above observations—that considered independently the rules of plurality and the rules of negation are consistent in and of themselves—the following example reveals that even these rules continue to be modified internally for the inclusion of white speakers and the exclusion of others. Some redundancy—“No, you can’t do that”—will be tolerated among white speakers, whereas the single marking in “You no can do that” in Hawaiian Creole English is also rejected despite its conformity to the supposed rule of singular negation.

A different way to look at the phenomenon that “Standard English” in fact comprises a variety of white speech patterns is in the observation that “Standard English” is less easily defined by what it is (as it is impossible to identify finite rules when the rules are in fact variable) than by what it is not. In particular, the features frequently cited to describe “Standard English” generally are those that differentiate usage from usage common among languages that have been spoken historically by people of color in the face of oppression. For example, we learn ad nauseam that in “Standard English” you don’t say ain’t (a term with ambiguous etymology, though believed to have come from Britain and
which took root in the United States within African American populations—though arguably not a feature of Ebonics “proper”—and in the poor areas of the rural south and you don’t conjugate the infinitive to be as be (which exists in some varieties of Ebonics as an habitual marking). To look at one such example more closely, when many English teachers are asked to identify important features of correct “Standard English” grammar, they often stress the importance of “subject-verb agreement.” Cynthia Linville (2004), in her chapter in ESL Writers: A Guide for Writing Center Tutors, identifies “subject-verb agreement” as the most common error type that is “often frequent or serious in ESL college compositions” (86). Citing “subject-verb agreement” (referring to the use of she goes instead of she go, for instance) as a feature of “Standard English” reveals a number of racial biases. First, this kind of verb conjugation is one of the features that superficially differs most noticeably with usage in some Ebonics and Hawaiian Creole English (exemplifying my observation that people define “Standard English” by what it is not). Second, arguments for superior clarity or consistency in “Standard English” become moot when we see that the preferred “Standard English” usage is in fact irregular in comparison to the more uniform usage in the other aforementioned languages (“I go/you go/she goes/they go/we go” versus “I go/you go/she go/they go/we go”). Third, the very characterization of subjects and verbs being in “agreement” in “Standard English” allows no room for other usages to be understood as legitimate translations; instead, the means by which the languages spoken historically by many people of color indicate subject-verb correspondence is implicitly denigrated as “disagreement” rather than simply as different markers of correspondence. Such a characterization is equally ironic when we see that, given conjugations for first and second singular and plural person forms, the “Standard English” conjugation of the third person singular would be more accurately described as “disagreement” than would its more consistent counterpart spoken in the above-cited languages.

One might also observe the peculiar phenomenon that “Standard English” handbooks fail to account for rhetorical conventions that may be “correctly” employed through the grammar of the language. Because Ebonics historically has used sophisticated rhetorical tools to communicate messages that non-Ebonics speakers (such as white slave masters) would not understand (hence its subversive capabilities and its rejection by those in power), many contemporary non-Ebonics speakers do not notice when the rhetoric is being used. Accordingly, this ignorance
means that believers in a quantifiable “Standard English” fail to account for their own multiple rhetorics in their own conversations or handbooks. Without having knowledge of the rhetoric of people of color against which to identify a standard rhetoric, such handbooks have no single rule that can stand on its own name. This all goes to the point that “Standard English” is really nothing more than whatever is not designated as nonstandard.

As compositionist Phyllis Ryder (2007) aptly observes, what are generally held up in contrast to “paradigms of American speech” are linguistic features “that bear the markers of non-white identity” (11). This is not to say that standardized Engishes have not been influenced by the languages of people of color in the United States; indeed, the speech patterns of most (if not all) white American communities have developed in response to diverse influences of many speakers. For instance, certain expressions translated literally from the Chinese during the height of immigration in the nineteenth century are so widely used today that their origins are largely unrecognized (the greeting for an old friend, long time no see, for example). What is significant about this phenomenon, nevertheless, is that privileged white people have had the power to adopt those influences and claim ownership of them as part of their language (in the phrase long time no see, for instance, no is used by white speakers to form a negation, but such consistent usage by Hawaiian Creole English speakers in Hawaii is still not recognized as standard).

Another reason that believing in a “Standard English” perpetuates a racist system can be seen when we recognize that when we talk about what constitutes a privileged way of speaking (whether we imagine that the language is indeed superior or that the language is just one among many equally as good), we obscure the fact that we are not really talking about language at all but about which communities we imagine to be superior. For when the languages of white people collectively are called “Standard English” and when “Standard English” is imagined as a tool necessary for participation in mainstream society, people of color are put in the oppressive position not of having to speak or learn to speak a particular language (for no single language exists), but of ridding themselves of all linguistic features that may identify them with communities of color.

The institutionalization of such racism is far reaching. In the classroom, it can be seen in the inequity of teachers’ grading practices
between white students and students of color when teachers do not recognize their own racialized assumptions about what constitutes "Standard English." If a white student submits a poorly written essay that draws upon her spoken language, its reception will tend to be better than a comparable piece of writing that reveals features of a language spoken by people of color. The first is merely assumed to be poor editing, the work of a potentially smart person who simply needs to develop her writing skills; the second is assumed to be evidence of the incompetence ascribed to a race of people and is received with far greater hostility. The study findings presented by Nancy Effinger Wilson later in this collection provide evidence of this inequity in response to perceived student "errors;" the surveys she administered to English instructors and writing center tutors revealed that sentences featuring "African American Vernacular English" were identified as the "most bothersome" as compared with sentences containing common ESL errors and non-standard European American English. As Wilson rightly comments, if teachers and tutors are concerned exclusively with error (and not race), then their scores in response to the writing samples in the surveys should have been uniform.

In the academy, an increasing number of scholars reference the Conference on College Composition and Communication's (1974) Students' Right to Their Own Language resolution as a foundation for building a number of what we interpret to be ethical teaching practices. While this resolution forcefully argues for the legitimacy and equality of diverse language varieties—the aspect of the resolution most readily referenced—the rejection of "the myth of a standard American dialect" included at the beginning is almost summarily overlooked by its contemporary readers and proponents. Importantly, while many of us would be quick to say that "Standard English" is no more superior than any other variety of English, in such a statement we nevertheless inadvertently reveal our subscription to what I argue is the most insidious and false assumption upon which all others rest: "Standard English" exists. This false premise is the sustenance of a racist educational system and functions in inextricable complicity with other racist assumptions about language, as I will discuss below.

