

SMITH, CYNTHIA A., Ph. D. Challenging Mis-Education Through Effective Communication: A Study of the Communication and Miscommunication between White Teachers and Black Male Students (2015)  
Directed by Dr. Hephzibah Roskelly. 186 pp.

The purpose of this study is to explore the ways in which communication patterns between teachers invested in whiteness and black male students can lead to the success or alienation of black male students in the public school environment. As statistics prove, black male students are the most at-risk for dropping out of school and/or facing disciplinary actions. Several factors lead to this at-risk status: the criminalization of black males within our society, the denigration of Black English in the classroom, and the stress of standardized method of traditional education models that value a one-style-fits-all education that objectifies students.

As we move into the Twenty-First Century, however, culture is changing and while education is a strong mechanism constructed for the white capitalist patriarchal paradigm, the paradigm itself is changing and so must education. This study explores the history of race and education, the roles teachers and students have played, and the ways in which critical and pragmatic education can lead us into an educational system built on community and relationships rather than paradigms and develops the student as a holistic critical agent.

CHALLENGING MIS-EDUCATION THROUGH EFFECTIVE COMMUNICATION:  
A STUDY OF THE COMMUNICATION AND MISCOMMUNICATION  
BETWEEN WHITE TEACHERS AND  
BLACK MALE STUDENTS

by

Cynthia A. Smith

A Dissertation Submitted to  
the Faculty of The Graduate School at  
The University of North Carolina at Greensboro  
in Partial Fulfillment  
of the Requirements for the Degree  
Doctor of Philosophy

Greensboro  
2015

Approved by

---

Committee Chair

APPROVAL PAGE

This dissertation written by CYNTHIA A. SMITH has been approved by the following committee of the Faculty of The Graduate School at The University of North Carolina at Greensboro.

Committee Chair \_\_\_\_\_  
Committee Members \_\_\_\_\_  
\_\_\_\_\_

\_\_\_\_\_  
Date of Acceptance by Committee

\_\_\_\_\_  
Date of Final Oral Examination

## TABLE OF CONTENTS

	Page
CHAPTER	
I. THE ROLES OF BLACK MALE STUDENTS AND TEACHERS INVESTED IN WHITENESS: HOW EACH CONTRIBUTES TO BLACK MALE MARGINALIZATION.....	1
II. TALKIN BACK AND TALKIN BLACK: THE IMPLICATIONS OF DIFFERING RHETORICAL AND LINGUISTIC STYLES BETWEEN WHITE-INVESTED TEACHERS AND BLACK MALE STUDENTS.....	46
III. THE CHANGING MARKETABILITY OF LANGUAGE: BLACK ENGLISH SPEAKERS AND THEIR TWENTY-FIRST CENTURY NARRATIVES .....	78
IV. BUILDING COMMUNITIES THROUGH DEFINITIONS OF US AND THEM: A CASE STUDY OF AN INNER CITY SCHOOL IN A PREDOMINANTLY WHITE APPALACHIAN COUNTY .....	108
V. RADICALIZING EDUCATION: MOVING FROM TRADITIONAL TO EXPERIENTIAL TEACHING .....	148
WORKS CITED .....	177
APPENDIX A. CHANGE IN CITY’S POPULATION BY RACE AND AGE FROM 2000-2010.....	185
APPENDIX B. COUNTY HIGH SCHOOLS’ COMPOSITION 2012-2013 .....	186
APPENDIX C. COUNTY HIGH SCHOOLS’ GRADUATION RATES 2012-2013 .....	187

APPENDIX D. COUNTY HIGH SCHOOLS' PROFICIENCY SCORES 2012-2013.....	188
APPENDIX E. "LIFT EV'RY VOICE AND SING" BY JAMES WELDON JOHNSON.....	189
APPENDIX F. GARY HOWARD'S ACHIEVEMENT TRIANGLE WITH DIMENSIONS OF KNOWING AND ACTION .....	191
APPENDIX G. EXEMPLAR TEXTS RECOMMENDED BY THE COMMON CORE FOR 11 AND 12 GRADES.....	192
APPENDIX H. "LET AMERICA BE AMERICA AGAIN" BY LANGSTON HUGHES .....	195

CHAPTER I  
THE ROLES OF BLACK MALE STUDENTS AND TEACHERS INVESTED IN  
WHITENESS: HOW EACH CONTRIBUTES TO BLACK MALE  
MARGINALIZATION

**Introduction**

What does it mean to be a black male student in today's society? This is a complicated question to answer. Theoretically, the black male student's educational outlook should be getting better every day. In a post-*Brown v. Board of Education* era, black students now have the opportunity for equal education alongside their white counterparts. Also, with the work of Geneva Smitherman and others in the *King v. Ann Arbor* case in 1979, a Michigan judge recognized that students who speak a black dialect have a right to it and that teachers needed to take that language into account in the classroom.<sup>1</sup> Again in 1997, according to Geneva Smitherman, the Oakland School Board in California resolved to use Ebonics "as the instructional avenue to literacy in the Language of Wider Communication<sup>2</sup>" (Talkin That Talk 157). Such moves toward an

---

<sup>1</sup> Smitherman discusses the case in Talkin That Talk: Language, Culture, and Education in African America. In the text, Smitherman quotes Judge Joiner's ruling: "It is clear that black children who succeed, and many do, learn to be bilingual. They retain fluency in 'black English' to maintain status in the community and they become fluent in standard English to succeed in general society....The evidence supports a finding that...the failure [of the Ann Arbor School Board] to develop a program to assist their teachers to take into account the home language in teaching standard English may be one of the causes of the children's reading problems[...]" (Talkin That Talk 155).

<sup>2</sup> Smitherman explains that Oakland's resolution wasn't taken lightly. Five states (one being California) tried passing anti-Ebonics legislation; three states—Oklahoma, South Carolina, and Georgia—succeeded (Talkin That Talk 157)

egalitarian and culturally conscious education for black male students could demonstrate that the academic community has become more inclusive for all, especially black male, students. However, the realities seen through media tell a different story. Images of black males vary, but all of them are negative, disparaging, or exclusionary. First is the black teen thug (represented in pictures of Trayvon Martin in a hoodie) who is gunned down in the streets by police or other concerned citizens and represents the lack of culture and the wild savagery of black masculinity. Second is the athlete who is valued for his body and brute skill rather than for his intelligence, as evidenced in the University of North Carolina controversy where black male students were given “special” (sometimes nonexistent) courses to guarantee academic success.<sup>3</sup> Finally—the affirmative action case: the black academic who gets special privileges just because of the color of his skin. For instance, in 2014 when high school student from Long Island Kwasi Enin was accepted into all eight Ivy League schools, many bloggers and commentators called an Affirmative-Action foul.<sup>4</sup>

Moreover, across high school and college campuses, many African American males who start school vanish, dropping out before they can graduate. According to The Schott

---

<sup>3</sup> According to Sally Kohn of CNN in October 2014, UNC “encouraged” at least 3,100 student athletes to “take ‘fake classes’ in order to get fake grades that would allow them to keep playing sports and spend their extra time practicing instead of studying.”

<sup>4</sup> OpEd writer Kristen West Savali argues that Enin’s acceptance is more a “trap of conflating excellence with exceptionalism” and points to college admissions expert Katherine Cohen’s comments in USA Today that “the fact that he’s a first generation American [from Ghana] helped him stand out from ‘typical’ African American kids.” Such statements distance Enin from typical legibilities of African American students while also making him an African (black) token in the Ivy League school of his choice.

50 State Report on Public Education and Black Males' 2012 report, in 2009-10 only 52 percent of black males who started high school graduated compared to 78 percent of white males, the first time in the study's history that black male students' rate was above 50 percent. In that same year black male student graduation rates were lower than any other student population (including black females, whites, or Latinos) in 38 states and the District of Columbia. According to Ivory Toldson, Deputy Director of the White House Initiative on HBCUs, "If Black male ninth graders follow current trends, about half of them will not graduate with their current ninth grade class, about 20 percent will reach the age of 25 without obtaining a high school diploma or GED, 45 percent of Black males will attempt college, however only 16 percent obtain a bachelor's degree by the age of 25."

So, what is the connection, or disconnection, between the classroom teachers who guard the gates and the black male students who can't seem to make their way through them? There could be several answers to this question—maybe the teachers and students have miscommunication issues; maybe the system itself is constructed in a way that black male students can't seem to overcome; maybe each comes to the classroom with misconceptions about the other. The study of three different constructs—social hierarchy created within the educational setting, the role/identity of the teacher, and the role/identity of the student—may lead to the answer to such wonderings. However, it is clear that there is no one unambiguous answer; it seems that answers to questions of black male students' low success rate and high disciplinary rate lie in all three.



## **Mis-Education and White Investment in Educational Discourse: Keeping the Black Man Down**

Many theorists have argued that the structure of education has created a mis-educational system—one in which the white patriarchal paradigm is reinforced and validated. The concept was first vocalized fully in 1933 by Carter Woodson in his text Mis-Education of the Negro. According to Woodson, the educational system “with all its defects, does others so much more good than it does the Negro, because it has been worked out in conformity to the needs of those who have enslaved and oppressed weaker peoples” (xii). He goes on to explain, “The same educational process which inspires and stimulates the oppressor with the thought that he is everything and has accomplished everything worth while, depresses and crushes at the same time the spark of genius in the Negro by making him feel that his race does not amount to much and never will measure up to the standards of other peoples” (xiii). The white patriarchal structure of education, according to Woodson, is meant to keep minorities, and especially black males, in their place by defining their place in society as no farther up the success ladder than the bottom rung. This mis-education tends to “handicap a student by teaching him that his black face is a curse and that his struggle to change his condition is hopeless [sic] is the worst sort of lynching. It kills one’s aspirations and dooms him to vagabondage and crime” (3).

Although many theorists today argue that racism has gone underground, the social and cultural stigmas are in place to keep such mis-education alive in current school structure.

There are two ingredients for creating mis-education: a society built on the idea that one group is superior while the other is inferior and a person in power willing to accept

the ideals of such a society as truth. For the purposes of my argument, in the classroom this person will be referred to as the “teacher invested in whiteness.” This category does not include all teachers or even all white teachers; instead it includes only those teachers who “buy in” to the white capitalist patriarchal paradigm that gives privilege to some over others due to skin color and/or socioeconomic status. According to George Lipsitz, “Whiteness has a cash value: it accounts for advantages that come to individuals” (vii). Although whiteness is a “scientific and cultural fiction that like all racial identities has no valid foundation in biology or anthropology,” it is a “social fact, an identity created and continued with all-too-real consequences for the distribution of wealth, prestige, and opportunity” (vii). Those teachers invested in whiteness are not necessarily white; however, they all “expend time and energy on the creation and re-creation of whiteness” (vii). As I move through my argument, my definitions of both black and white denote not ethnicity, per se, but a social definition that is based on a combination of skin color, language, socioeconomic status, and social performance. Teachers invested in whiteness are more likely to privilege students who fit the “white” features of such categories.

In terms of the black male student, many theorists argue that his definition in society and in educational settings overlap, which seems plausible since the educational system is meant to prepare future generations to live within a white patriarchal paradigm and in turn is its own microcosm of the outside culture. In her study Bad Boys: Public Schools in the Making of Black Masculinity, Ann Arnett Ferguson argues that there are two images of the black male student: the criminal and the endangered species. In the first image, the black male poses a threat to others in the educational setting:

the presence of black males in public spaces has come to signify danger and a threat to personal safety. But this is not just media hype. Bleak statistics give substance to the figure of the criminal. Black males are disproportionately in jails: they make up percent of the population of the United States, but 45 percent of the inmates in state and federal prisons; they are imprisoned at six times the rate of whites. (78)

On the other hand, patriarchal whites who seek to help the black male see him as an endangered species: “It represents him as being marginalized, to the point of oblivion. While this discourse emanates from a sympathetic perspective, in the final analysis the focus is all too often on individual maladaptive behavior and black mothering practices as the problem rather than on the social structure in which the endangerment occurs” (78). Although one viewpoint is more sympathetic than the other, both allow the teacher invested in whiteness to disassociate himself or herself from blame. More importantly, both images allow the teacher invested in whiteness to keep a theoretical knowledge of the black male student which saves the teacher from getting to know the student on a practical level. According to Ferguson, both images are “lodged in theories, in commonsense understandings of self in relation to others in the world as well as in popular culture and the media. But they are condensations, extrapolations, that emphasize certain elements and gloss over others. They represent a narrow selection from the multiplicity, the heterogeneity of actual relations in society” (78-79). Because images of black male students are defined by popular culture, the media, and other forms of social construction, such students are seen as different from other children, according to Ferguson: “At the intersection of this complex of subject positions are African American boys who are doubly displaced: as black children, they are not seen as childlike but adultified; as black males, they are denied the masculine dispensation constituting white

males as being ‘naturally naughty’ and are discerned as willfully bad” (80). In other words, before a black male student even enters a classroom he is labeled as bad—more specifically, as a threat to the authority because the teacher predicts the black male child will be willfully disobedient.

Because such theories of black masculinity are weaved into our social fabric, many teachers invested in whiteness could be inadvertently teaching these images to black male students because they lack the critical eye to realize what messages the standard curriculum, traditional teaching styles, and internalized racist fear and distrust may be doing to the students’ self-image. According to Keith Gilyard, oftentimes such teachers have a false view of knowledge as apolitical Truth: “A view of knowledge as lore, then, as accumulated information, is an authoritarian view. A teacher holding this view would consequently conduct classes in an authoritarian manner, assuming his or her rightful function to be that of distributing knowledge to his or her charges” (Let’s Flip the Script 82). The students in such a model would be completely silenced and must absorb all the lessons and ideals of the teacher, including those of the white patriarchal paradigm.<sup>5</sup>

The major goal of mis-education, according to Woodson, is to use such cultural Truths to keep minorities, especially black male students, locked within their assigned place in society. Bell hooks describes her reaction to her first experience with authoritarian pedagogy in Teaching Critical Thinking: Practical Wisdom. Growing up, hooks describes her African American teachers who were invested in the success of their community as always “humane”: “Their embodiment of both a superior intellect and an

---

<sup>5</sup> See also Paulo Freire’s discussion of the banking concept of education in Pedagogy of the Oppressed

ethical morality shaped my sense of school as a place where the longing to know could be nurtured and grow” (1). However, when she entered Stanford University, “a predominantly white college” (2), she experienced teachers invested in whiteness for the first time:

When I made my way to college, I was truly astonished to find teachers who appeared to derive their primary pleasure in the classroom by exercising their authoritarian power over my fellow students, crushing our spirits, and dehumanizing our minds and bodies[...]. I never once considered what it would be like to study with teachers who were racist[...]. I had romanticized college. I believed it would be a paradise of learning where we would all be so busy studying that we’d never have time for the petty things of the world, especially not racism. (2)

Hooks’ story is not an isolated incident. In an authoritarian classroom, the paradigms of racism are present even if the teacher is unaware of them. Such authoritarian structures lull willing students to invest in whiteness passively while unwilling students are labeled as “troublemakers” or “disposable”; in other words, students must accept the Truth they are fed or risk being marginalized or expunged from the educational setting. For black male students, who may challenge certain truths, this type of classroom can be a minefield where one wrong word will land the student ostracized and outside the classroom.