Another linguistic truism that nonlinguists regularly reject at the service of racism is that "grammaticality and communicative effectiveness are distinct and independent issues" (Lippi-Green 1997, 10). To clarify, the term grammaticality is used by linguists to refer to any utterance that
carries meaning by a speaker of a language, independent of the social judgments about the propriety of the choice. For example, to say “I ain’t happy” would be considered “grammatical” because it is a construction that exists among English speakers, even if great social stigma can be found against that particular word. In other words, “I ain’t happy” is intrinsically capable of clearly expressing an idea to English speakers even if some people would prefer that “I am not happy” be used in its stead (a choice, many could argue, that in fact loses a sense of emotion and intensity conveyed through the former). In contrast, the ability to have “communicative effectiveness” depends upon the judgments of the listeners. For example, if a listener has a preconceived notion about the educational background, social status, or intelligence of the kind of person who would choose to say “I ain’t happy,” then upon hearing this statement the listener may tune out, be dismissive, or feel her preconceptions have been affirmed; the intention on the part of the speaker to engage meaningfully with this listener may be unsuccessful.

For example, in a debate on a writing center listserv about the place of variant dialects in the classroom, a prominent writing center scholar wrote:

There are many faculty around a campus who lament the use of non-standard English by their students, knowing that it will cost them jobs, in addition to lost time and money due to miscommunication. (Remember that PEW report about a survey of Fortune 500 companies where top execs were asked what aspect of the college education of their employees was most lacking? Almost all the respondents listed poor communication at the top of their list because it caused massive time and monetary loss, as people e-mailed back and forth trying to figure out what the other person meant in his/her e-mail, memo, report, etc....and then the original writer had to write back to ask the questioner what he/she was confused about?) Miscommunication is serious, important, and employers realize that it’s a major concern out there.

While miscommunication, as this writing center scholar argues here, can certainly lead to serious consequences, the assumption the scholar takes for granted is that “poor communication” in general and strong communication in a nonstandardized variety of English are one and the same. In this instance, the purportedly unclear usage cited by the listserv poster (who himself or herself, albeit writing in an informal forum, would be vulnerable to the red pen of many a critical editor) was a perfectly comprehensible statement made by a student drawing on features of Ebonics. When the threat of “miscommunication” is used
as a scapegoat for enforcing racist attitudes about a speaker and her perfectly comprehensible differences in speech, racism is perpetuated.

The fact that one’s ability to communicate clearly and to be received successfully are not necessarily directly correlated sheds important light on how the pedagogical practices of even the most well-intentioned educators are fundamentally problematic. This is so because the goal to teach students of color “Standard English” as a tool for success in mainstream society falsely assumes several things: 1) People believe falsely that the home languages of people of color, despite their linguistic “grammaticality,” are unable to communicate clearly in widespread contexts and are therefore (at least partially) responsible for their reduced opportunities in white-dominated society; in contrast, this assumption prohibits consideration of the ways in which the racist judgments of listeners about who people of color are as people influence those listeners’ willingness to listen. In other words, this assumption ignores the role of the audience in the success of the communicative exchange. 2) People believe falsely that by changing the way people of color speak (diminishing the racially identified markings in their language), others’ racist preconceptions will disappear and the communicative act will be successful.

Belief in those two misstatements reveals a fundamental lack of understanding about how racism is institutionalized in American society. Arguing that “literate culture is the most democratic culture in our land: it cuts across generations and social groups and classes,” E.D. Hirsch (2006) voices a widespread belief in a myth that posits that “Standard English” is a racially neutral language available for all to use with the same potential for communicative success:

Literate culture has become the common currency for social and economic exchange in our democracy, and the only available ticket to full citizenship. Getting one’s membership card is not tied to class or race. Membership is automatic if one learns the background information and the linguistic conventions that are needed to read, write, and speak effectively. (21–22; emphasis added)

Nevertheless, as I will show below, the success afforded by the adoption of linguistic conventions sanctioned by the powerful is not at all automatic, but quite contingent upon those very markers.

While I have already argued that privileged white people speak the languages that comprise the abstract “Standard English” language, it is less easily proven that adopting one of these standardized Englishes spoken by those in power will lead a person otherwise subjected to
the oppression by that group into membership. Just as the “American Dream” myth purports that anyone with good brains, determination, and hard work will be met with equal opportunity for financial, social, and political success, so too does the “Standard English” myth insist that speaking this imagined dialect of prestige is the ticket to upward mobility. If those on the margins of society, people of color in the context of this discussion, are not moving up in the economic ranks, it is—so the myth goes—because they are incompetent, lazy, and/or cannot speak correctly. If only they would speak “proper” English, the world bemoans, they could improve their station in life. It is their language—their hillbilly, black, accented you’lls and ain’ts—preventing them from getting mainstream jobs. Language prejudice is not a figment of the imagination. People across the world form strong opinions in response to the negative assumptions they make about different languages, and those attitudes undoubtedly have material consequences for the opportunities made available to speakers. Nevertheless, a central argument of my chapter is that it is not the language which causes listeners to make assumptions about the speaker, but the attitudes held by the listeners towards the speaker that cause them to extend that attitude towards the speaker’s language. Accordingly, changing the language would address merely the symptom of the racial prejudice—not the institutionalized cause. In other words, a stigmatized person will rarely lose her stigmatization completely by adopting—or speaking as a home language—a language of prestige because her body still carries with it the racialized markers people have used to relegate her to the margins to begin with. She may gain a minimal amount of access in certain ways by distancing herself from what white people historically associate with people of color, but doing so does not erase others’ white privilege nor bring about institutional change to the larger system that held her up to judgment in the first place. Black people are not discriminated against because some speak a variety of Ebonics—rather, I argue, Ebonics is stigmatized because it is spoken primarily by black people. It is its association with a particular people and history that has compelled people to stigmatize it. Our attitudes towards language, it appears, are often steeped in our assumptions about the bodies of the speakers. We assume an essential connection—language as inherently tied to the body. In other words, language varieties—like people—are subject to racialization.

It is this unspoken, perhaps unconscious, belief that some languages belong most naturally to certain bodies that make some people assign
a language to a face and a face to a language. While one myth might lead us to believe that any person who speaks or learns a standardized English can better avert the discriminatory practices of a society hyper-conscious of race, it is sometimes the case that the unexpected sound of a standardized English coming from the mouth of a “non-naturally” standardized English-speaking person creates in some people such unease and confusion that they nevertheless dismiss the person back to the margins—an anomaly, a freak, something they do not know how to name; certainly, not a real American.

David Mura (1991), for example, in his memoir _Turning Japanese_, illustrates an encounter that appears frequently in narratives by Asian American writers. This encounter demonstrates the feeling of disconnection that some people experience when an unexpected language comes out of a marked body; it also shows the subsequent resistance towards accepting the combination of the language and the body as something natural. On Mura’s first day teaching a class of fourth graders, the following dialogue occurs:

“Where do you come from?” one of the students asked.
I knew what the student meant, but answered, “Minneapolis.”
“No, where were you born?”
“I was born at Great Lakes Naval Training Center.”
“But where did you learn English?” Later, I got this same question from some of the teachers.

I told them I learned English in the same way they had, at home, in school, on the streets of my hometown, Chicago. (76)

Mura, through this dialogue, emphasizes the extent to which mainstream American society assumes that the English language (and therefore, American identity) is something essential to phenotypically white citizens; whereas, on the contrary, someone with an Asian face is not only necessarily a foreigner, but someone for whom English is something acquired—something secondary, something unnatural.

Traise Yamamoto (1999), in _Masking Selves, Making Subjects_, asserts that “the body [is] the bearer and manifestation of difference” (77) and that “women, people of color, the poor, the queer are subject to an enforced embodiment wherein the particularity of their hyper-visible bodies defines their status as the obverse of American ideality, or more accurately as the obverse on which the idea of American national identity depends” (73). While many argue that the English language is a uniting commodity, that speaking it provides a common
denominator among diverse citizens, this is clearly not always the case; rather, as Mura’s (1991) experience shows, it is the speaking of English that creates additional marginalization, because no longer are the speakers merely Othered (“Asian”—not “American”), but now they are Othered and without a name. It is this recognizable pairing of appearance and voice that creates opportunities for judgment—not acceptance—by some observers whose power over definitions is threatened by what Hayden White (1982) calls the “sublime;” they are unable to make coherent and identify that which is out of their control.

It is this desire for physical and linguistic coherence that allows people to take liberties in making assumptions when confronted with faces and voices that do not conform to their expectations—even when those voices employ Hirsch’s supposed “common currency” of a standardized English. Booker T. Washington (1901), in *Up From Slavery*, observes an instance when white Americans’ attitudes towards black Americans make the latter’s proficient use of a standardized English problematic. Washington tells of a time during the late nineteenth century:

I happened to find myself in a town in which so much excitement and indignation were being expressed that it seemed likely for a time that there would be a lynching. The occasion of the trouble was that a dark-skinned man had stopped at the local hotel. Investigation, however, developed the fact that this individual was a citizen of Morocco, and that while traveling in this country he spoke the English language. As soon as it was learned that he was not an American Negro, all the signs of indignation disappeared. The man who was the innocent cause of the excitement, though, found it prudent after that not to speak English. (50)

What this moment illustrates is the deep entrenchment of racism towards black people in the United States, so much so that anyone subject to being racially marked as Other is likewise at risk of being subjected to prejudice regardless of—or in this case more readily because of—their language use. Essentialist assumptions about black Americans (different, because of our national history, than assumptions about black Africans) led these white Americans—when hearing the sound of English—to conclude that this man was the kind of black with which they were familiar and who was deserving of their disdain. The foreigner’s use of English did not provide him “membership” in American society; instead, the impression that he was an American due to his use of English subjected him to exclusion and racism because he was mistakenly associated with an already marked group within the United States.
More problematically, in American classrooms, teachers’ assumptions about the innate intelligence and capabilities of African American students lead to highly contentious interactions where power struggles over the use of standardized Engishes reveal that the distribution of membership cards is indeed dependent on race. Because Ebonics is viewed by many as broken English (an assumption which stems, undoubtedly, from a belief that its speakers are inferior), a bilingual African American speaker who can switch between a variety of Ebonics and a standardized English variety is viewed with skepticism; such a speaker, after all, is generally not viewed as bilingual but as a contradiction—how can someone ignorant (a black U.S. Ebonics speaker) also be intelligent and competent (through her standardized English speech)? Such an irreconcilable confusion on the part of the listener reduces the speaker’s presumed access to the mainstream and instead positions her as a paradox worthy of suspicion. In an essay by Shuaib Meacham (2002), for example, an African American teacher discusses her own experiences as a student in a teacher-education program. Linda, a fluent speaker of “African American English”—despite proficiency in a written standardized English—describes having her academic work challenged by her white teachers in ways that other white students do not. Meacham argues, drawing on the work of John Baugh, that these teachers believe that “speakers of African American English are less capable of expressing ideas in an academic manner” (194). When Linda contradicts those assumptions by submitting a sophisticated written assignment in a standardized English, the teacher’s first impulse is to assume that the work is plagiarized. The teacher asks: “Did you write these passages? It doesn’t look like your writing. Please give references” (194). Meacham observes that

regardless of the reason for the comments, it is clear that the writer holds inaccurate conceptions regarding the academic performance possibilities of speakers of African American English. Linda later observed that the [teacher] could have expected her writing to contain African American English and when it was not evident, assumed that the Standard English writing had to have been plagiarized. . . . Not only was her intelligence called into question, but her personal and academic integrity as well. (195)

This woman’s experience shows that despite simplistic arguments that “Standard English” provides opportunities for success, that success was not granted her free of charge; the teacher’s assumption about Linda’s intelligence and capabilities based on her racialized body affected
the teacher's willingness to accept her use of a standardized English. Instead, the standardized English writing was called into question as being legitimately hers, and Linda was forced to suffer the insult and added labor of having to prove the authenticity of her work. This is an insult her white classmates had the privilege—because of their lack of racial stigmatization, not their particular dialects—not to endure. In pointing out this example, I do not seek to invalidate the success that ultimately may have been aided by Linda's proficiency in a standardized English privileged by her academic context. Instead, I hope to show that her physical body affected the reception of her language use, even when that language use was identical to that of her white classmates. In other words, despite writing in a language variety that her white teacher had deemed proper, her communicative success was disrupted by that same teacher's racist assumptions.

Indeed, while many continue to argue that "Standard English" is a "neutral" tool that provides access and opportunity to all who use it, evidence continues to suggest that people's prejudices towards certain speakers carry more weight than the speakers' facility with language itself. Keith Gilyard (1991), in his autobiographical study of language, Voices of the Self, cites a study by Frederick Williams as one that "fuels the argument that racial prejudice overrides concerns of linguistic output."