### **Defining Space for the Black Male Student: Limiting his Role within the Educational and Social Setting**

The way black male students approach education defines the spaces they are allowed to inhabit. First, according to Woodson, if the black male is successfully educated, there is no space for him within his black community because, he argues, a major step in the

process of mis-education is to remove the black student—physically, intellectually, or both—from his community. The black male student who adheres to the demands of the educational system learns how to function in the “white” world, not the black: “When a Negro has finished his education in our schools, then, he has been equipped to begin the life of an Americanized or Europeanized white man, but before he steps from the threshold of his alma mater he is told by his teachers that he must go back to his own people from whom he has been estranged by a vision of ideals which in his disillusionment he will realize that he cannot attain” (5-6). The goal, according to Woodson, is to have blacks “imitate” whites, which will “thus remove the pretext for the barriers between the races” (7). Students read Shakespeare and learn about great (white) American figures who have come to represent the theoretical concepts of freedom and justice we can all achieve; all the while, these narratives contradict the historical and experiential African American narratives from slavery to modern-day racial profiling.

One glance through a typical high school literature textbook demonstrates the segregation between white writers and black. As I look through the Literature text I must teach my high school students, there is a particular narrative created. Although texts like *Oludah Equiano* are included in the section called “Encounters and Foundation to 1800,” such texts are buried within Anne Bradstreet and Jonathan Edwards and seem almost an afterthought. Also, the section of Equiano’s text includes his trip into slavery, where he was sold and resold by his own kind; there is no mention of his slavery in America (Holt Elements of Literature Sixth Course). In other sections, such as “The Rise of Realism,” slave narratives are segregated into their own space with the heading

“Comparing Points of View: Slavery.” Also, in “the Moderns” section, black literature is segregated only to “The Harlem Renaissance.” Only in the Post-Modern selections are the black writers more integrated with the others. When students of color approach such a text, they see their own segregation and lack of literary history; instead of having a strong presence in American Literature, black students see their role in society as marginalized and insignificant (or lacking any tradition) until present times. This is far from the truth. Students of color need to be offered more than just one narrative and have the ability to choose which narrative to believe and which to reject; however, if they expect to be successful, both in education and in the wider social paradigm, there really is no choice; they must accept the version created through textbooks and reinforced by teachers.

Throughout African American literature, writers have explored this double bind in which educated black males find themselves. At the turn of the Twentieth Century, one story in particular illustrates the black male students’ intellectual separation from his community. In W.E.B. DuBois’ story “Of the Coming of John,” a young, black John leaves home to get an education. His education opens his eyes to the veil that keeps him silenced: “he first noticed how the oppression that had not seemed oppression before, differences that erstwhile seemed natural, restraints and slights that in his boyhood days had gone unnoticed or been greeted with a laugh[...]. A tinge of sarcasm crept into his speech, and a vague bitterness into his life” (367). However, John sees it as his goal to go back to his own community to meet his “manifest destiny”---to “help settle the Negro problems there” (370). The use of such a historically saturated term is significant. It was “manifest destiny” that whites should rule America from coast to coast—even if it meant

sacrificing the lives of Native Americans by pushing them on reservations built on sterile, useless land; the lives of Chinese and other immigrants who died building the railroads; and, of course, the lives of slaves who were brought westward to work fields and build towns. The term “manifest destiny,” then, speaks of John’s ultimate dream and failure: He wants to redefine the town by giving power back to his black community; however, because he is black, the white dream of control is not attainable.

John’s arrival home signifies the segregation created between black male intellectuals and black communities: He is no longer a member of his own community because he has been “whitened.” He no longer sees himself as part of the subordinate black community. In two particular scenes, he inadvertently forgets his “place” in the racist patriarchal social paradigm: First, he buys a ticket for a concert hall in New York and sits among the white patrons (368-369); second, when he is seeking a job on his return home, he is caught attempting to walk into the Judge’s front door. In both instances, he is “corrected” for his actions. The usher apologizes for selling him a seat that had already been taken (a more sympathetic, but no less racist, way of avoiding the racial tension). The Judge is more direct; he tells John,

The Negro must remain subordinate, and can never expect to be the equal of white men. In their place, your people can be honest and respectful; and God knows, I’ll do what I can to help them. But when they want to reverse nature, and rule white men, and marry white women, and sit in my parlor, then by God! We’ll hold them under if we have to lynch every Nigger in the land. (373)



John's intentions are clear; he feels that he is somehow different, no longer a "nigger" and now a man. However, by taking such a position, John himself realizes that he has made more problems than solutions:

Every step he made offended someone. He had come to save his people, and before he left the depot he had hurt them. He sought to teach them at the church, and had outraged their deeper feelings. He had schooled himself to be respectful to the Judge, and then blundered into his front door. And all the time he had meant right—and yet, and yet, somehow he found it so hard and strange to fit his old surroundings again, to find his place in the world about him. (373)

John is no longer the "good Nigger" (373), but he isn't white either; he has moved into the "dangerous Nigger" category (375). More importantly, John is once again getting "schooled." His earlier education taught him that speaking white and thinking white led to freedom; however, his conservative Southern education by way of the Judge informs him that he cannot be white, so his safest bet is to go back to playing "the good Nigger."

Black male students experience this same double bind when they must choose between embracing their own culture or abandoning it for a culture that promises more opportunity. In 2008, Franz Fanon echoed DuBois' sentiments in explaining the paradox that black male students like John found then and still find themselves in: They have been taught that the means to success is to be "white" while simultaneously being constantly reminded that they never will be white. In the "Introduction" of his Black Skin, White Masks, he argues,

As painful as it is for us to have to say this: there is but one destiny for the black man. And it is "white." This tends to be the goal of education—to prepare the black student to function in the white world, or to "bleach" him. This creates a dilemma for the black student. In order to become successful, there must be separation

between his black community and the white world that represents success. As the black male rejects his blackness and embraces whiteness, he is only too pleased about this, and by developing further this difference, this incomprehension and discord, he discovers the meaning of his true humanity. Less commonly he wants to feel a part of his people. And with feverish lips and frenzied heart he plunges into the great black hole. We shall see that this wonderfully generous attitude rejects the present and future in the name of a mystical past.

In trying to be white, in blaming the less successful blacks for their own failures, in breaking with his own community, Fanon argues that the black man rejects those who will accept him for those who will reject him and becomes forever lost. Therefore, the successful black male intellectual has no real place in society, white or black. The echo of Dubois in Fanon's texts illustrates that even after over one hundred years, the Civil Rights movement, and the abolishment of segregation, the double bind black male students experience still hasn't changed.

Fanon's argument—that black sons, who are designated inferior, will be destroyed by claiming their place among their patriarchal white fathers—is illustrated in Langston Hughes' story "Father and Son." Like DuBois' John, Bert was sent off to school at 14, when he was starting to come into his manhood (his father's main reason for sending him away was his self-assured superiority). As the Colonel, who is Bert's white master and birth father, muses, Bert "has been, after all, the most beautiful of the lot, the brightest and the baddest of the Colonel's five children, lording it over the other children, and sassing not only his colored mother, but also his white father, as well" ("Father and Son"). Bert was sent away because he was "[h]andsome and mischievous, favoring too much the Colonel in looks and ways" ("Father and Son"). According to Fanon's theory,

Bert did not see himself as black; instead, his intelligence and his connection to whiteness made him “arrogant” enough to claim a place within white society. This is clear when Bert comes face to face with his father on his return from college:

“Good evening, Bert,” the Colonel said.

“Good evening, Colonel Tom,” the boy replied quickly, politely, almost eagerly.

And then, like a puppet pulled by some perverse string, the boy offered his hand.

The Colonel looked at the strong young near-white hand held out toward him, and made no effort to take it. His eyes lifted to the eyes of the boy, his son, in front of him. The boy’s eyes did not fall. But a slow flush reddened the olive of his skin as the old man turned without a word toward the stoop and into the house.

The boy’s hand went to his side again. (“Father and Son”)

Just like DuBois’ John had done, Bert physically asserts his position as equal to white society; the difference is that John’s actions were inadvertent. When John walks into Judge’s front door, he does so without thinking. His education has blurred his sense of racial hierarchy. Bert offers his hand deliberately. His eagerness to gain approval from his white father puts both in an awkward position. Although the Colonel admires his son, to take his hand is to break the plantation narrative that exists between them.

The rest of that summer was a battle of the wills between the Colonel and Bert. The Colonel ordered him to work in the cotton fields, but Bert refused. The Colonel refused to send him back to school, thinking that cutting off his education would once again turn him into a “good nigger;” however, soon after, Bert got in an argument with a white woman who gave him the wrong change at the Post Office. The Colonel vowed to teach his son a lesson; either Bert would submit to his white father’s will and play the part of

“nigger” or he would be exiled from the plantation (or killed). Bert responds to his father’s request by saying, “Oh, but I’m not a nigger, Colonel Norwood....I’m your son.” The Colonel calls him a “black bastard” and kicks him off the plantation. However, Bert refuses to leave through the back door and instead reaches for the front door in order to leave in such a manner as to claim his place as equal to his white father. However, in order to exit out the front door, he must kill his father who stands in his way.

Both John and Bert’s stories are encroached in the white patriarchal hierarchy that claims that white men are and will always be superior to his black brothers and sons. According to Paulo Freire, our society is trapped in what he calls “narration sickness” (71). As Michel Foucault would argue, this narration sickness comes from what Foucault calls “architectonic unities,” or “systems[...]which are concerned not with the description of cultural influences, traditions and continuities, but with internal coherences, axioms, deductive connexions, compatibilities” (5). According to Foucault, history, and social knowledge, is not created by the artifacts that create it but defines such artifacts to suit an overall narrative:

[History] has taken as its primary task, not the interpretation of the document, nor the attempt to decide whether it is telling the truth or what is its expressive value, but to work on it from within and to develop it: history now organizes the document, divides it up, distributes it, orders it, arranges it in levels, establishes series, distinguishes between what is relevant and what is not, discovers elements, defines unities, describes relations. The document, then, is no longer for history an inert material through which it tries to reconstitute what men have done or said, the events of which only the trace remains; history is now trying to define within the documentary material itself unities, totalities, series, relations. (7)

In other words, the overarching theories of the dominant minds, not the experiences and events of the majority, create our social and historical narratives. The old adage says that history is defined by the winners; according to Foucault, not only history but all the objects that support and define history are interpreted through those who fall highest on the cultural hierarchy. This justifies why such similar narratives exist across the last century; those creating the narrative are still white and predominantly male. Also, this creates what Foucault calls a “general history,” or an overall narrative of history that all objects within that history need to support. So, what happens if a character like John, who wants to create enclaves of equality in his community, or Bert, who wants to claim his place within his white father’s family, come along and disrupt that general history or narrative? According to Foucault, two actions need to be taken: first, the artifact, or character, must be isolated and assigned a space within the hierarchy (10); then, s/he must be assigned a specific location within the already-approved general history or narrative (10-11). By grouping all artifacts of the same nature together, they can easily be labeled within the hierarchy. John and Bert become the “bad niggers”; while John’s father and Bert’s brother Willie, who both devote themselves to the whites in power and serve tirelessly and without complaint, are seen as the “good niggers” (DuBois 373; “Father and Son”). In terms of the narrative created by the white patriarchal paradigm, the lynchings of both John and Bert are justified—they challenged the power structure and were eliminated for not adhering to the rules. Even Bert’s brother Willie was punished for his actions as he was lynched alongside his brother (“Father and Son”). Although Willie was a “good nigger,” because he was also the son of the Colonel and had as much

right as Bert to claim his whiteness, he had to serve as an example as well. Foucault describes such labeling as the relationship between the “signifier” and the “signified” (11), with the white patriarchal paradigm as the signifier who defines who the good and bad niggers are, and the black men as the signified objects who have no control over the label they are given.

Those black students who refuse whiteness are not safe from social labels either as they are given their own marginalized space. Ferguson points out that those black males who refuse to play into white expectations aren't separated from their home community, but they are separated from their classroom community. She explains, “The Punishing Room is the name I have given to the place to which children are sent by adults when they get in trouble” (31). Such separation serves two purposes: it removes the black male student from the classroom, saving the other children from his corruption, and it allows the student to escape from the inferiority assigned by the teacher. Ferguson explains that many black male students in the elementary school where she observed did not think twice about going to the Punishing Room: “getting into trouble in school did not necessarily arouse fear and shame in children, nor induce a resolve to turn over a new leaf and be good. Getting in trouble and making a trip to the Punishing Room was, for some children, also the occasion for escaping from classroom conditions of work, for self-expression, for making a name for yourself, having fun, for both actively contesting adult rules and power, as well as for the sly subversion of adult prohibitions” (31). Being assigned to the Punishing Room meant students could inhabit a space with others “like them,” other “bad seeds” and “future criminals.” Such associations helped the student

learn that he was not alone or different; there were others like him. However, being sent to the Punishing Room reinforced the idea that such students were corrupt and unsalvageable and had no business in the classroom environment where only obedient and serious students should be.

If black male students continue to misbehave, they are removed from the school altogether, either through suspension or expulsion. According to Ferguson, “If the Punishing Room is indeed a place where children come to occupy a ‘free space’ with less surveillance than in the classroom, then full suspension has the potential to be the freest space of all that children can win in a state of punishment” (39). However, as Ferguson points out, it is also a means of making the “troublesome” black male student completely invisible within the academic setting because it “provides a ‘freeing up’ for the classroom teachers who have, for a short time anyway, gotten rid of some of the children they consider the most difficult students in the room” (39). In other words, the most important outcome is a sanctified learning environment, free from impurities that would ruin the environment.

Both means of removing the student from the classroom setting, by means of a Punishing Room or complete suspension, have no value in terms of correction or intervention. Instead, they are just ways of keeping the learning environment free of “disruptions.” In other words, the black male students who refuse to learn and play the role of passive student are denied an education altogether; no other means of remediation is often used. Such disciplinary actions also lead to a written record of the students’ misbehaviors that further label the student as a miscreant in training: “Children passing

through the system are marked and categorized as they encounter state laws, school rules, tests and exams, psychological remedies, screening committees, penalties and punishments, rewards and praise. Identities as worthy, hardworking, devious, or dangerous are proffered, assumed, or rejected” (41). Such records or assumptions follow students through the educational process as documentation and teacher talk often reach future teachers before the actual student does. Within the educational system, then, the student’s identity is defined objectively by the ideas of others, not by his own voice.