Separate videotapes were made of three children: black, white, and Mexican-American. Enough of the children was visible so that racial characteristics were apparent, but the children had been filmed at such an angle that a viewer could not see the movement of their mouths as they spoke. The same voiceover was then dubbed onto all the tapes. Nonetheless, when student teachers were asked to rate the children's speech for standardness and fluency, the white child's speech was rated superior. It seems foolish to dispute the belief of Burling (1973) that "when we are contemptuous of a people, we tend to be contemptuous of their language" (p. 20), even if what they are speaking is really our own. (73)

For these children, the uniform expression of the "democratic" linguistic currency did not afford them equal access; their physical bodies, ultimately, were the deciding factor in their public (and educational) reception.

Similarly, Ryuko Kubota and Lori Ward (2000) cite a study by Donald Rubin that demonstrates how "native speakers' racial and ethnic stereotypes can negatively affect how well they comprehend the utterances of others," regardless of how well the speaker uses language. This shows,
perhaps most concretely, the veracity of the linguistic truism that grammaticality and communicative effectiveness are indeed separate matters. They explain that in the study

a group of undergraduate students was presented with a picture of a Caucasian female instructor and listened to a lecture recorded by a native speaker of English from the Midwest, while another group listened to the same audio recording, while looking at a picture of an Asian female instructor dressed exactly the same. The results showed that the group that was presented with the picture of an Asian instructor perceived more accent and performed more poorly on a listening comprehension test compared to the other group. These results imply that it is not only non-native speakers of English, but also native speakers, who are responsible for problems in cross-cultural communication. (81)

Just as with the study cited by Gilroy (1991), these conclusions demonstrate how deeply assumptions about the physical body can trump the supposed value of language facility; this instructor was perceived as having an accent because of her physical features, despite speaking with the same voice as that of the Caucasian woman.

Despite all linguistic evidence to the contrary (particularly our understanding that no single “Standard English” exists and that speaking a standardized English well does not automatically afford communicative effectiveness, particularly for people of color), the following assumption remains as the driving force behind most educators’ practices: “Standard English” is a ticket available to all people for upward mobility and success in mainstream educational and occupational settings. Indeed, given a number of false premises, many of the most progressive and influential scholars and teachers in the realm of writing studies—those who value the diversity of languages among their students and those who seek to fight against institutional oppression—necessarily develop what they mistakenly perceive to be ethical and pedagogically effective practices. In particular, the most liberally progressive scholarship up to the present day continues to reiterate, without much variation or development, the same set of assumptions and claims: (1) nonstandardized English varieties are legitimate, rule-based language systems, (2) all students must learn “Standard English” because it is the language of wider communication in the United States and is crucial for academic and professional success, and (3) teachers must validate and respect students’ home languages in order to effectively teach these students “Standard English.”
Indeed, Elaine Richardson (2003) reports that a survey of members of both the CCCC and the NCTE found that 96.1 percent of all members believe that students “need to master standard English for upward mobility” (45). Smitherman (2001), the most influential contemporary scholar on Ebonics, argues that “yes, black youth need to learn LWC” (38) and that while “the language policy for the black community must be one of multilingualism,” such a policy must “reinforce the need for the Language of Wider Communication” (39) as it is the “language of literacy, commerce, politics, and education, and it is a necessary addition to most people’s linguistic repertoire” (38). Prominent linguists Rickford and Rickford (2000) conclude their book, which otherwise celebrates the legitimacy of U.S. Ebonics, with the suggestion that “It is only when we have claimed both Spoken Soul and Standard English as our own, empowering our youth to appreciate and articulate each in their respective forums, that we will have mastered the art of merging our double selves into a better and truer self” (229). Delpit (1995), a scholar on the education of African American children, argues that these children must be taught “Standard English”: “I prefer to be honest with my students. I tell them that their language and cultural style is unique and wonderful but that there is a political power game that is also being played, and if they want to be in on that game there are certain games that they too must play” (39–40). Influential composition scholar Peter Elbow (2002) likewise agrees: “The short-range goal is clear: help students in our classrooms today whose comfortable dialect is not ‘Standard’ American English (SAE) to meet the demands of most teachers and employers. We can’t wait for a new culture of literacy” (129). Following their examples, other lesser-known scholars repeat well-meaning platitudes like these: “We are obligated to promote standardized English in public and professional settings where it is required” (Bruch and Marback 2002, 663–64); “We have an obligation as teachers to open up LWC to all our students, help them become fluent in it and be able to use it with comfortable facility” (Jonsberg 2001, 53); and finally, “It is our duty as English teachers to promulgate the correct use of standard English” (Shafer 2001, 41). While all of these educators, I believe, care deeply about the success of their students of color, it is the pervasiveness of a racist system that obscures the linguistic realities that make their pedagogical arguments necessarily problematic. Donaldo Macedo (1994) perhaps says it best: “If education in ‘English Only’ can guarantee linguistic minorities a better future . . . why do the majority
of black Americans, whose ancestors have been speaking English over 200 years, find themselves still relegated to the ghettos?” (39). A few contemporary scholars also have begun to criticize this kind of pedagogy. Vershawn Ashanti Young’s work, for example, interrogates the racism behind commonplace assumptions about pedagogies for “code-switching.” In his chapter that follows in this collection, he builds an argument in support of an alternative language practice.

To be sure I am not misunderstood: I do not want to argue that the reason “Standard English” does not exist is because, as Elbow’s (2002) recent writings about the difference between written and spoken language suggests, nobody speaks the same way they write. As discussed earlier, the profound differences between written and spoken language are widely agreed upon by linguists, but such an observation should not allow us to conclude that written language is entirely free from abstraction or that standardized written Englishes approximate the speech patterns of all Americans to an equal degree. Put differently, scholars such as Elbow, whether intentionally or not, exploit the above truism that in effect obscures recognition of the racism that student writers of color may experience. Assertions such as Elbow’s (while nevertheless helpful, I would argue, for students to understand why their experiences as writers may differ from their experiences as speakers) problematically suggests that all students experience the process of learning to write in American classrooms with the same degree of ease, eliding recognition of (historically racialized) home languages as significant factors. In contrast, as I have shown, race can play an integral role not only in the overprivileging of some people’s monolingualism or the burden of a compulsory multilingualism, but also in the way a student and her language—regardless if it is standardized or not—are received.