### **The Roles We Play: How Teacher Narrative Roles Affect the Student/Teacher Relationship**

Because teachers, especially those invested in whiteness, often “know” students from interaction with colleagues, documentation, or socially-constructed prejudices, such teachers do not take the time to allow students to contradict such misconceptions. In other words, schools are not immune and are often invested in the narratives that play out in the wider culture and such narratives play out in the relationship between teachers and students. According to Paulo Freire,

A careful analysis of the teacher-student relationship at any level, inside or outside the school, reveals its fundamentally *narrative* character. This relationship involves a narrating Subject (the teacher) and patient, listening objects (the students). The contents, whether values or empirical dimensions of reality, tend in the process of being narrated to become lifeless and petrified. (Pedagogy of the Oppressed 71)

As Freire describes, the dominant narrative assigns the teachers and students roles, and those roles don’t change. The teacher is the authoritarian, and the students are passive instruments meant to catch the knowledge that is being distilled and poured into them.



Black male students, especially those resistant to the learning environment, are labeled as threats to this perfect narrative.

The role of teachers in the development of an African American student is highly influential in both positive and negative ways because teachers are the ones who help students become marketable products in the white patriarchal capitalist society. According to Lisa Delpit, a major goal for teachers of black students is to help them acclimate into the main (white) culture, or what she calls the “culture of power.” She explains that teachers must keep in mind five “aspects” that will help students of color/minority students navigate through our white patriarchal society: 1. Power dynamics in the classroom, 2. The existence of the “culture of power” and the codes and rules of such a culture, 3. The ways in which those rules reflect who has power within the culture, 4. The ability to recognize such rules to help students acquire or navigate such power, and 5. The invisibility of power to those who have the most (Other People’s Children 24). To summarize her main argument: Delpit believes that by helping students of color uncover the dominant culture’s influence on society, they can better recognize and manipulate their power within that structure.

Delpit’s argument, especially the last aspect, brings up one big paradox as it contradicts the narrative Freire describes: How can white teachers understand the constructs of power within a white culture when they are less likely to recognize it? More importantly, white teachers, or those invested in whiteness, are more likely to ignore their own investment or blame students for their lack of power since acknowledging such power dynamics would mean acknowledging that the narrative of the classroom is built

on a white patriarchal paradigm. As Cornel West argues, the way many teachers “deal” with the students who don’t fit the passive mold, especially students of color, has fallen politically into two camps—rigidly devoted to the white patriarchal paradigm (West defines them as conservative) or sympathetic but powerless to change the paradigm (West defines them as liberal). Those devoted to the paradigm blame those without power for their own powerlessness and attribute lack of power to lacking the ability to gain power or wield it; those in the sympathetic role take a more paternal approach by defining what should be done to help those without power and objectifying the marginalized or powerless in the process. As West points out, the common denominator for both camps is the objectification of the powerless, or as West says, “‘problem people.’”<sup>6</sup> The narrative assumption is that power gives those on the outside of the black experience the right to define the experience and diagnose a solution. According to West, “for liberals, black people are to be ‘included’ and ‘integrated’ into ‘our’ society and culture, while for conservatives they are to be ‘well behaved’ and ‘worthy of acceptance’ by ‘our’ way of life. Both fail to see that the presence or predicaments of black people are neither additions to nor defections from American life, but rather *constitutive elements of that life*” (Race Matters 3). In both camps, then, the truth of the black experience is defined through theoretical, not practical, knowledge.<sup>7</sup> In other words, teachers cannot be

---

<sup>6</sup> West is echoing W.E.B. DuBois’ question—“How does it feel to be a problem?” (213)

<sup>7</sup> The terms “liberal” and “conservative” are meant as philosophical, not political, labels. As mentioned above, I am using the term “conservatives” to denote those who are committed to the white patriarchal paradigm and its rules. To define “liberals,” I am using Lerone Bennett, Jr.’s definition of white liberalism: “The white liberal believes something should be done, but not too soon and not here. . . . He wants results without risks, freedom without danger, love without hate. He is all form, all means, all words—but no substance” (79).

invested in whiteness and also be invested in those who lack power under a white patriarchal paradigm.

In The New Jim Crow, Michelle Alexander explores the history of social philosophies during Jim Crow segregation to illustrate the common purpose of both—to find a means of keeping power while solving the “black” problem. According to her, “The liberal philosophy of race relations emphasized the stigma of segregation and the hypocrisy of a government that celebrates freedom and equality yet denies both on account of race,” while conservatives “blamed liberals for pushing blacks ahead of their proper station in life and placing blacks in positions they were unprepared to fill” (32). Notice though—both philosophies deal in the abstract ideals of society and do not delve into the pragmatic realities. Liberals asked questions such as “what does equality and democracy mean in terms of segregation?” and “how can we be both democratic and deny rights to people?” Conservatives asked questions such as “are blacks ready for the responsibility of citizenship?” and “are we pushing them too far by expecting them to be responsible citizens with full rights?” In each camp, there is a specific “we” and a specific “them,” with “them” being completely silenced and objectified by the answers. In the liberal camp, “we” must make efforts to grant “them” rights so that “we” are not hypocrites. In the conservative camp, “we” need to be careful not to overwhelm “them” with too much freedom. Because both camps refuse to give up power or think of “them” as subjects, neither can be successful. Also, because both refuse to enter into the black space to learn from black experience, neither will form clear and useful answers.

Conservatives were the easiest threat for black students (and audiences reading African American literature) to recognize because of their clear and overt investment in the white patriarchal hierarchy. Such characters believe that all definitions and roles created in such a hierarchy must be maintained for social peace. The earliest examples of conservative teachers were slave masters who controlled what slaves learned. We can easily see the Judge and the Colonel, in DuBois' and Hughes' works respectively, as conservative figures; the fact that their signifying role, not their name, defines them proves this as much as their actions. Throughout literary history, however, conservative characters consistently appear, especially in the slave narrative. As Frederick Douglass points out in his Narrative of the Life of Frederick Douglass, An American Slave, Master Auld informs Mrs. Auld, "If you give a nigger an inch, he will take an ell. A nigger should know nothing but to obey his master—to do as he is told to do. Learning would *spoil* the best nigger in the world" (364). In hearing these words, Auld teaches Douglass both his place as slave in the social order and, ironically, his ticket to escaping that order: "I now understood what had been to me a perplexing difficulty—to wit, the white man's power to enslave the black man. From that moment, I understood the pathway from slavery to freedom" (364). Douglass outlines the struggle that the white conservative archetype and the black male "student" has—the former needs to control the social hierarchy so that he can stay on top while the latter works to break his assigned role as the powerless subordinate. Douglass proves, also, that even though he is powerless at the moment because of his role as object, he is not afraid to find his own avenues to education and power.

Conservatives don't necessarily deny education to black male students, as long as the black male student is devoted to upholding the social narrative. However, when that black male student becomes resistant to his assigned role or to the social narrative being taught, such education has to be stopped and the learner punished. One clear example comes through the story of Dave in Charles Chesnutt's "Dave's Neckliss." Written as a conjure story, the story within the story is told by Uncle Julius, an employee on a former plantation now owned by a Northern white man. Julius tells his employer that Dave was once a slave on the plantation who learned to read. When Dave's master finds out, he asks Dave what he learned. According to Julius, "Dave wa'n't no fool, ef he wuz a nigger, en sezee: "Marster, I l'arns dat it's a sin fer ter steal, er ter lie, er fer ter want w'at doan b'long ter yer; en I l'arns fer ter love de Lawd en ter 'bey my marster.'" (190)

Dave's master approved of Dave's education because, as he tells Dave, "Dat's w'at I wants all my nigger fer ter know'" and asks Dave to teach the other slaves (190). However, when Dave is accused and then framed for stealing Master's bacon, the overseer, Master Walker, blames education for his insubordination: "Mars Walker say it was des ez he 'spected: he did n' b'lieve in does yer readin' en prayin' niggers; it wuz all 'pocrisy, en sarve Mars Dugal' right fer 'lowin' Dave ter be readin' books w'en it wuz 'g'in' de law'" (192). The juxtaposition of education and theft here is significant although the two actions seem unrelated. Master Walker recognizes the threat that Dave poses as an educated black man and assumes that by reading, Dave is disrupting the master/slave narrative that defines the slave master as intellectually superior. When that narrative is broken, the slave is defined as "uppity" and must be put back in his place. The argument

that reading led to crime illustrates the fear that white slave owners had of literate slaves. Dave was accused of stealing on two counts: first, of stealing the ham, and second, of stealing knowledge. Therefore, although Dave was innocent of both the theft and of learning about his own humanity, his masters made an example of him.

Although the goal of conservatism is to protect the racist hierarchy and the white man's place within it, liberalism is no less dangerous. According to Lerone Bennett, white liberalism can be more damaging than conservatism because it is often disguised with such good intentions. He argues, "The white liberal and the white supremacist share the same root postulates. They are different in degree, not kind" (89). Bennett explains the main problem with white liberalism is lack of commitment to fighting oppression wholeheartedly: "The white liberal is a man who finds himself defined as a white man, as an oppressor, in short, and retreats in horror from that *designation*. But...he retreats only halfway, disavowing the title without giving up the privileges, tearing out, as it were, the table of contents and keeping the book" (77). His book metaphor connects nicely with Foucault and Freire's idea of narrative—the liberal may disavow or rebuke the narrative but never gives up his or her role within it. The key to white liberalism is the investment in power; while the conservative blames black society for its own problems because they just don't act "white" enough, the white liberal, according to West and Bennett, acknowledges that racism exists and that the system is unequal. However, believing is one thing; acting to change the system, especially if it means relinquishing power, is the step liberals are hesitant to take.

One of the earliest versions of the white female liberal comes through in Frederick Douglass' Narrative in the form of Mrs. Auld, his slave mistress in Maryland. When Douglass first meets her, he describes her as “a woman of the kindest heart and finest feelings” (363). What surprised him most is her treatment of slaves: “The crouching servility, usually so acceptable a quality in a slave, did not answer when manifested toward her. Her favor was not gained by it; she seemed to be disturbed by it. She did not deem it impudent or unmannerly for a slave to look her in the face. The meanest slave was put fully at ease in her presence, and none left without feeling better for having seen her” (363). One would expect such a mistress to remain consistently kind; however, she has just not learned the proper ways of dealing with a slave. As mentioned before, her conservative husband discovers her teaching young Frederick to read and chastises her for her actions.

This sympathetic liberal female trope continues in post-Reconstruction literature as well; only this time the slave mistress is replaced by a classroom teacher. In The Garies and Their Friends, when the villainous Mrs. Stevens informs the sweet Miss Jordan that the Gary children are “coloured pupils,” she is at first shocked at the thought of her light-skinned pupils as black and breaks into an analysis of her situation:

“I never could have dreamed of such a thing!” exclaimed Miss Jordan, as an anxious look overspread her face; then, after a pause, she continued: “I do not see what I am to do—it is really too unfortunate—I don’t know how to act. It seems unjust and unchristian to eject two such children from my school, because their mother has the misfortune to have a few drops of African blood in her veins. I cannot make up my mind to do it.” (Webb 131)

Miss Jordan acknowledges that to expel the students would be “unjust”; however, she must make a choice—the anger of the white parents or justice for two black children. There is no doubt which choice she will make. Several other points within her musings seem important. First, she confirms that she “doesn’t know how to act,” a trait Bennett assigns to liberals. If she does act, she could potentially harm her own position; therefore, she is consciously choosing her own safety in upholding the power of the white parents. Also, she blames the children’s mother for her having “a few drops of African blood in her veins.” In this moment, she is disavowing herself from blame. Instead, it is the mother’s fault that the students are unworthy of being in the white school, and the teacher and/or other parents can clean their hands of any guilt.

One final view of the sympathetic liberal teacher comes in The Autobiography or an Ex-Colored Man. The white female teacher is again put in an awkward position as students are divided along racial lines:

One day near the end of my second term at school the principal came into our room and, after talking to the teacher, for some reason said: “I wish all of the white scholars to stand for a moment.” I rose with the others. The teacher looked at me and, calling my name, said: “You sit down for the present, and rise with the others.” I did not quite understand her, and questioned: “Ma’am?” She repeated, with a softer tone in her voice: “You sit down now, and rise with the others.” I sat down dazed. I saw and heard nothing. When the others were asked to rise, I did not know it. When school was dismissed, I went out in a kind of stupor. (Johnson 400)

Again, the white teacher has the choice to voice the injustice that is happening to the black male student, and again she keeps her mouth shut in order to please the white man in charge.



Although each white teacher in each scene is created by a different writer and in a different era, they each have three things in common: an authoritative male or social structure directing her actions, an assigned role of “liberal female as victim,” and a moment where she must choose between accepting the white authority or advocating for the student’s agency.

In both the Douglass text and the Johnson text, authority comes in the form of a male figure: In Douglass, it is the Master Auld; in Johnson, it is the principal. In The Garies, Mrs. Stevens represents not the male authority figure but the white patriarchal capitalist one. The teacher Miss Jordan is not ordered to expel the Gary children, but she understands that the school will be hurt financially if parents who disapprove of their attendance remove their own children to attend another school. As Mrs. Stevens tells Miss Jordan, ““If this matter was known to me alone, I should remove my daughter and say nothing more about it; but, unfortunately for you, I find that, by some means or other, both Mrs. Kinney and Mrs. Roth have become informed of the circumstance, and are determined to take their children away. I thought I would act a friend’s part to you, and try to prevail on you to dismiss these two coloured children at once”” (Webb 131-132). Because of the external social or patriarchal force putting pressure on her, the white liberal teacher can declare that she herself is the victim; although she may see the value of the students’ humanity, she must only play the cards she is dealt.

All three authors play on the “liberal as victim” trope. Each writer chooses to construct the scene to show the process of inner turmoil (and ultimately defeat) the teachers go through. According to Douglass, under the slave master’s tutelage, Douglass’

slave mistress changed: “That cheerful eye, under the influence of slavery, soon became red with rage; that voice, made all of sweet accord, changed to one of harsh and horrid discord; and that angelic face gave place to that of a demon” (364). Here, Mrs. Auld is objectified as she is autopsied for the reader. We see her eye, hear her voice, and see the demonic change in her face; she is no longer a whole person but has become an object of her conservative husband’s racism. As we see this epitome of female sweetness and perfection change, we can’t help but feel pity not just for Douglass’ character but for hers as well. In Johnson’s text, we hear the teacher’s voice switch to a “softer tone” as she is trying to soften the blow that the narrator feels in discovering he is black and also, we can assume, to convey her sympathy because both of them were put in such an awkward position. Finally, in Webb’s text, Miss Jordan “struggled to acquire sufficient control of her feelings” as she tried to make a decision (Webb 132). Finally, she tells Mrs. Stevens that she will expel the children, but “not in that unfeeling manner; that I cannot do” (Webb 132-133). Miss Jordan’s resolution speaks to the heart of sympathetic liberal attitude: It makes no difference to the children if they are dismissed with or without feeling; it makes no difference if Mrs. Auld loses her humanity or the teacher in Johnson’s novel feels awkward for having outed the narrator. The student is still denied an education or labeled as culturally less deserving than white students.

Within traditional education built on white patriarchal norms, there are two main choices for the liberal teacher if she (or he) wants to be guaranteed power within a white patriarchal narrative: the white liberal teacher must choose between confirming the black male student in his narrative role as “slave” or “coloured” and, in other words, not fit to

be considered white, or she risks losing her own place within the narrative. If she supports the student's agency or stands up for the student and against injustice, she risks being assigned a deviant character role. In Miss Jordan's and Mrs. Auld's case, that label would have been abolitionist; as Mrs. Stevens warns Miss Jordan, "you see the necessity of doing something at once to vindicate yourself from the reproach of abolitionism" (Webb 133). Miss Jordan's reaction says it all: "At the pronouncement of this then terrible word in such connection with herself, Miss Jordan turned quite pale" (Webb 133). As Leroy Bennett points out, "The Negro senses dimly that white liberals, despite their failings, are the best America has to offer. And he clings to the white liberal, as a drowning man clings to a plank in a raging sea, not because the plank offers hope of salvation but because it is the very best he has" (78-79). But, as the characters in the three novels learn, "The plank is rotten; the sea is choppy—the plank must be made better or we shall all drown" (79).

Because the classroom is a microcosm of our white patriarchal society, teachers invested in whiteness often play the role of either conservative or liberal. West tells us, "As long as black people are viewed as a 'them,' the burden falls on blacks to do all the 'cultural' and 'moral' work necessary for healthy race relations. The implication is that only certain Americans can define what it means to be American—and the rest must simply 'fit in'" (Race Matters 3). Nowhere is this clearer than in the relationship between white liberal teachers, often portrayed as female, and black male students.

## **Black Male Legibility and Performance in the Classroom**

As mentioned earlier, black male students also have assigned roles within the narrative, and, according to Mark Anthony Neal, their “legibility” keeps them confined into specific roles. As mentioned earlier, Ferguson focuses on roles created by location within the white patriarchal paradigm: the teacher adhering to a more conservative role would view the black male student as a criminal, while the more liberal teacher would see him as an engendered species. Neal explains that boys are also seen as a particular physical role. For instance, athlete and criminal are easily read by teachers within the white paradigm, but academic is not because it is a mental, not physical role, proving such black males are objectified and seen for parts of their identity and never as a whole being. As students become more educated, they must fight to also be seen outside those “legible” identities, and that fight can often take place within the classroom between the black male student and teacher.

According to Vershawn Ashanti Young, five words define the literacy of black males in the classroom: “I don’t give a fuck” (Your Average Nigga). This goes for both the “academic” black boy and the “typical” black boy. Young says as an academic, his anger and chosen alienation came toward his community: “It didn’t help that I had no ‘raunchy macho,’ couldn’t develop that ‘special [pimp] walk,’ or that I was no good at the ‘distinctive handshakes and slang’ . . . . Because of this my gender performance was incompatible with what was required of black boys. So for psychological protection, I convinced myself that I didn’t give a fuck about the ghetto and longed only to get out.” Young argues that his attitude was a means of masking his own fear and pain for not

being able to play the legible “ghetto thug” and gain acceptance among black peers. For other black boys who feel alienated by the white-invested classroom, their anger is aimed at (white) educational authority by expressing their identity through black stereotypical legibility, which challenges that white-invested identity of the classroom. Young explains the reaction of the teacher invested in whiteness by describing a reaction he had to one particular student:

Cam arrived in class on the first day about twenty minutes late, on what Momma used to call CPT (Colored People’s Time). He was wearing baggy jeans, Nike sneakers, and a bright yellow Tommy Hilfiger jacket that hung low, and he was bobbing his head to music that pumped from headphones that he didn’t remove until after he sat down in the very first seat to my left. That’s when I smelled the scent of fresh marijuana, which I suspected he’d just smoked. And I thought, ‘Damn, why me?’ And that’s when I profiled him as a ghetto black man, like the ones I had grown up with and was trying to leave behind. That’s when I thought of him—I’m sorry to say—as a nigger. (Your Average Nigga)

What is interesting about the scene is that Young’s role as teacher can be interpreted in two ways. First, he is the teacher invested in whiteness whose authority is now threatened by the black male student’s legibility. Also, he is the academic white/black whose legibility in either realm is challenged by Cam’s clearly black legibility. By being in Cam’s presence Young can be perceived as not black enough to be in league with Cam, but if he in any way sympathizes with Cam, he risks his perceived “whiteness.” Young confirms his insecurities when he explains, “I felt endangered, not physically but racially. I felt as if my blackness had been jeopardized because, unlike Cam, I am not equally able to speak and personify BEV [Black English Vernacular]. Nor am I able to speak and embody the language I was called to teach—standard English, which, . . . is an English

vernacular based on the language norms of middle- and upper-middle-class white people.” In order to hide his own fears, as teacher and authoritarian of the classroom, his reaction was to “not give a fuck” about Cam.

Michelle Alexander argues that such roles established to separate white and black are essential to maintain the racial hierarchy. According to her, such roles have played out historically from slavery through Jim Crow and into today’s War on Drugs. Alexander argues that we have moved from a system of exploitation to one of subordination and finally landed in marginalization: “Every racial caste system in the United States has produced racial stigma[...]. Racial stigma is produced by defining negatively what it means to be black. The stigma of race was once the shame of the slave; then it was the same of the second-class citizen; today the stigma of race is the shame of the criminal” (197). So what is a black male student to do to escape such a stigma? According to Alexander, black parents and other authority figures tell young black males if they ever hope to escape their assigned criminal narrative, “they must be on their best behavior, raise their arms and spread their legs for the police without complaint, stay in failing schools, pull up their pants, and refuse all forms of illegal work and moneymaking activity, even if jobs in the legal economy are impossible to find” (215). In other words, black males must play the “good nigger” to have any hope of favors from the white patriarchal paradigm. However, the experiences of black male students show that there is little hope of ever escaping their stigma; a student at a school for juvenile defenders in Washington, D.C., complains, “We can be perfect, perfect, doing everything right and still they treat us like dogs. No, worse than dogs, because criminals are treated worse than

dogs”); another student asks, “How can you tell us we can be anything when they treat us like we’re nothing?” (Alexander 200) These students prove that there is no breaking from their assigned subversive role—no matter how “good” they are, the imprint of insubordinate criminal is stamped on their black skin.

The “legibility” of black male students is so engrained in the academic setting because teachers invested in whiteness like Young cling to it in order to maintain authoritarian control. In the “Preface about black men” in We Real Cool: Black Men and Masculinity, bell hooks explains that black men and boys are trapped within the legibility that whites read only on their black skin and no deeper:

Whether in an actual prison or not, practically every black male in the United States has been forced at some point in his life to hold back the self he wants to express, to repress and contain for fear of being attacked, slaughtered, destroyed. Black males often exist in a prison of the mind unable to find their way out. In patriarchal culture, all males learn a role that restricts and confines. When race and class enter the picture, along with patriarchy, then black males endure the worst impositions of gendered masculine patriarchal identity.

Such “legibility,” then, is a defense mechanism meant to protect whites from the feared and dangerous black male, further reinforcing the stereotype such legibility is built on. According to Mark Anthony Neal, “the ‘legible’ black male body is continually recycled to serve the historical fictions of American culture” (Looking for Leroy 4). He goes on to say, “That the most ‘legible’ black male body is often thought to be a criminal body and/or a body in need of policing and containment—incarceration—is just a reminder that the black male body that so seduces America is just as often the bogeyman that keeps America awake at night” (Looking for Leroy 5). Therefore, while teachers are working to

linguistically bleach black male students, as was the case with Young, they are also working within a cultural definition of the black male student as trouble-maker and criminal, as Young does when he defines Cam as a “nigger.” Such a goal seems contradictory—teachers are to look at black male students as beneath white counterparts and as disruptions to classroom’s investment in whiteness while also trying to mold black male students into the image we expect them to defy.

This double bind of being male and black is what causes the failure of many black male students. Young argues that boys in general resist education because school is seen as an effeminate space and “school language (WEV) as a discourse for girls”; however, white and black boys perceive this effeminacy differently: “black boys not only feel coerced to give up their masculinity if they do well in school, but they also feel forced to abandon their race—the ultimate impossibility. This feeling of racial and gender endangerment occurs not only in cases of black boys from the ghetto but is also experienced by black boys from middle-class communities” (*Your Average Nigga*). Such legibility traps black male students in a definition that white patriarchy creates with limited knowledge about the student or his community.

In order to deny the black man his rights within a patriarchal society, he can never be considered a whole person and is thus labeled as “nigger” or “criminal” or “unsalvageable” (Young, Alexander, Ferguson, respectively). Because of this denial of wholeness, according to Fanon in his “Introduction,” the black man will never be a man:

Man is not only the potential for self-consciousness or negation. If it be true that consciousness is transcendental, we must also realize that this transcendence is obsessed with the issue of love and understanding. Man is a “yes” resonating from



cosmic harmonies. Uprooted, dispersed, dazed, and doomed to watch as the truths he has elaborated vanish one by one, he must stop projecting his antinomy into the world.

Blacks are men who are black; in other words, owing to a series of affective disorders they have settled into a universe from which we have to extricate them. (Black Skin, White Mask)

Overall, black students cannot be their own person because, through the double consciousness<sup>8</sup> in which they are forced to exist, they can never rise above the role that white patriarchy forces on them. The first time a black boy walks into a classroom, he is read and labeled, as hooks says in “Preface about black men,” as “animals, brutes, natural born rapists, and murderers”; the overall picture drawn of the black man by white patriarchy is of a “brute—untamed, uncivilized, unthinking, and unfeeling” (We Real Cool). And oftentimes, there is no escaping such a construct.

Through this constant reinforcement of negative roles and stereotypes, young black men learn that their future career is in crime because the white patriarchy pushes them in that direction. For example, in his Autobiography, Malcolm X describes how such an imprint can lead a young black male to crime. Before being put in foster care, Malcolm steals both out of necessity and frustration over being poor and hungry. He describes his situation: “there were times when there wasn’t even a nickel and we would be so hungry we were dizzy. My mother would boil a big pot of dandelion greens, and we would eat that” (14). To abate his hunger, he “began drifting from store to store, hanging around

---

<sup>8</sup> A concept coined by DuBois which describes how blacks are aware of and define themselves through how they are envisioned by whites; he describes it as “this sense of always looking at oneself through the eyes of others, of measuring one’s soul by the tape of a world that looks on in amused contempt and pity” (215).

where things like apples were displayed in boxes and barrels and baskets, and I would watch my chance and steal me a treat. You know what a treat was to me? Anything!” (14-15) Malcolm’s first foster home is with a black family (the Gohannases) that he would often visit at dinnertime when he lived with his mother. His foster mother is the first to label him as bad; she tells him, “Malcolm, there’s one thing I like about you. You’re no good, but you don’t try to hide it. You are not a hypocrite” (15). His foster mother, Mrs. Gohannas, defines Malcolm as incapable of playing the “good nigger.” Such a statement could mean several things: first, that Malcolm was not trying to be something that he is not; more significantly, it proves that Malcolm cannot play the subordinate role that white patriarchal society demands of him. However, it also illustrates the limited nature of such legibility. Rather than recognizing the reasons behind his stealing (his hunger, his need to survive, the lack of support his family receives from the community), Malcolm is only defined by the fact that he is a thief, a criminal, a “bad nigger.”

In the classroom, Malcolm is also not willing to play the “good nigger.” While living with the Gohannases, Malcolm gets expelled from school for a prank he pulls:

I came into the classroom with my hat on. I did it deliberately. The teacher, who was white, ordered me to keep the hat on, and to walk around the room until he told me to stop. “That way,” he said, “everyone can see you. Meanwhile, we will go on with class for those who are here to learn something.”

I was still walking around when he got up from his desk and turned to the blackboard to write something on it. Everyone in the classroom was looking when, at this moment, I passed behind his desk, snatched up a thumbtack and deposited it in his chair. When he turned to sit back down, I was far from the scene of the crime, circling around the rear of the room. Then he hit the tack, and I heard him holler and caught a glimpse of him spraddling up as I disappeared through the door. (25-26)

In reading both Malcolm's and the teacher's narrative roles, the white patriarchal narrative becomes apparent. First, Malcolm is quick to mark the teacher as both male and white; we can also assume that he is conservative in that he values his authority in the classroom, shows no pity toward Malcolm, and turns Malcolm into a spectacle just because authority gives him the power to do so. By turning Malcolm into an objectified spectacle, the teacher's goal is to humiliate Malcolm into obedience, or at least to demonstrate his own authoritative power over Malcolm by forcing him to do something utterly ridiculous in front of the class. Also, the teacher acts to separate Malcolm from the learning that is occurring, which means we can assume that the teacher interprets Malcolm as someone who is apathetic about his education or unable to perform academically, since the teacher only plans to teach the students who "are here to learn something." In this narrative, the teacher is the white patriarchal master while Malcolm is forced to play the role of black insubordinate fool. However, as the scene plays out, the roles reverse. When the teacher sits on the tack, he becomes the spectacle and the fool. The term "spraddling" indicates that the teacher is in an awkward, comical position as he quickly jumps up from his seat. X also uses the word "crime" to define his action. It is unclear, however, whether he is interpreting his actions as criminal or if he is describing how the teacher and administration see the action. Considering Malcolm's role as a mirror reflecting only the role the white patriarchy uses to define him, there is no clear way to extrapolate one interpretation from the other. However, within the educational setting, the authoritative stance taken by the teacher to humiliate and shame Malcolm is not mentioned because the students' limited legibility places the blame squarely on his

own black shoulders. Another interesting thing about this scene, however, is how power plays out in terms of Malcolm's assigned role as "criminal." Although Malcolm remains in the role of "criminal" from the beginning of the scene to the end, first by not taking off his hat and second by "assaulting" his teacher with a tack, his legibility does shift. He changes from a fool to a criminal mastermind. When he places the tack on the chair and forces the teacher into the fool's role, he has bested his teacher and subverted his assigned role as passive student. Therefore, because he has usurped the white patriarchy's dominance over him, he has to be forced out of the school community, much like John and Bert are removed from their respective communities.