As Lippi-Green (1997) argues, with the rejection of linguistic fact comes the “implication . . . that discrimination is purely a matter of language, and that it is first and primarily the right accent which stands between marginalized social groups and a bright new world free of racism and prejudicial treatment” (50; italics in original). What I hope to have shown, in contrast, is that such assumptions both have origins in our racism and, when acted upon, allow institutionalized racism to thrive. By suggesting that “Standard English” exists as a language variety, rather than acknowledging that “Standard English” is, by definition, the conglomeration of all privileged white speech, we set up a hypothetical ideal for all people which, for people of color, can never in reality be
attained. Worse yet, granting, for the sake of example, that "Standard English" does exist as a particular language variety, the suggestion that a person of color could speak it and thus overcome the institutional oppression that exists independent of her language perpetuates a commonplace understanding of racism as individual acts of prejudice and makes invisible the institutionalized racism that remains.

An objection to what might be perceived as the trajectory of my argument at this point is likely the same objection that Delpit has wielded at liberal educators in her numerous writings about educating black children. Delpit critiques liberal educators (who fear oppressing their students by teaching them "Standard English") for withholding from African American students the very tools she believes are necessary for them to survive the system. To the contrary, I reject the very premise of both that pedagogy and its critique—the premise that there is a quantifiable and ascertainable "Standard English" language. Rather, I believe teachers and tutors must be cautious about what it means to insist upon what language resources any student does or does not need. Given my arguments in this chapter, I am calling for a drastic revision to contemporary approaches to teaching language. Ultimately, until our institutionalized racism is eradicated, practices that advocate the teaching of any privileged language will be—by definition—contributing to a system of inequity. Instead, our writing classrooms and writing centers can be deliberately and openly concerned with participating in, even leading, efforts to create greater social justice beyond our walls. In addition to giving all students as many language tools as possible, teachers and tutors should ultimately be concerned with helping them develop a critical consciousness of the effects of their choices at an individual and institutional level, and—most importantly—cultivating in them a sense of agency in combating, linguistically and otherwise, the injustices they encounter along the way. To do so, discussions of the sort included in this text can become a part of the curriculum, so that students' choices about language use are based on their own critical thinking, not on the instructors' personal biases. Such a pedagogy is not a distraction from the real work of teaching and tutoring writing, but an investment in teaching and tutoring through a lens that both ethically and practically accounts for the social and linguistic truths of our time.

In 1969, the New University Conference convened at the CCCC and drafted a resolution that called for a move away from the privileged teaching of "Standard English," offering in its place a project of social change:
CCC and NCTE meetings and CCC and NCTE Executive Committees should work actively to make non-standard dialects acceptable in all schools from kindergarten on and create an active articulation between the elementary schools, secondary schools, junior colleges and universities to deal with this problem. Linguists and English teachers should concentrate not on trying to teach everyone to speak and write upper-middle-class white dialect but rather on changing the attitude of society that discriminates against other dialects. Their efforts should be devoted to teaching the truths that all dialects are effective and valuable and that no dialect is any more indicative than any other of intelligence and even language ability on the part of the speaker. (quoted in Faigley 1992, 60; emphasis added)

The Students’ Right to Their Own Language resolution that was devised as a result conspicuously failed to account for this goal of social change; in doing so, the resolution obscures the reality of systemic injustices and falsely implies that it is the individual speaker and the individual teacher who are exclusively responsible for the student’s future communicative success. This chapter is a call to revisit the goals of the New University Conference and begin collectively to devise strategies for creating pedagogies that advance those aims. We can no longer be satisfied with deferring to the kind of rhetoric of “naturalization” that Villanueva cites from Eduardo Bonilla-Silva, saying that our students need “Standard English” because “it’s just the way things are.”

REFERENCES
3

SHOULD WRITERS USE THEY OWN ENGLISH?

Vershawn Ashanti Young

What would a composition course based on the method I urge look like?

. . . First, you must clear your mind [of the following]: “We affirm the students’ right to their own patterns and varieties of language—the dialects of their nurture or whatever dialects in which they find their own identity and style.”

Stanley Fish, “What Colleges Should Teach, Part 3”

Cultural critic Stanley Fish (2009d) come talkin bout—in his three-piece New York Times “What Should Colleges Teach?” suit—there only one way to speak and write to get ahead in the world, that writin teachers should “clear [they] mind of the orthodoxies that have taken hold in the composition world.” He say don’t no student have a right to they own language if that language make them “vulnerable to prejudice”; that “it may be true that the standard language is a device for protecting the status quo, but that very truth is a reason for teaching it to students.”

Lord, lord, lord! Where do I begin, cuz this man sho tryin to take the nation back to a time when we were less tolerant of linguistic and racial differences. Yeah, I said racial difference, tho my man Stan try to dismiss race when he speak on language differences. But the two be sho nuff intertwined. Remember when a black person could get hanged from the nearest tree just cuz they be black? And they fingers and heads (double entendre intended) get chopped off sometime? Stanley Fish (2009a) say he be appalled at this kind of violent racism, and get even madder at the subtle prejudice exhibited nowadays by those who claim that race is dead, that racism don’t happen no mo. But it do happen—as Fish know—when folks don’t get no jobs or get fired from jobs and worse cuz they talk and write Asian or black or with an Appalachian accent or sound like whatever ain’t the status quo. And Fish himself acquiesce to this linguistic prejudice when he come sayin that people make themselves targets for racism if and when they don’t write and speak like he do.
But don’t nobody’s language, dialect, or style make them “vulnerable to prejudice.” As Laura Greenfield point out in her chapter on racism and writing pedagogy in this collection, it’s ATTITUDES. It be the way folks with some power perceive other people’s language. Like the way some view, say, Black English when used in school or at work. Black English don’t make it own-self oppressed. It be negative views about other people use them own language, like what Fish express in his NYT blog, that make it so.

This explain why so many bloggers on Fish’s NYT comment page was tryin to school him on why teachin one correct way lend a hand to choppin off folks’ tongues. But, let me be fair to my man Stan. He prolly unaware that he be supportin language discrimination, cuz he appeal to its acceptable form—standard language ideology, also called “dominant language ideology” (Lippi-Green 1997). Standard language ideology is the belief that there is one set of dominant language rules that stem from a single dominant discourse (like standard English) that all writers and speakers of English must conform to in order to communicate effectively. Dominant language ideology say peeps can say whateva the heck they want, howeva they want to—BUT AT HOME!