After his expulsion, Malcolm is moved to a detention home and starts the seventh grade as one of only a few black students in his new school. Again, Malcolm is at the mercy of the white patriarchal definitions. In history class, he not only had to endure the "nigger" jokes his teacher told, he also had to see himself defined by his textbook:

Later, I remember, we came to the textbook section on Negro history. It was exactly one paragraph long. Mr. Williams laughed through it practically in a single breath, reading aloud how Negroes had been slaves and then were freed, and how they were usually lazy and dumb and shiftless. He added, I remember, an anthropological footnote on his own, telling us between laughs how Negroes' feet were "so big that when they walk, they don't leave tracks, they leave a hole in the ground." (30)

The teacher cannot fathom the black male student as a threat to his authority and expects the black male students to absorb the "truths" he and the textbook are spouting; why wouldn't he when both are speaking from the accepted historical and cultural narrative? Malcolm has two choices: to speak out and again play the criminal, defiant to authority,

or to sit passively and play the “good nigger.” Either way, he is trapped in his assigned legible role.

Despite, or to spite, his imposed legibility, Malcolm soon is in competition with two white students for top of his class and was voted class president, a reward, he says, for his honorary “whiteness”: “I didn’t really have much feeling about being a Negro, because I was trying so hard, in every way I could, to be white” (33). However, as he enters his eighth grade year, a white male teacher once again reminds him of the role he is to play in a white patriarchal paradigm as one day, Malcolm finds himself alone with his English teacher, Mr. Ostrowski, a teacher he highly respects and who has given him high marks his seventh and eighth grade years:

He was, as I have mentioned, a natural-born “advisor,” about what you ought to read, to do or think—about any and everything. We used to make unkind jokes about him; why was he teaching in Mason instead of somewhere else, getting himself some of the “success in life” that he was telling us how to get?

I know he probably meant well in what he happened to advise me that day. I doubt that he meant any harm. It was just in his nature as an American white man. I was one of his top students, one of the school’s top students—but all he could see for me was the kind of future “in your place” that almost all white people see for black people.

He told me, “Malcolm, you ought to be thinking about a career. Have you been giving it thought?”

The truth is, I hadn’t. I never have figured out why I told him, “Well, yes, sir, I’ve been thinking I’d like to be a lawyer.” Lansing had no Negro lawyers—or doctors either—in those days to hold up an image I might have aspired to. All I really knew for certain was that a lawyer didn’t wash dishes, as I was doing.

Mr. Ostrowski looked surprised, I remember, and leaned back in his chair and clasped his hands behind his head. He kind of half-smiled and said, “Malcolm, one of life’s first needs is for us to be realistic. Don’t misunderstand me, now. We all here like you, you know that. But you’ve got to be realistic about being a nigger. A

lawyer—that's no real goal for a nigger. You need to think about something you *can* be. You're good with your hands—making things. Everybody admires your carpentry shop work. Why don't you plan on carpentry? People like you as a person—you'd get all kinds of work.” (37-38)

It's clear in the way X describes this scene that he reads Mr. Ostrowski as a sympathetic, yet still white-invested, teacher. Mr. Ostrowski doesn't mean harm; he is only trying to alleviate future disappointment. However, the repeated use of “nigger” illustrates the way in which his aims are more in line with preserving the white patriarchal paradigm than in helping a young black male student. Therefore, such a sympathetic description of his character can also be taken tongue in cheek. As discussed earlier, it doesn't matter what Ostrowski's intentions are; he is the one, not the overtly racist Mr. Williams, who cements Malcolm's marginalization. From that point on, Malcolm refuses to play the honorary white because he knows he can never be white, or equal to whites.

### **Not all Legibilities are Equal**

Within a white patriarchal paradigm, all players have a role. The authoritative (often) white (often) male reinforces the structure of the paradigm. Much like Mr. Williams, who tells “nigger” jokes or the Judge, who explains, ““In their place, your people can be honest and respectful; and God knows, I'll do what I can to help them. But when they want to reverse nature, and rule white men, and marry white women, and sit in my parlor, then, by God! we'll hold them under if we have to lynch every Nigger in the land”” (DuBois 373). The sympathetic (often) white (often) female sympathizes with the marginalized but refuses to side with them because it would mean giving up the power she gains within the paradigm. Finally, the black male student must live with being

stereotyped as physically adept (as an athlete or, in Malcolm's case, a carpenter), intellectually inferior, and morally lacking (lazy, violent, shiftless).

Although each character is trapped within the role and is defined by it, the significance comes with who is most visible within the paradigm. Power hides evil as characters move up the hierarchy. It becomes easier for those who benefit from white patriarchal power to assuage themselves of guilt by blaming the victim. Although all are game pieces, the marginalized pawns are easier to exterminate, especially when they refuse to play their assigned role. This concept is illustrated through DuBois's story "Of the Coming of John." When John heads home to see the Judge's son John trying to rape his sister, he finally steps up to his sister and his community's defense; in an attempt to express his rage that he and his sister are both pawns for the white community, black John kills white John. However, in claiming his manhood through both intellectual and physical action, black John must be eliminated and is lynched by the white community (375-77). John falls into the "black hole" that Fanon describes. He no longer fits in with the black community and cannot be allowed to continue existing alongside the white community. His intelligence and his sense of manhood prevent the status quo of white as master and black as servant/slave. He, along with Hughes' Bert and young Malcolm, believes that blacks can exist as equals to white, that imposed plantation narratives can be overcome; however, as evidenced through literature, because such black men lay claim to their own wholeness, society forces them to either submit to their limited, fragmented role or die.

In terms of education, this plays out in the role of good student and bad student. Ferguson defines the shifting role of the black male student as the spectrum between good boy and bad boy. The good students are those who “know what is expected of them. They have a language for their feelings. Most important of all, they have self-control and can sit and listen and learn from the teacher...these children are well behaved because they have parents who care about their education and oversee their homework. They have total support from home. Not only do these adults want their children to succeed, but they are role models for this success” (45). Such narratives of good students are encased in racial and class identities—these students know the expectations of the white patriarchal paradigm and can express such expectations in word and passive action; these students also have families who model middle- or upper-middle-class success. In contrast, the bad children, most often black and male, “when they take tests they score way below their grade level. They eat candy, refuse to work, fight, gamble, chase, hit, instigate, cut class, cut school, cut hair. They are defiant, disruptive, disrespectful, profane” and often need extra attention because “they lack attention at home and are always demanding it in the classroom. Their parents do not care about their education” (46-47). Although such stereotypes affect black female students from poor communities, Ferguson points out that the actions of boys are watched much more closely. According to Ferguson, girls tend to follow the rules policing bodily control more easily than boys. For instance, when faced with disciplinary correction from teacher or administrator, the black boy is more likely to display anger through body language: “For boys, the display involved hands crossed at the chest, legs spread wide, head down, and gestures such as a desk pushed away” (68).



Often, teachers would interpret such actions and displays as threatening and would go as far as to use “these displays as a measure of the students’ academic potential” (68). Such defiant and disrespectful students were labeled Troublemaker and moved to the lower rungs of academia.

As will be explored later, this dichotomy between the “good” black boy and the “Troublemaker” in terms of language is shifting. As the Twentieth Century was a time of reinforcing white patriarchal paradigms, the Twenty-First Century culture—with its black President and mainstream black influences in music, fashion, and speech—faces a definitional shift in the way both “black” and “white” are seen. As we move into an era when whites will become the cultural minority in America, it seems unlikely that the American culture will remain so invested in whiteness; the question becomes, then, how can the educational system move beyond this investment in whiteness to prepare all students for this inevitable future?

In other words, how are we as teachers supposed to break this cycle and the bonds placed on both us and our students by an educational system built on white patriarchal hierarchies and rules? Our first responsibility as teachers is to recognize the wholeness of our students. In doing so, we need to recognize the ways in which language and classroom structure alienate and confine black male students in particular. According to Ferguson, “for African American children the conditions of schooling are not simply tedious; they are also replete with symbolical forms of violence. Troublemakers are conscious of the fact that school adults have labeled them as problems, social and educational misfits; that what they bring from home and neighborhood—family structure

and history, forms of verbal and nonverbal expression, neighborhood lore and experiences—has little or even deficit value” (169). As teachers, we need to find ways to unveil the ways in which the white patriarchal construction of education has blinded us and alienated our students. To do that, we need to find ways to use language and experience, both theirs and ours, to create a holistic learning experience that bridges the gap between their community and the school community. We must learn to value students, not just as “good” students who fit the academic mold that has defined education in a white patriarchal society, but whole human beings with pain and resistance that must be overcome before learning can happen.

In the following chapters, I will explore the ways of accomplishing such goals. In Chapters Two and Three, I will explore the ways language shapes learning and how language education also shapes the ways in which students learn to use language in the outside world. Chapter Two will explain the connection between language and thought and illustrate the mis-communications that occur when the students’ home language and educational language contradict. Chapter Three explores the marketability of language within the white patriarchal paradigm and the ways such marketability is shifting in the Twenty-First Century. Chapter Four delves into the pragmatic side of language in the classroom by analyzing the sense of community and language use at a particular school system and its inner-city school in an Appalachian community. Finally, Chapter Five explores ways that teachers can move beyond white investment toward more holistic and culturally relevant educational models.

## CHAPTER II

### TALKIN BACK AND TALKIN BLACK: THE IMPLICATIONS OF DIFFERING RHETORICAL AND LINGUISTIC STYLES BETWEEN WHITE-INVESTED TEACHERS AND BLACK MALE STUDENTS

#### **Introduction**

Language links us socially, politically, academically, and culturally. However, oftentimes teachers and students fail to realize that language nuances also create hegemonic imbalances between teachers and students. Of course, categories—Standard (White) English and Black Vernacular English—in and of themselves illustrate the privilege White English has over the marginalized Black Vernacular.<sup>9</sup> However, miscommunications go deeper than just dialect. Without really comprehending the linguistic and rhetorical moves that s/he makes, a teacher can alienate students without conscious realization. On the other hand, students can challenge teacher authority through their own rhetorical and linguistic moves. In order to understand how literacy instruction can recreate the stereotypes and discrimination present within the larger society, there

---

<sup>9</sup>Many theorists use different terms for “Black” English and “White” English. In *Let’s Flip the Script*, Keith Gilyard uses Standard English to describe the white dominant culture’s language, BEV as an outdated term for Black English Vernacular, and AC as the African Creole language, which represents “an amalgam of English and structure from various African languages” (65). In *Other People’s Children*, Lisa Delpit also uses Standard English and Black English to differentiate between white and black dialects. In *Word from the Mother*, Geneva Smitherman uses both BL (Black Language) and (AAL) African American Language to denote black speech and European American English or Language of Wider Communication (LWC) to denote white speech.

are several questions that need answered: How does language work to create stereotypes and other cultural ideals that keep the white patriarchal paradigm alive and well? Why and how do we value certain languages above others in the learning environment, and what effect does that have on both students and teachers? How can we as teachers think differently about language and knowledge construction in ways that correspond to each other and reinvigorate the classroom?

### **The Linguistic Construction of Power: Defining and Trapping Blackness**

As discussed in Chapter One, the definition of blackness, which is often based on stereotypical and discriminatory social constructions, trap black male students into specific roles. However, the way teachers perceive the language discrepancies and privilege certain languages reinforce these social constructions as well. In Archeology of Knowledge, Foucault argues that tradition allows the status quo to stay constant: “tradition enables us to isolate the new against a background of permanence, and to transfer its merit to originality, to genius, to the decisions proper to individuals” (21). This tradition creates a definition of the “spirit” of a thing, “which enables us to establish between the simultaneous or successive phenomena of a given period a community of meanings, symbolic links, an interplay of resemblance and reflexion, or which allows the sovereignty of collective consciousness to emerge as the principle of unity and explanation” (22). An important point Foucault establishes: The key to the success of a collective consciousness is its invisibility; collective consciousness is not something one chooses to accept; it is built into the fabric of the dominant culture to resemble an absolute Truth.

Foucault explains how an object's meaning becomes statically trapped within the collective consciousness:

The conditions necessary for the appearance of an object of discourse, the historical conditions required if one is to “say anything” about it, and if several people are to say different things about it, the conditions necessary if it is to exist in relation to other objects, if it is to establish with them relations of resemblance, proximity, distance, difference, transformation—as we can see, these conditions are many and imposing. Which means one cannot speak of anything at any time; it is not easy to say something new; it is not enough for us to open our eyes, to pay attention, or to be aware, for new objects suddenly to light up and emerge out of the ground. But this difficulty is not only a negative one; it must be attached to some obstacle whose power appears to be, exclusively, to blind, to hinder, to prevent discovery, to conceal the purity of the evidence or the dumb obstinacy of the things themselves; the object does not await in limbo the order that will free it and enable it to become embodied in a visible and prolix objectivity; it does not pre-exist itself, held back by some obstacle at the first edges of life. It exists under the positive conditions of a complex group of relations. (44-45)

Foucault would argue, then, that blackness is an object within collective consciousness, defined by those who have the power to define it (the white patriarchal paradigm). Once this definition is set, anything meant to challenge the collective understanding of the object stands up against this static and rock-solid collective definition. What does this mean in terms of blackness and whiteness? I believe Foucault would argue that blackness serves two purposes within the collective consciousness: first, it is the antithesis to whiteness—white is pure, black is evil; white is clean, black is dirty; white is civilized, black is savage. Second, because of its hyper-visibility, it foils whiteness and turns it invisible. Therefore, whiteness as a label cannot exist without objectified blackness, and blackness as an object supports the definition of whiteness.

To support this idea, Michelle Alexander argues that racism in America has never changed; only the language and rhetoric surrounding it has. Therefore, while nuances change, whites remain dominant. To illustrate her point, Alexander explains that although racism as a social construct seems like a historical constant, only in the past few centuries has the idea of race even existed; it “emerged as a means of reconciling chattel slavery—as well as the extermination of American Indians—with the ideals of freedom preached by whites in the new colony” (23). In other words, to support the Absolute Truth that all can achieve success in America, minorities were physically and then rhetorically enslaved and objectified:

Faith in the idea that people of the African race were bestial, that whites were inherently superior, and that slavery was, in fact, for blacks’ own good, served to alleviate white conscience and reconcile the tension between slavery and democratic ideals espoused by whites in the so-called New World. There was no contradiction in the bold claim made by Thomas Jefferson in the Declaration of Independence that “all men are created equal” if Africans were not really people. Racism operated as a deeply held belief system on “truths” beyond question or doubt. (Alexander 26)

After slavery was abolished, slaves became “blacks,” and Jim Crow laws were created to protect whites (especially women) from the black males who were “menacing and dangerous. In fact, the current stereotypes of black men as aggressive, unruly predators can be traced to this period, when whites feared that an angry mass of black men might rise up and attack them or rape their women” (Alexander 28). Such rhetoric created a “blame-the-victim” attitude toward racist relations; for example, West Virginia Senator Robert Byrd once commented during the Civil Rights Movement, ““If [blacks] conduct themselves in an orderly way, they will not have to worry about police brutality””

(Alexander 42). In the 1980s, Reagan's war on drugs set the stage for another rhetorical attack on black males; according to Alexander, "The War on Drugs, cloaked in race-neutral language, offered whites opposed to racial reform a unique opportunity to express their hostility toward blacks and black progress, without being exposed to the charge of racism" (54). The definition of black males was revised from "menacing and dangerous" to "thug and drug dealer." The threat was the same, but the inherent racism became white-washed because the collective consciousness focused on the black males' supposed activities, not skin color.