Don’t get me wrong, Fish ain’t all wrong. One of his points almost on da money—the one when he say teachers of writin courses need to spend a lot of time dealin straight with writin, not only with topics of war, gender, race, and peace. As a person who train and supervise writin teachers, I have observed too many syllabi that cover the rhetoric of the feminist movement, which is cool, but don’t spend no time on effective sentence construction, the development of prose style, the conventions of argumentation, and the conventions of public discourse. Fish rightly ask teachers to pay mo attention to these matters. But he don’t like no Black English and Native American rhetoric mixing with standard English. And this is a huge problem considerin that the concept of “standard English” is widely contested. Linguist John McWhorter (2001), for one, challenge the notion of a monolithic standard English in the very subtitle of his book Word on the Street: Debunking the Myth of “Pure” Standard English. McWhorter agree with what Laura Greenfield say in her chapter, that “the terms language, dialect, and variety, and other such words intended to organize speech into coherent groupings are in fact themselves arbitrary markings” (42).

To me, what make these “markings,” i.e., “standard” and “dialect,” problematic, even though I use the designations myself, is that what we call standard English is part of a common language system that include...
Black English and any other so-called variety of English. I’m sho not try-
ing to say here that Black English don’t have some rhetorical and gram-
matical features that differ from what is termed standard English. What
I’m sayin is that the difference between the two ain’t as big as some like
to imagine. McWhorter’s own book title show this, since it has what
some would codify as black speech “word on the street” with what some
would codify as standard speech (the myth of pure standard English).

This why I got a big problem with the followin advice that Fish
(2009d) give to teachers:

If students infected with the facile egalitarianism of soft multicultu-
ralism declare, “I have a right to my own language,” reply, “Yes, you do, and I am
not here to take that language from you; I’m here to teach you another one.”
(Who could object to learning a second language?) And then get on with it.

Fish got it wrong here. When we’re talkin bout so-called varieties of
English or dialect in relation to standard English, we’re not dealin with
two different languages; we’re dealing with a common language. So
in fact he can’t teach “another one.” When we/he teach English, we
 teachin it with all its beautiful dialects that comprise it. And Fish should
know better, seeing how often he himself has used the full range of
English, even emphasizing its dialects to good effect (Fish 2002).

In addition, besides encouraging teachers to be snide and patron-
izing, Fish flat out confusin’ (I would say he lyin, but Momma say be
nice). You can’t start off sayin’, “Disabuse yo self of the notion that stu-
dents have a right to they dialect” and then say to tell students, “Y’all do
have a right.” That be hypocritical. And ain’t it disingenuous of Fish to
ask, “Who could object to learning a second language?” when his whole
argument is to convince writin teachers to require students, the “multicultu-
ralists,” to do the impossible, to leave they dialect behind and learn
another one, the one he promote? If he meant everybody should be
thrilled to learn another dialect, then wouldn’t everybody be learnin
everybody’s dialect? Wouldn’t we all become multidialectal and plura-
lingual? And when it comes to speakin and writing English, ain’t we all
 usin a common language anyway, even if somebody over there speak
it with this accent, and someone over here use it in that dialect? And
that’s my exact argument, that we all usin a common language. And to
the extent that folks use of that language differ, then we all should learn
everybody’s dialect, at least as many as we can, and be open to the mix
of them in oral and written communication (Young 2007).
Of course, the argument to teach and learn the dialects of English and to understand how to exploit them in effective communication don’t come originally from me. I borrow the idea from the 1974 Resolution on the Students’ Right to Their Own Language (SRTTOL), specifically where it say, “Resolved, that NCTE [National Council of Teachers of English] promote classroom practices to expose students to the variety of dialects that comprise our multiregional, multiethnic, and multicultural society, so that they too will understand the nature of American English” (Conference 1974). This resolution point up for me an important fact—that don’t nobody all the time, nor do they in the same way, subscribe to or follow standard modes of expression. Everybody mix the dialect they learn at home with whateva other dialect or language they learn afterwards. That’s how we understand accents; that’s how we can hear that some people are from a Polish, Spanish, or French language background when they speak English. It’s how we can tell somebody is from the South, from Appalachia, from Chicago, or any other regional background. We hear that background in they speech, and it’s often expressed in they writin’ too. It’s natural (Coleman 1997).

But some would say, “You can’t mix no dialects at work, how would peeps who ain’t from yo hood understand you?” They say, “You just gotta use standard English.” Yet, even folks with good jobs in the corporate world don’t follow no standard English. Check this out: reporter Sam Dillon write about a survey conducted by the National Commission on Writing in 2004. He say “that a third of employees in the nation’s blue-chip companies wrote poorly and that businesses were spending as much as $3.4 billion annually on remedial training.”

Now, some peeps gone say this illustrate how Fish be right, why we need to be teachin’ no standard grammar and stuff. If you look at it from Fish view, yeah it mean that. But if you look at it from my view, it most certainly don’t mean that. Instead, it mean that the one set of rules that people be applyin’ to everybody’s dialects leads to stereotypes that writers need “remedial training” or that speakers of dialects are dumb. Speakin’ and writin’ prescriptively, as Fish want, force people into patterns of language that ain’t natural or easy to understand.

This unnatural language use is what my girl, linguist Elaine Richardson (2004), call “stereotype threat.” This term applies when someone is forced in the face of racial perceptions to keep the most expressive parts of her language out of formal communication, whether writing or speakin’, like when say, a black person is asked to keep her dialect out
of a school paper. Richardson says this causes "stereotype threat" and her language become neither expressive standard or expressive Black English but a stilted middle-brow discourse. A whole lot of folk could be writin and speakin real, real smart if Fish and others stop using one prescriptive, foot-long ruler to measure the language of peeps who use a yardstick when they communicate.

Instead of prescribing how folks should write or speak, I say we teach language descriptively. This mean we should, for instance, teach how language functions within and from various cultural perspectives. And we should teach what it take to understand, listen, and write in multiple dialects simultaneously. We should teach how to let dialects come mingle, sho nuff blend together, like blending the dialect Fish speak and the black vernacular that, say, a lot—certainly not all—black people speak.

See, people be mo plurilingual than we wanna recognize, as I will illustrate later. What I want to argue right now is that we need to enlarge our perspective about what good writin is and how good writin can look at work, at home, and at school. The narrow, prescriptive lens be messin writers and readers all the way up, cuz we all been taught to respect the dominant way to write, even if we don't, can't, or won't ever write that one way ourselves. That be hegemony. Internalized oppression. Linguistic self-hate. But we should be mo flexible, mo acceptin of language diversity, language expansion, and creative language usage from ourselves and from others both in formal and informal settings. To better explain, take, for example, that time when Fish put former Harvard President Lawrence Summers on blast in 2002. What had happened—was, Summers called Professor Cornell West to his office and went straight off on the brothas for writin books everybody could read, for writin clear, accessible scholarship. Summers apologized after the media got involved, sayin, "I regret any faculty member leaving a conversation feeling they are not respected." Fish (2002) say, "In a short, 13-word sentence, the chief academic officer of the highest ranked university in the entire country, and therefore in the entire world, has committed three grammatical crimes, failure to mark the possessive case, failure to specify the temporal and the causal relationships between the conversations he has and the effects he regrets, and failure to observe noun-pronoun agreement."

But get this: Fish's correction of Summers is suspect, according to a grammar evaluation by linguist Kyoko Inoue (2002). Inoue say, "What the writer/speaker says (or means) often controls the form of the
sentence.” She says Summers’s intent make his sentence clear and understandable, not rules from the grammar police-man.

But Fish gone ignore Inoue again, as he did back then in 2002, when Fish used Summers’s example to try to force writin teachers at the University of Illinois at Chicago, where I was a graduate student, to teach more standard English grammar. Inoue gave Fish her analysis, but it didn’t change his mandate. Fish believe the examples of Summers and the corporate workers show reasons why we should teach no standard grammar. He reasons that if corporations and high-ranked universities got folks who can’t write right, we gotta do a better job of teachin the rules. And since most of those workers are white, he gone also say he not supportin prejudice. He don’t like it when whites don’t speak right, just the same as he don’t like it when Latinos not speakin right. Race ain’t got nothin to do with it, he gone add. It be only about speakin and writin standard English. He say his words apply to everybody, not just to those who be wantin “a right to their own language.”

But here what Fish don’t get: standard language ideology insist that minority people will never become an Ivy League English department chair or president of Harvard University if they don’t perfect they mastery of standard English. At the same time the ideology instruct that white men will gain such positions, even with a questionable handle of standard grammar and rhetoric (Didn’t George W. get to be president for eight years, while all kinds of folks characterized his grammar as bad and his rhetorical style as poor? And hasn’t former vice presidential candidate Sarah Palin made up words like refudiate for repudiate and lanemstream media to poke fun at mainstream media? Just askin.) Fish respond that this the way our country is so let’s accept it. I say: “No way, brutha!”

Also, Fish use his experience teachin grad students as evidence for his claim. He say his grad students couldn’t write a decent sentence. Well, they wrote good enuf in they essays to get into grad school, didn’t they? And most grad schools admit students by committee, which mean some of his colleagues thought the grad students could write right. But it sound like Fish sayin he the only one who could judge what good writin is—not his colleagues. What is Fish really on, what is he really tryin to prove?

I, for one, sho ain’t convinced by Fish. I don’t believe the writin problems of graduate students is due to lack of standard English; they problems likely come from learnin new theories and new ways of thinkin and tryin to express that clearly, which take some time. New ideas don’t always come out clear and understandable the first few times they expressed.
And, further, grad students also be tryin too hard to sound smart, to write like the folk they be readin, instead of usin they own voices.

In my own experience teachin grad students, they also tend to try too hard to sound academic, often using unnecessary convoluted language, using a big word where a lil one would do. Give them students some credit, Fish! What you should tell them is there be more than one academic way to write right. Didn’t yo friend Professor Gerald Graff (2003) already school us on that in his book *Clueless in Academe*? He say he tell his students to be bilingual. He say, say it in the technical way, the college-speak way, but also say it the way you say it to yo momma—in the same paper. Now that’s some advice!

But Fish must don’t like this advice. He say we should have students to translate the way they talk into standard English on a chalk board. He say, leave the way they say it to momma on the board and put the standard way on paper. This is wrongly called code switching. And many teachers be doin’ this with they students. And it don’t work. Why? Cuz most teachers of code switching don’t know what they be talkin bout. Code switching, from a linguistic perspective, is not translatin one dialect into another one. It’s blendin two or mo dialects, languages, or rhetorical forms into one sentence, one utterance, one paper. And not all the time is this blendin intentional, sometime it unintentional. And that’s the point. The two dialects sometime naturally, sometime intentionally, coexist! This dialects coexisting in one is code switching from a linguistic perspective: two languages and speech act (Auer 1988).

But since so many teachers be jackin up code switching with they “speak this way at school and a different way at home,” we need a new term. I call it CODE MESHING! Code meshing is the new code switching; it’s multidialectalism and pluralalingualism in one speech act, in one paper.

Let me drop some code meshing knowledge on y’all. Code meshing what we all do wheneva we communicat—writin, speakin, whateva. Code meshing blend dialects, international languages, local idioms, chat-room lingo, and the rhetorical styles of various ethnic and cultural groups in both formal and informal speech acts. This mode of communication be just as frequently used by politicians and professors as it be by journalists and advertisers. It be used by writers of color to compose full-length books; and it’s sometimes added intentionally to standard English to make the point that there ain’t just one way, sho nuff more than one way, to communicate formally.
Code meshing also be used to add flavor and style, like journalist Tomas Palermo (2007) do in the excerpt below from his interview with Jamal Cooks, professor of education. In his online article “Rappin’ about Literacy Activism,” Palermo write:

Teachers frequently encounter him on panels with titles like “The Expanding Canon: Teaching Multicultural Literature In High School.” But the dude is also hella down to earth. He was in some pretty successful “true-school” era hip-hop recording groups. . . . Meet the man who made it his passion to change the public education game, one class at a time.

With vernacular insertions such as “but the dude is also hella down to earth” (not to mention beginning a sentence with the conjunction “but”) and adding the colloquial “game” to “public education,” the article, otherwise composed in monodialect standard English, shift into a code meshed text.

Here some mo examples:

1. Iowa Republican Senator Chuck Grassley sent two tweets to President Obama in June 2009. His messages blend together common txtng abbrvs., standard English grammar, and a African American rhetorical technique:

   First Tweet: “Pres Obama you got nerve while u sightseeing in Paris to tell us ‘time to deliver’ on health care. We still on skedul/even workin WKEND.”