In the classroom, the collective consciousness defines the roles of teacher and black male students: before each steps foot into a classroom, the language and rhetoric they have been exposed to from birth creates a very clear image of their relationship in terms of social construction as well as social stereotype. One of the most powerful catalysts for constructing this racist knowledge comes through everyday media. In "Theory and ideology at work," Tony Trew argues that our linguistic acceptance of what we believe to be true is linked with our social and cultural norms:

Which systems are imaginary representations of reality and which not, which are practical and which purely knowledge-producing, cannot be decided by reference to properties of the *language* in which the representations are expressed. In a particular case of opposing representations, there may well be a systematic linguistic difference—but there isn't a generally applicable one. Decisions about which systems of representation are correct and which are not can be taken only in light of the relevant scientific and social practices to which the systems belong. (95)

To give an example of how language within a system "creates" comprehension, we can return to Alexander's discussion of the Declaration of Independence: Early Americans

could believe all men were created equal and that slavery was justified in their democratic society because black men were not “men”; they were chattel in terms of property rights and three-fifths a person constitutionally in terms of the population count. However, as slaves became freed blacks, again they were defined not as men but as illiterate and incapable of representing themselves. Finally, according to Alexander, since all men, except for those convicted of a crime, are equal according to the law, black males, who find themselves under the thumb of the prison system in some way or another at a rate of two to one over white males, are once again shut out of the democratic society; therefore, labeling black males as criminals reinforces the egalitarian rhetoric created by the founding fathers.

To illustrate the way media shapes language, Trew gives two headlines describing the same event: “RIOTING BLACKS SHOT DEAD BY POLICE, AS ANC LEADERS MEET” and “POLICE SHOOT 11 DEAD IN SALISBURY RIOT.” He explains three linguistically significant choices that support racist hegemony: first, the passive form of the verb in the first title obscures the police as agents, putting the blame on the “rioting blacks” rather than on those who did the shooting; both titles use the term “riot” to describe the events of the day, which legitimizes police involvement and also stereotypically paints the “blacks” as out of control and causing civil unrest; finally, in the first title, the use of the word “blacks” groups those “rioting” into a particular group. The police are not marked by ethnicity, only the blacks who are causing the trouble. Trew goes on to evaluate the ways language abstraction creates a skewed view of events:



The article itself does refer to the original event, in “Rioting and sad loss of life”. But even in doing this it puts the event in a subordinate position to “rioting”, and by rewording “kill” to “lose life”, nominal expression is made which describes a situation whose occurrence needs to be explained. It is now given an explanation in terms of more general causes than those figuring at the start. [sic] (102)

Although Trew focuses on two particular articles describing one particular event, he argues that such examples illustrate media’s overall goal to support the ideals of the collective consciousness:

This requires that the regimes apply violence and intimidation, and suppression of the nature of the exploitation this makes possible. It requires that the regimes and their agents be put constantly in the role of promoters of progress, law and order, concerned to eliminate social evil and conflict, but never responsible for it, and only killing unarmed people when forced to do so by those people themselves. All this is so far from the truth that only a powerful grip on the press and information and the diligence of the media in resolving the flood of anomalies which they report are adequate to preserve the pretense that the press is truthful. (106)

Through these examples, Trew illustrates that discourse creates linguistic and rhetorical processes that trap the collective consciousness into a stagnant version of the truth supporting the systems in power. This often means objectifying and dehumanizing those who could possibly challenge the status quo.

One more current example of the ways in which media shapes discourse is the case of Trayvon Martin, a black teen who was shot by half-white, half-Hispanic George Zimmerman in a gated community in Sanford, Florida, in February 2012. According to media theorist Safiya Noble, the Zimmerman-Martin case helps illustrate the ways black masculinity is criminalized by the media, whose goal in their coverage of such events is to create a spectacle that “delivers to us a version of race and race relations, in many

ways divorced from our own lived realities” (13). She cites many cases, including Renisha McBride and Jonathan Ferrell, of young blacks MWB (Murdered While Black); however, such cases are often used by the media to put black youth on trial.<sup>10</sup> In cases such as these, Noble says, “these deaths symbolize the myriad ways in which the spectacle swallows whole the story and spits back little to interrogate or dismantle systems of state-sanctioned or state-justified forms of violence on black life” (14).

According to Noble, the ways in which stories are told are shaped by the audiences that media outlets anticipate. For instance, while MSNBC and Fox News were both covering similar facts, MSNBC, which sought to attract large black audiences “focused on a more liberal message” that sympathized with Martin (16); however, Fox News, with a large conservative audience, supported George Zimmerman’s right to shoot Martin. The case boils down to the ways in which each of the men is defined by the dominant narrative:

In the dominant narrative that ultimately bolstered the acquittal of George Zimmerman, Trayvon is a “thug” out of place in a gated community to which he doesn’t belong. So powerful was the narrative of Trayvon as a thug that the Huffington Post began reporting on Fox News and their intensity in mischaracterizing the teen as such. He is wearing a hoodie—the uniform of threatening black youth.... To this, conservative commentator Geraldo Rivera suggested on Fox & Friends that Trayvon invoked his own death: “you dress like a thug, people are going to treat you like a thug.” [Martin] is looking suspicious. He is noncompliant in answering questions when approached by Zimmerman. Social media circulated pictures of Trayvon in an effort to make him match the narrative of black youth as out of control and to be feared. (16)

---

<sup>10</sup> Both McBride, who was killed in a white neighborhood in Dearborn, Michigan, and Ferrell were killed while seeking help. McBride was killed by a resident who later used Michigan’s version of the “Stand Your Ground” law as a defense; Ferrell was killed by a police officer (Noble 13).

Although the lived reality was different—Martin’s stepmother lived in the gated community; he was an A/B student; he was well-loved by friends and family and a model youth—the media painted a different picture: Martin was a black boy in a white neighborhood who evoked fear. Noble explains, “The spectacle, then, is about the commodification of not just the material world; it is engaged in commodifying ideas and experiences. This, I would argue, is at the core of the case of Trayvon and George. In this legal and civil case, we see the politics of power over ideas and experiences of race and racism. Ideas about who has legitimate rights serve to bolster the creation of products and industries that are buttressed by the racial binary and history of race relations in America” (17-18). The effects of such a case are also clearly seen in the aftermath of Zimmerman’s acquittal. Even after the case, surveys showed how divisive the perspectives were between blacks and whites. In the summer of 2013, the Pew Research Poll found 86 percent of black respondents were unhappy with the verdict, compared with 30 percent of whites (Noble 19). In a similar Washington Post-ABC poll, “87 percent of African Americans believed the shooting was not justified, versus 33 percent of white Americans” (19). More interesting, though, is how the two groups viewed the case in terms of race relations: “The two groups were also divided over whether the issue of race was too much of a focus in the discourse around the case. The Pew poll found 78 percent of blacks said it raised ‘important issues about race that need to be discussed,’ while 60 percent of whites thought race ‘received too much attention’” (19). The media was essential in creating a blame-the-victim mentality which allowed whites to view the case from a post-racial lens: the black boy was in a gated community dressed like a “thug.” He

should have stopped when Zimmerman asked him to, and he should have spoken to Zimmerman when spoken to. In the media (and in the collective consciousness) Martin got what he deserved.<sup>11</sup>

Foucault calls this use of language the “economy of the discursive constellation” (66). As dominant discourse makes sense of dueling realities, it must find a way to tie them to the “truths” such discourse has created. Foucault goes on to say, “what we are dealing with is a modification in the principle of exclusion and the principle of the possibility of choices; a modification that is due to an insertion in a new discursive constellation” (67). How these new “constellations” are connected to the dominant discourse is decided by a particular authority that depends on the discourse’s “*rules and processes of appropriation*” as well as the discourse’s confinement “in the sense of the right to speak, ability to understand, licit and immediate access to the corpus of already formulated statements, and the capacity to invest this discourse in decisions, institutions, or practices” (68). In other words, new statements or ideals can be added to a discourse as long as it doesn’t rock the proverbial boat of established “truths.” For instance, in history

---

<sup>11</sup>Another case involving a MWB teen, which made national headlines, was eighteen-year-old Michael Brown in Ferguson, Missouri. Again, as Brown and his friend were walking down the street, a white police officer driving by stopped them to tell them to get off the street. Conflicting (racialized) stories exist with the black friend arguing the police officer was the aggressor, first with obscenities and later with bullets. Another account argues that Michael leaned into the car and struck the police officer first. However, the spark that ignited the flame (and one of the few undisputed issues) is that the police officer reversed his car and approached the boys after they responded (or “talked back”) to his command to get off the streets. (CNN Staff)

textbooks the overarching theme of “land of the free and home of the brave” must still be maintained through stories of slavery and battles over land rights with Native Americans; therefore, slaves and Native Americans must be cast as not-human in the dominant narrative to maintain that theme. According to Noble,

The power of the neoliberal historical moment is the constant decontextualization and ahistorical approach to making sense of our realities. It divorces the historical production of ideologies of racism from the moment, and it invents new terms like “post-racial” to foment the erasure of the past. It obscures our understanding of history and capitalism so that we cannot make sense of the present as part of an ongoing dialectical process in everyday life. In the case of Trayvon and George, it focuses us on the unique and individual aspects of their personalities, their life stories, and their guilt or innocence in the actions that led to Trayvon’s death. It situates the conflict in the moment between two people. It gives rise to statements like, “We weren’t there, so we can never know what really happened.” It robs us of opportunities to make sense of the spectacle and its subversions presented as uncontested fact or dominant narrative. (23)

However, both Foucault and Trew acknowledge hiccups, or cracks in the collective conscious’ discourse, and these moments create opportunities for silenced voices to be heard. Trew refers to these possible disruptions in discourse or ideology as “awkward facts,” which he argues are anomalies that can challenge current political or social ideologies. He goes on to say,

Above all social ideologies are essential to the legitimation of a social order and their acceptance is essential to the maintenance of that order. Glaring anomalies are a challenge, therefore, not simply to the ideology but to the legitimacy of the order. The option of abandoning the ideology is, therefore, unthinkable, and the challenge has to be resolved in the terms of the ideology itself, whether by denial and suppression or by reinterpretation. (97)

To keep these disruptions from happening, it is important, then, that those who are confined within their objectivity stay trapped, which means protestors must stay rioters and Native Americans must stay savages and black boys must remain thugs, which is how a killed black youth is put on trial by the media and the man who shot him goes free.

According to Paulo Freire, when such a collective consciousness becomes cemented as reality, both the oppressor and the marginalized pay the price. In Pedagogy of the Oppressed, Freire argues that the person in the role of oppressor is blind to the oppression around him/her. For instance, if the oppression is resolved, according to Freire, the former oppressors feel cheated:

they genuinely consider themselves to be oppressed. Conditioned by the experience of oppressing others, any situation other than their former seems to them like oppression. Formerly, they could eat, dress, wear shoes, be educated, travel, and hear Beethoven; while millions did not eat, had no clothes or shoes, neither studied nor traveled, much less listened to Beethoven. Any restriction on this way of life, in the name of the rights of the community, appears to the former oppressors as a profound violation of their individual rights—although they had no respect for the millions who suffered and died of hunger, pain, sorrow, and despair. (57)

Freire's use of "individual rights" is significant in explaining the rhetorical strategy of "blaming the victim." If I have enough to eat and have an education, and if all individuals are equal in the United States, others should have the same thing; if not, it is their fault, not mine, for not looking out for their own individual rights. It is not my responsibility to give them some of what I have (in the form of donations, food, or taxes) because they did not take care of themselves. This sets up the discursive dichotomy, according Freire: "For the oppressors, 'human beings' refers only to themselves; other people are 'things.' For the oppressors, there exists only one right: their right to live in peace, over against the

right, not always even recognized, but simply conceded, of the oppressed to survival” (57-58). Therefore, in our society, there are upstanding citizens, and there are gangbangers and thugs; there are middle-class families, and there are crack babies and welfare moms. The former have the right to clean homes, happy lives, and material wealth; while the latter have revoked such “rights” due to lifestyle choices. More importantly, within the collective imagination, the former is almost always pictured as white, while the latter is almost always depicted as black. As these definitions of blackness and whiteness play out in the world, they also play out in the classroom.

### **Thought, Language, and Learning**

Before looking specifically at classroom practices, the relationship between thought, language, and learning needs to be explored. Vygotsky was one of the first theorists to make a connection between thought and language. He argued that our language and thought were interconnected. As we grow, our thought and language work together to form our conception of our world. In essence, Vygotsky argues that as we experience the world and reflect on it, we learn to represent our experiences (and thus the world around us) through the language we use: “There is every reason to suppose that the qualitative distinction between sensation and thought is the presence in the latter of a *generalized* reflection of reality, which is also the essence of word meaning; and consequently that meaning is an act of thought in the full sense of the term. But at the same time, meaning is an inalienable part of word as such, and thus it belongs in the realm of language as much as in the realm of thought” (6). So, through this process of experience, reflection, and thought, our language is formed. However, for students who speak one language at

home and another at school, this split comprehension creates disruption in both language acquisition and overall learning. Vygotsky explains that students “often have difficulty in learning a new word not because of its sound, but because of the concept to which the word refers” (8). Once the student is mentally and emotionally mature enough to grasp the concept, s/he can finally learn the language. Because of this reason, Vygotsky argues, “we all have reason to consider a word meaning not only as a union of thought and speech, but also as a union of generalization and communication, thought and communication” (9). It is in this feedback loop between thought (generalization), speech (the expression of the generalization), and communication (the connection between the generalized speech and the concrete world) where learning occurs.

A large part of the learning process is being able to reflect on (think about) what has been learned and summarize (speak) the experience to be able to connect it to past and future experiences. In Experience and Education, John Dewey explains the process this way:

[T]he method of intelligence manifested in the experimental method demands keeping track of ideas, activities, and observed consequences. Keeping track is a matter of reflective review and summarizing, in which there is both discrimination and record of the significant features of a developing experience. To reflect is to look back over what has been done so as to extract the net meanings which are the capital stock for intelligent dealing with further experiences. It is the heart of intellectual organization and of the disciplined mind.

Dewey also expresses frustration at the fact that most formal education is not organized to fit the experimental method. In his criticism of traditional education, he argues that such organization of formal education “limited rather than promoted the intellectual and



moral development of the young” by not allowing them to have experiences and to think through and verbalize the experiences. Instead, as Freire points out, they are passive objects meant to hold information.

One argument I would also make is that education is built mainly on the abstract idea rather than the concrete experience. In The Politics of Education, Freire argues that students need to learn to be “not only *in* the world but *with* the world, together with other men.” He goes on to say, “Only men, as ‘open beings,’ are able to achieve the complex operation of simultaneously transforming the world by their action and grasping and expressing the world’s reality in their creative language.” Living such a life involves being “capable of transforming, of producing, of deciding, of creating, and of communicating himself.” Freire echoes Dewey’s experimental method. Such a life comes from an interplay of engagement with the world and objective distance in order to evaluate or reflect on such interactions. However, according to Freire, students cannot truly learn if they are taught through mechanistic objectivism because “consciousness [becomes] merely a ‘copy’ of objective reality. For solipsism, the world is reduced to a capricious creation of consciousness. In the first case, consciousness would be unable to transcend its conditioning by reality; in the second, insofar as it ‘creates’ reality, it is *a priori* to reality. In either case man is not engaged in transforming reality” (Politics of Education 69). Without the chance to engage and inform the ideas they are being taught and reflect on how such ideas connect to their own view of reality, students will not be able to transform. This also means that if the concepts and/or language of education is alienating to students, learning cannot occur.

## **Taming Our Students' Tongues: The Importance of Standard English in the Classroom**

Because it is constructed within the collective consciousness, the goal and structure of education currently supports the needs of the white patriarchal paradigm, and its language (White Standard English) is the only “right” language. As teachers invested in whiteness take on the authoritative role to enforce and cajole students to speak Standard English, they ignore the students’ own agency and identity created in his or her cultural voice as well as the ways in which the students’ languages have created knowledge of the world around them. But why, in a country with no set national language and a diverse range of dialects and languages spoken ubiquitously, is one Standard English important?

There are several reasons why the collective consciousness needs one set language. First, because it is considered an ideal and is taught as the ever-constant language that all students must master to be considered literate, it sustains the static nature of the dominant narrative. However, the realities of language are that no language can ever be constant—they change as the cultures they represent change. Asa Hilliard lists five misconceptions about the English language, many of which teachers reinforce: English is “immaculately conceived” and “pure”; “superior to other languages”; “fixed or permanent”; exactly the same everywhere it is spoken; and not just a language, but the only correct language (92). Many English teachers who romanticize the English language would probably agree, but the realities of English don’t meet these idealistic notions. English began when the Germanic Celts, the Romans, and the Brits were fighting over the British Islands. Hilliard describes it as “Germanic in grammar and largely Romance in vocabulary” (93). When

the French took over parts of the British Isles during the 100 Years War, their language was intermixed with the butchered German, and Old English transformed into Middle English. After further interactions with other languages, we have the Modern English of today. This history illustrates both Vygotsky's idea that language is a product of the changing world around it as well as the fact that the idealism of any language does not fit its history.

Teachers are driven to follow the idealistic notions of Standard English and sell the idea to students because their pay often depends on teacher evaluation systems that rely on student Standardized testing scores. In other words, underlying the urgency to have all students speaking "right" and writing "right" is the test at the end of the year that ultimately judges if teachers are teaching "right." In Smitherman's narrative of her experience as a student, she explains how her white speech teacher, in order to help her and other linguistically disenfranchised students, taught them correct pronunciations geared toward the test. This "teaching to the test" model of education is one that many Appalachian English and Ebonics-speaking students learn.<sup>12</sup> Negating students' own experiential language and its significance in American culture and history, teachers feel obligated to stress a "right" way of speaking and a "wrong" way. Gilyard tells this story:

I recently observed a basic writing class being taught by an African American instructor in which the students were doing workbook exercises, taking turns supplying answers aloud. One student, a young African American, had arrived late

---

<sup>12</sup> Many theorists argue against teaching to the test because, as Houston Baker argues, such tactics were the "mainstay" of pre-*Brown* schools for blacks, which were meant to limit student creativity and critical thinking. According to Ira Shor, when education is built around tests with "right" answers, "The lesser role for students' voices decreased their participation in the classes. Without a moment for them to make their own meaning about the problem posed, mutual dialogue turned into teacherly monologue and student silence" (101).

and had barely turned to the proper page by the time his turn came. Trying to orient himself, he asked the instructor, “What are we doing this for?” He didn’t know how wise his question was. There was an uneasy and telling silence until a fellow student explained that the class was preparing for the upcoming writing examination and that the exercises were for that purpose. The questioner, seemingly satisfied with the explanation replied, “Oh, okay,” and joined in. (95)

Gilyard’s complaint, and a valid one, is that students were supposedly learning writing, which would include a process of exploring voice and playing with organization and style and running rampant through description and action verbs. Instead, students were learning from “skills-based” workbooks to be able to pass a test, and that test requires one discourse that must be learned and one voice to speak it in. It seems that simultaneously while our culture defines itself through strict ideals of the dominant collective conscious created through the lens of white patriarchy, our classrooms define language through a similar constricting lens. But why the need to control and tame the wild tongues<sup>13</sup> that enter the classroom?

Because language is ever-evolving and represents the changes in culture, we can see how students have trouble grasping the idealistic concept of Standard English: How can it be that language is constant and unchanging in one environment (school), but constantly shifting and changing in others? Despite their own resistance, students learn quickly that this language is and will be the academic standard for which they are judged. For instance, in her essay “How to Tame a Wild Tongue,” Gloria Anzaldua had a hard time

---

<sup>13</sup> In Gloria Anzaldua’s essay, “How to Tame a Wild Tongue,” she describes her wild tongue: “‘We’re going to have to do something about your tongue,’ I hear the anger rising in his voice. My tongue keeps pushing out the wads of cotton, pushing back the drills, the long thin needles. ‘I’ve never seen anything as strong or as stubborn,’ he says. And I think, how do you tame a while tongue, train it to be quiet, how do you bridle and saddle it? How do you make it lie down?” (75).

conforming: “I remember being caught speaking Spanish at recess—that was good for three licks on the knuckles with a sharp ruler. I remember being sent to the corner of the classroom for ‘talking back’ to the Anglo teacher when all I was trying to do was tell her how to pronounce my name. ‘If you want to be American, speak “American.” If you don’t like it, go back to Mexico where you belong”” (75). While her teacher saw an illiterate little Mexican, Anzaldua actually performed feats of acrobatic linguistics as she maneuvered between the eight languages she spoke: Standard English, Working class English, Standard Spanish, Standard Mexican Spanish, North Mexican Spanish dialect, Chicano Spanish found in the Southwest American states, Tex-Mex, and *Pachuco* (the language of zoot suit-wearing Hispanic gangs). She goes on to say, “My ‘home’ tongues are the languages I speak with my sister and brothers, with my friends. They are the last five listed, with 6 and 7 being closest to my heart” (78); language in school was closely related to her brain, or her intellect, with no feeling attached; like her, students who recognize the ever-changing nature of language, especially those who grow up in homes speaking a multitude of languages, are stunted in their language development when they enter school and are more resistant to language education. More importantly, they must learn to dissect themselves and only use certain parts (the brain) at school and others (the heart) at home.

In terms of Ebonics, the one thing white educators tend to ignore is the cultural and historical significance it has as a language. Smitherman outlines this history:

Using elements of the white man’s speech in combination with their own linguistic patterns and practices, enslaved Africans developed an oppositional way of speaking, a kind of counterlanguage, that allowed for the communication of

simultaneous double meanings. When an enslaved African said, “Eve’body talkin bout Heaben ain goin dere,” it was a double-voiced form of speech that *signified* on slaveholders who professed Christianity but practiced slavery. This Africanized form of speaking became a code for Africans in America to talk about Black business, publicly or privately, and in the enslavement period, even to talk about ‘old Massa’ himself right in front of his face! Given these historical processes and the various purposes that US Ebonics serves, it is only logical that 90 percent of the African American community uses one or more aspects of the language some of the time. (Talkin That Talk 18-19)

According to Smitherman’s logic, Black English is a threat because it is disruptive to the discursive narrative and construction of Standard English. It can redefine words and change the way the signs signify. Standard English doesn’t simplify speech by keeping it “standard” or “static”; it reinforces the signs and signification created by white patriarchy. Smitherman points out, “Some folk, dismissive of Ebonics, think that all you have to do to speak Ebonics is use ‘incorrect grammar,’ by which they generally are referring to violating a rule of LWC” (21). Smitherman is not referring to “folk” in terms of race; therefore, I will improvise the following definition: by folk, Smitherman means any instructor of any color that values LWC (or Standard English) as the “right” way of student expression. In adopting such rules, the instructor invested in whiteness is adopting a racial dichotomy in language—all language not defined by the racial hierarchy as being right is defined as wrong.

By ignoring the rhetorical functions of Ebonics, however, such instructors invested in privileging “white” English over other dialects, especially Ebonics, refuse to acknowledge the sophistication of the rhetorical nuances of Ebonics. Take signification, for instance. Smitherman defines it as

a ritualized kind of put-down, an insult, a way of talking about, needling, or *signifyin on* someone else. Sometimes it's done just for fun, in conversations with friends and close associates. Other times, the put-down is used for a more serious purpose. In this communicative practice, the speaker deploys exaggeration, irony, and indirection as a way of saying something on two different levels at once. (Talkin that Talk 26)

She uses the terms “nigger” and “nigga” as an example. She says that a lack of the “r” sound demonstrates “West African language influence” and is used when one is “referring to other African people, whether they are biologically related or not” (22). Without the “r” sound at the end, the word is being reappropriated in the West African pronunciation. Therefore, its use between two African American males signifies both their connection within a group (as African Americans who share similar roots) but also as members of an oppressed group as the word is often used against them by whites. The word, then, becomes a political statement: I’m socially with you and I stand politically with you. However, white educators who feel uncomfortable hearing the word, possibly because of their own historical location as the oppressor, ban the word in his or her presence. Teachers invested in Standard English can only see one version of the word—“nigger.” To them, it is read as a means of a black student keeping him or herself in his/her place or making apparent or challenging a sense of racism the student may feel. Because they are confined within the discourse of Standard English, teachers invested in whiteness cannot, or do not want to, see the implications of the word as politically powerful.

Finally, Smitherman points out the historical narratives used to define the “awkward fact” of Ebonics. According to her, under the “Anglian tradition of scholarship,” Ebonics is the bastard child of Standard English:

[W]hat was called “Negro” or “Black” English is really “*White* English,” traceable to British dialects spoken in remote areas. (This position has resurfaced in the 1990s...). This school of thought argued that Africans in enslavement picked up their English from white immigrants from places like East Anglia, that is, from whites speaking various dialects of the British Isles, who had settled in the South during the Colonial era in US history. Thus, according to this line of reasoning, Black speech is simply outdated or archaic white speech, and these old-fashioned forms of English have persisted in the African American community because of racial, and consequently, linguistic isolation. Over time, Blacks have not participated in the language changes taking place in the white mainstream because they have not been part of the mainstream. (30)

This argument is interesting, not because of its accuracy (in fact, Smitherman proves its fallibility by comparing Black English to West African linguistic patterns), but because of the way it positions the Black speaker in the evolution of English. First, English has been kept pure and has not been “tainted” by African language or syntax. This also means that the Africans themselves were “a blank slate, filled with European American culture” (Smitherman 30); however, in the process of that language evolving, the Africans have remained behind on the evolutionary scale: “Whether archaic or old-fashioned, or genetic or biological, we are led to the view that the African still has not caught up with the European in the scheme of things, and in post-modern twentieth century-America, the shift has simply been from biology to sociobiology” (Smitherman 30). This logic follows the Darwinian notion of language acquisition by arguing that blacks have not evolved to the linguistic heights of whites. In terms of education, if the white teacher takes this



pedagogical stance toward black students, two things happen. First, such a theory allows white educators to frame language in terms of right and wrong. Second, because Standard English has evolved but Black English has not, it is the job of the teacher to help that student along in the linguistic evolutionary process. Thus, for students at risk of failing the standardized test, teachers rely on grammar drilling and “teaching to the test” to demonstrate that black students move up the linguistic evolutionary ladder.

Such a theory also mirrors Paulo Freire’s banking concept of education. In his model, the student comes to school as an empty vessel to be filled by the teacher. The Anglian-based theory creates an image of the early African native as an empty linguistic vessel; however, over generations the African descendent becomes a linguistic computer that relies on whites for updates because it is linguistically isolated. Within such a model, there is no linguistic agency for the black student. As Vershawn Ashanti Young points out, the problem with equating race and language is as follows:

[B]ecause it’s that equation that seems to transform the effort to teach black students to speak and write differently into the effort to alter who and what they believe they are. In a certain sense it converts the educational process into a form of assimilation and requires everyone—teacher and student both—either to accept or to refuse assimilation. This causes both students and teachers to suffer. (Your Average Nigga)

Such an environment where students are resistant to education makes both teacher and student paralyzed—the teacher cannot do his or her job in teaching a student that doesn’t want to learn, and the student cannot succeed when he or she is resisting the act itself.

## **Language and Power in the Classroom**

Due to this disconnect between thought and language, in the classroom there are many ways that discursive dichotomies play out. According to Freire, the structure of the teacher-student relationship in and of itself creates a power imbalance. In such a classroom, which Freire says suffers from “narration sickness,” students are passive learners and teachers are the active agents creating knowledge. As illustrated by many writers, for instance, in the scene mentioned earlier from Autobiography of Malcolm X where Malcolm's history teacher disparagingly defines black manhood, X points out how authority is created in the classroom through language: "Later, I remember, we came to the textbook section on Negro history. It was exactly one paragraph long. Mr. Williams laughed through it practically in a single breath, reading aloud how the Negroes had been slaves and then freed, and how they were usually lazy and dumb and shiftless" (30). X and Haley illustrate the two main voices that establish the black male identity in the classroom: The teacher and the textbook. While the teacher is amusing the class with imitation slave songs and hyperbolic stories of Negro feet, the textbook itself is creating a clear and constricting definition of a black man as “lazy and dumb and shiftless.” The compatible rhetoric of both teacher and text keep the approved racist discourse in place. It is interesting, though, that X still argues for his love of history when it has trapped him into a very limited definition. Of course, this creates an interesting question: What history does he still love—one created by the collective consciousness, or one he can imagine beyond such construction? It can be argued that as a creative thinker, X was able to see beyond the abstract mechanized objectivism demonstrated by teacher and text. However,

the fact that X dropped out of school illustrates his acknowledgement that traditional education did not speak to his experiences as a black male.