   Second Tweet: “Pres Obama while u sightseeing in Paris u said ‘time to deliver on healthcare’ When you are a ‘hammer’ u think everything is NAIL I’m no NAIL.” (Werner 2009)

2. Professor Kermit Campbell (2005) uses multiple dialects to compose Gettin’ Our Groove On, a study of college writing instruction. In it he say:

   Middle class aspirations and an academic career have rubbed off on me, fo sho, but all hell or Texas gotta freeze over befo you see me copping out on a genuine respect and love for my native tongue. . . . That’s from the heart, you know. But I don’t expect a lot of folks to feel me. (3)

3. Chris Ann Cleland, a real estate agent from Virginia, express disappointment about President Obama’s economic plan in an interview with the Washington Post:

   “Nothing’s changed for the common guy,” she said. “I feel like I’ve been punked.” (Rich 2009)
4. Referencing Cleland’s remark, the title of New York Times columnist Frank Rich’s (2009) Op-Ed article asks, “Is Obama Punking Us?” Rich writes in the last paragraph of his article:

The larger fear is that Obama might be just another corporatist, punking voters much as the Republicans do when they claim to be all for the common guy.

The contraction “nothing’s,” the colloquial phrase “common guy,” and the vernacular expression “punked,” are neither unusual nor sensational. Yet, when these examples get compared to the advice teachers give about code switching, you get a glaring contradiction.

Students be told that vernacular language should be reserved for the playground with friends or at a picnic with neighbors, and that standard English be used by professionals at work, in academic writing, and when communicating with important officials. However, the colloquial language of two white, middle-aged professionals (Cleland and Rich), which appears in two of our nation’s most highly regarded newspapers, prove this ain’t so, at least not no mo and prolly never was. The BIG divide between vernacular and standard, formal and informal, be eroding, if it ain’t already faded. And for many, it’s a good thing. I know it sho be for me.

The Internet, among other mass media, as well as the language habits of America’s ever-growing diverse ethnic populations, be affecting how everybody talk and write now, too. A term like punked, which come from black culture to describe someone getting tricked, teased, or humiliated, used to be taboo in formal communication as was black people wearin braided hair at work in the 1980s. The professional world has become more tolerant of black hair styles. And that same world not only toleratin but incorporatin, and appropriatin, black language styles—as they do black hairstyles.

Actor Ashton Kutcher popularized the term punked with his hit TV show of the same title. That’s probably how the word seeped into the parlance of suburban professionals (“I feel punked”; “Obama . . . punking voters”), although it still retains it colloquial essence.

Fish may reply, “But these examples be from TV and journalism; those expressions won’t fly in academic or scholarly writing.” But did you read Campbell’s book, Fish? What about Geneva Smitherman’s (1997) Talkin and Testifyin? Is you readin this essay? Campbell (2005) blends the grammars and rhetorical styles of both Black English and
so-called standard English, along with the discourse of Rap and Hip Hop. He also blend in oral speech patterns (with the phonological representation of words like “fo sho” and “beef”). And his book is published by an academic press and marketed to teachers of English. Campbell just one of so many books by academics—professors of language and writing studies, no less—who code mesh.

Still, Fish may say, “Yeah, but look, they paid their dues. Those professors knew the standard rules of writing before they broke them.” To this kind of objection, Victor Villanueva (2006), a Puerto Rican scholar of American studies, as well as of language and literacy, point to “writers of color who have been using the blended form . . . from the get-go” (351). Villanueva makes this observation in a review of Candace Spigelman’s book *Personally Speaking: Experience as Evidence in Academic Discourse*. In it he take exception with Spigelman’s notion that academics pay their dues by writing in formal traditional academic prose that excludes narrative first, and only when they done that, they turn to using stories in writing they research. But Villanueva point out that many academics of color find they first academic voice in narrative modes that come from the particular rhetorics of their cultural heritages. In other words, many writers from minority backgrounds don’t play academic games (do it this way first, then you can use story). As Villanueva put it, including himself among those who use the narrative voice first, “The blended form is our dues” (351). They don’t have to learn the rules to write right first; the blended form or code meshing is writing right.

This brings us back to Senator Grassley’s tweets. It’s obvious he learned some cool techno shorthand (e.g., “WKEND” and “delivr”). He also use both the long spelling of “you” and the abbrv. “u” in the same line. “We still on skedul” is a complete sentence; the backslash (“/”) that follow it function like a semicolon to connect the emphatic fragment to the previous thought. And the caps in “WKEND” and “NAIL” pump up the words with emphasis, which alleviate the need for formal exclamation marks.

Grassley’s message be a form of loud-talking—a Black English device where a speaker indirectly insult an authority figure. The authority figure is meant to overhear the conversation (thus loud-talking) so that the insult can be defended as unintentional. Grassley sent the message over his Twitter social network but he address Obama. He wanna point out what seem like a contradiction: If healthcare reform is so important to Obama, why is he sightseeing in Paris?
Grassley didn’t send no standard English as a tweet. Twitter allow messages with 140 characters. The standard English question—If healthcare reform is so important to Obama, why is he sightseeing in Paris?—is eighty characters. Why didn’t Grassley use this question or compose one like it? Cuz all kinds of folks know, understand, and like code meshing. So Grassley code meshed.

Code meshing be everywhere. It be used by all types of people. It allow writers and speakers to bridge multiple codes and modes of expression that Fish say disparate and unmixable. The metaphorical language tool box be expandin, baby.

Plus code meshing benefit everybody.

In the 1970s linguist William Labov noted that black students were ostracized because they spoke and wrote black dialect. Yet he noted that black speakers were more attuned to argumentation. Labov say that “in many ways [black] working-class speakers are more effective narrators, reasoners, and debaters than many middle-class [white] speakers, who temporize, qualify, and lose their argument in a mass of irrelevant detail” (Graff 2003, 37).

So when we teach the rhetorical devices of blacks we can add to the writing proficiency of whites and everybody else. Now, that’s something, ain’t it? Code meshing use the way people already speak and write and help them be more rhetorically effective. It do include teaching some punctuation rules, attention to meaning and word choice, and various kinds of sentence structures and some standard English. This mean too that good writin gone look and sound a bit different than some may now expect.

And another real, real, good result is we gone help reduce prejudice. Yes, ma’am. Now that’s a goal to reach for.

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