Specifically within the English and/or writing classroom, students must face a dilemma when their learned language and experience is not represented by the academic language. They start to identify that a proper or “Standard” English is the linguistic version of the static collective consciousness or mechanistic objectivism and, like X, resist traditional education altogether. Although such language is a Platonic ideal—hardly no one speaks it perfectly and on a regular basis—teachers stress that it is attainable with focus and hard work, which causes anger and frustration for students who don’t speak Standard English at home, especially since students need to master it to be able to succeed in the dominant culture. In Black Skin, White Masks, Fanon argues, “To speak means being able to use a certain syntax and possessing the morphology of such and such a language, but it means above all assuming a culture and bearing the weight of a civilization.” According to Fanon, the black male student is caught between two cultures: his experiential black culture, in which he is “the missing link in the slow evolution state from ape to man” or a thug who refuses to speak “articulately,”<sup>14</sup> and the abstract white culture which represents the height of civilization but the lack of an authentic experiential language. According to Fanon, there is no straddling both: “A man who possesses a language possesses as an indirect consequence the world expressed and implied by this

---

<sup>14</sup> In Articulate While Black, Alim and Smitherman point out the inherent linguistic racism that is implied in the use of the word “articulate” toward a black speaker. They quote Lynette Clemetson as saying, “When whites use the word in reference to blacks, it often carries a subtext of amazement, even bewilderment.... Such a subtext is inherently offensive because it suggests that the recipient of the “compliment” is notably different from other black people.”

language.” Therefore, the black man cannot adopt the “white” language without rejecting black culture: “The more he rejects his blackness and the bush, the whiter he will become.” This definition of “whiteness” is deceiving. In no way can the black man escape his color and enter the white world, short of being light skinned and able to pass. However, in adopting the “white” language, he loses his place within the black community. He is also creating a split between his experiences and his language, and ultimately stunting his own ability as an active participant in authentic being and (within the classroom) an active subject.

Keith Gilyard agrees with Fanon that language acquisition for black students holds many linguistic and rhetorical contradictions. In Let’s Flip the Script: An African American Discourse on Language, Literature, and Learning, he points out, “Americans of African descent, for example, spring from a tremendous oral tradition but know full well the power of literacy, know it to be strong medicine if for no other reason than the fact that it was in large measure legislated away from them” (23). Gilyard gives voice to the frustrations that black students experience in terms of literacy; just as discourse traps them rhetorically and linguistically into a specific defined space, historically the ability to become literate and learn discursive construction does as well. First, white legislators banned slaves from learning to read. Then, during the Jim Crow era, black students were denigrated to poorer schools with little in terms of support. Currently, education is dictating the voice students are allowed to write, speak, and, essentially, think with. Therefore, students who want to speak out against the injustices of education are trapped within an academic voice: “Any written linguistic argument against academic literacy,

including any academic argument against academic literacy, is ultimately, as a philosopher-colleague of mine would say, self-refuting” (24). The educated black man or woman is trapped within the language they must speak to be taken seriously. Breaking away from that language means potentially losing the ethos needed to be heard in academia while also losing an authentic ethos within the black community. But how can you argue against a language if no one will listen if you speak any other?

Taking this into consideration, one argument is easy to make: Being unable to acclimate to academic (white) discourse silences minority students. In Talkin that Talk, Geneva Smitherman explains her own experience as a “ghetto child”:

Teachers who didn’t look like me and who didn’t talk like me attacked my language and put me back one grade level. Back then, educators and others attributed “Black Dialect” to the South, although nobody ever satisfactorily accounted for the fact that Black Northerners used linguistic patterns virtually identical to those of Black Southerners. Thus effectively silenced, I managed to avoid these linguistic attacks and to be successful in school by just keeping my mouth shut—not hard for a ghetto child in those days. (1)

Like Anzaldua, Smitherman acknowledges that the linguistic definition of “American” does not include her: “the problem was that there existed a bias against this different-sounding American English emanating from the margins. Yet our sounds were as ‘American as apple pie,’ having been created as a result of the historical processes that went into the making of America” (Talkin That Talk). This point is significant in thinking about the way Dewey and Freire discuss traditional education. Within the paradigms of traditional education based on white patriarchal ideals, history is defined as white—we all have one idea of freedom, and one idea of language, and one idea of education.

However all of these ideas match one viewpoint—the white middle or upper-middle class experience. To say that Black English is as “American as apple pie” challenges this ideal and therefore cannot be accepted within the traditional classroom invested in whiteness.

However, if students choose to abandon their first language for Standard (“proper”) English, they face alienation from their own community. Several examples of this appear through African American literature. The first example can be seen within The Garies and their Friends in the miscommunications between young black Charlie, who was seeking entry into a Sabbath school because he could not attend the local white school, and the older Aunt Comfort, a student at the Sabbath school. The scene opens with Aunt Comfort refusing to believe that the letter Q and the letter O weren’t the same letter. As she and the teacher are arguing, Charlie enters, and the superintendent asks him “numerous and sometimes difficult questions” about Biblical history, which Charlie “answered boldly and quickly to many of them, and with an accuracy that astonished his fellow scholars” (Webb 211). The voice of the black experience comes clearly through Aunt Comfort, who “could not restrain her admiration of this display of talent on the part of one of her despised race” (Webb 211). An interesting dialogue between Comfort and Charlie is created:

“talks jis’ de same as if he was white. Why, boy, where you learn all dat?”

“Across the Red Sea,” said Charlie, in answer to a question from the desk of the superintendent.

“Cross de Red Sea! Umph, chile, you been dere?” asked Aunt Comfort, with a face full of wonder. (Webb 211)

This interplay between Charlie and Comfort continues, with Charlie ignoring her questions in order to answer the superintendent. There are a few important points made in this dialogue. First, Aunt Comfort places Charlie within the realm of white society by saying he “talks jis’ de same as if he was white.” This is illustrated in both the quality and quantity of his knowledge in Biblical history and in his clear use of “white” English. Second, because she has such an exaggerated Southern black dialect, Charlie sounds “white” not only to Comfort but to the reader comparing the language of the two. Finally, and most importantly, it is clear to the reader both in his syntax and his body position (toward the superintendent with his back to Comfort) his attention is turned toward the dominant white sphere. Charlie is clearly caught between a respected black female elder and an authoritative white male, between the black experience and the white ideal. Within such a dichotomy, the black elder is seen as a nuisance, much like a fly buzzing around Charlie’s face. He must block her out to be able to impress the white male superintendent, which can lead him to success. The miscommunication also illustrates that Charlie is no longer in the same social circle as Aunt Comfort. Instead, he is on a level with the white superintendent, albeit not on equal footing; however, Aunt Comfort (and with her the black experience) has been left far behind in a Darwinian linguistic fight for survival.

Another example of education leading to a separation between a black male student and his black experience comes in DuBois’s chapter “Of the Coming of John.” Foreshadowing the struggle to come, John Jones’ exodus to school has mixed reviews from his community. First, the whites are against his leaving because he is a “good boy”:

“fine plough-hand, good in the rice-fields, handy everywhere, and always good-natured and respectful.” They worry that school would “”spoil him--, ruin him” (DuBois 364).

However, as he represented a way out for the black community,

full half the black folk followed him proudly to the station; to them he represents the hope of a more prosperous future for the black community: “And they that stood behind, that morning in Altamaha, and watched the train as it noisily bore playmate and brother and son away to the world, had thereafter one ever-recurring word,— ‘When John comes.’ Then what parties were to be, and what speakings in the churches; what new furniture in the front room,—perhaps even a new front room; and there would be a schoolhouse, with John as teacher; and then perhaps a big wedding; all this and more—when John comes home.” (DuBois 364)

The black community hopes that John will be the perfect conglomerate of the black experience and white intellect. As their future teacher, he will be the one who will educate them in the way of freedom, as he will be the one who holds the rope that could connect the two worlds—black and white—together.

However, when John returns home, the white predilection proves true: he is in many ways “ruined.” First, he sees the community for what it is: “a little dingy station, a black crowd gaudy and dirty, a half-mile of dilapidated shanties along a straggling ditch of mud” (370). He no longer sees the connection between himself and his experiences in the community; instead, he sees the town through white ideals. However, in his homecoming speech, he declares his hope that progress can find its way into the community: “He sketched in vague outline the new Industrial School that might rise among these pines, he spoke in detail of the charitable and philanthropic work that might be organized, of money that might be saved for banks and business” (371). His words fall on deaf ears, however, since no one can understand him: “A painful hush filled that crowded mass.



Little had they understood of what he said, for he spoke an unknown tongue, save the last word about baptism; that they knew, and they sat very still as the clock ticked” (371). He no longer thinks like the black community, so he no longer speaks in a way that they understand. John’s language alienates the black community for two reasons: first, it is alien, and second, it criticizes the black experience, further aligning itself with white culture’s need to progress through industrialization. In his speech to his black audience, after singing the praises of “wealth and work,” stressing an Industrial school and various opportunities in creating “banks and business,” John tells the black community, “the world cares little whether a man be Baptist or Methodist, or indeed a churchman at all, so long as he is good and true. What difference does it make whether a man be baptized in river or washbowl, or not at all? Let’s leave all that littleness and look higher” (371). In a church service following his speech, an elderly man walks to the pulpit and challenges John’s speech with one of his own:

He seized the Bible with his rough, huge hands; twice he raised it inarticulate, and then fairly burst into words, with rude and awful eloquence. He quivered, swayed, and bent; then rose aloft in perfect majesty, till the people moaned and wept, wailed and shouted, and a wild shrieking arose from the corners where all the pent-up feeling of the hour gathered itself and rushed into the air. John never knew clearly what the old man said; he only felt himself held up to scorn and scathing denunciation for trampling on the true Religion, and he realized with amazement that all unknowingly he had put rough, rude hands on something this little world held sacred. (372)

Just like with the case of Aunt Comfort and Charlie, there is no understanding between the old man and John. Instead, John’s audience is unable to understand the eloquent, educated, “white” language that John speaks, and in the same vein, John is unable to

understand the “rude and awful eloquence” of the old man. John has been officially excommunicated from the black culture because he no longer understands the black experience; however, the white community will not accept him either. It is important to note that within the text Dubois uses Southern dialect not only for the blacks but also for the whites. The only three characters who speak Standard English are the Judge and the two Johns. With his use of dialect, Dubois seems to be arguing that John has intellectually earned his place among the white elite, which is why the white society must eliminate him—he has no place in their world because of his black skin.

### **The Realities of Language and the Shifting Times**

Both the theoretical and literary texts illustrate a strong point about the black student experience today: Black students, especially black male students, are trapped between a rock and a hard place—if they speak the language they grew up learning, they are seen as a threat, a thug, a menace; if they learn to speak “white,” they risk being alienated from their own community and seen as a threat to the white elite because they have the potential to change the collective consciousness that defines them as a threat, a thug, and a menace. However, there is one major flaw in the Standard English argument—as mentioned, as culture changes, so does language. As we move into the Twenty-First Century, technology, global markets, and the changing diversity of American culture alone are making a “Standard English only” curriculum obsolete. As we look to the future, educators need to be able to shift with the times, and that means letting the ideals of Standard English fall to the wayside and embracing new modes of language discourse. In the next chapter, the need for such modes will be discussed.

CHAPTER III  
THE CHANGING MARKETABILITY OF LANGUAGE:  
BLACK ENGLISH SPEAKERS AND THEIR TWENTY-FIRST CENTURY  
NARRATIVES

**Introduction**

As a black male student wrestles with his choice of languages—should he embrace a Standard English that does not match his experiences or should he reject the Standard English that promises success—he becomes trapped in whatever choice he makes. As mentioned in Chapter One, blackness refers less to the color of one’s skin and more to the ways in which society defines what it means to be Black. However, as we move toward the Twenty-First Century, the marketability of blackness has increased, with black music such as rap and hip hop moving into the mainstream and a black man elected as U.S. President. Also, new forms of electronic media have changed the way society thinks through dominant narratives, allowing diverse voices to challenge the dominant narrative and create their own perspective. As we prepare our students to market themselves in the Twenty-First Century, we must ask ourselves if falling back on an archaic Standard English curriculum will still be useful or if we must rethink the language discourse of the future.

**The Future American of the Twentieth and Twenty-First Centuries**

One of the first writers to illustrate the impact of racial integration on American culture is Charles Chesnutt. In his essay “What is a White Man?” Chesnutt seeks to trap

the essence of white (and by antithesis black) in American culture. He starts with the following words:

The fiat have gone forth from the wise men that the “all-pervading, all-conquering Anglo Saxon race” must continue forever to exercise exclusive control and direction of the government of this so-called Republic, it becomes important to every citizen who values his birthright to know who are included in this grandiloquent term. It is of course perfectly obvious that the writer or speaker who used this expression... did not say what he meant. It is not probable that he meant to exclude from full citizenship the Celts and Teutons and Gauls and Slavs who make up so large a proportion of our population; he hardly meant to exclude the Jews, for even the most ardent fire-eater would hardly venture to advocate the disfranchisement of the thrifty race whose mortgages cover so large a portion of Southern soil. What the eloquent gentleman really meant by this high-sounding phrase was simply the white race; and the substance of the argument of that school of Southern writers to which he belongs, is simply that for the good of the country the Negro should have no voice in directing the government or public policy of the Southern States or of the nation. (24)

In the preceding passage, Chesnut defines whiteness in terms of “race,” not skin color. It isn’t just the Western European (Gauls, Celts, etc.) who first declared themselves white; it also includes those, like Jews, who can substantiate their value in the amount of money and land they have acquired. In other words, anyone who could prove their ability to trade and benefit the capitalist market could be defined as white. The only one who is definitely excluded from the definition is the Negro. Through Chesnut’s language, however, he also blurs the lines between white and “not-white.” Although he calls the Southern white “wise” and his verbiage “eloquent,” the clear, articulate prose he presents creates his own ethos as one making a claim to be rhetorically white. Chesnut seems to acknowledge his own slip beyond the color line by saying, “the line which separates the races must in many instances have been practically obliterated” (24). He is talking, of

course, about the “intermingling of the races” and the biological crossing of the color line. However, his essay itself is a rhetorical crossing. He is writing to a white audience in a very elitist “white” rhetorical voice to chastise the straws of whiteness they seem to be grasping. The irony in his essay is that the only ones obsessed with defining specifically what “white” is are those obsessed with defining themselves as superior:

In view, therefore, of the very positive ground taken by the white leaders of the South..., it becomes in the highest degree important to them to know what race they belong to. It ought to be also a matter of serious concern to the Southern white people; for if their zeal for good government is so great that they contemplate the practical overthrow of the Constitution and laws of the United States to secure it, they ought at least to be sure that no man entitled to it by their own argument, is robbed of a right so precious as that of free citizenship. (25)

The pronouns here obscure Chesnut's argument. First, who is the “they” whose race is contested? It could be those of “mixed” blood who appear white. However, that doesn't fit with Chesnut's argument: instead, he is turning the gaze onto those whites who are obsessed with defining whiteness so that they can claim it; only by labeling those around them with rigid definition can they be sure of their own privilege, which leads to the second question: What is the “it” they are trying to secure? “It” is what provides them with free citizenship, so “it” must be whiteness. In contrast, while whites are fighting to pin down a clear definition of whiteness, the lowly Negro “must content himself with the acquisition of wealth, the pursuit of learning and such other privileges as his ‘best friends’ may find it consistent with the welfare of the nation to allow him” (25). As we go back to the definition of whiteness that Chesnut creates in the first paragraph (of wealth

and wisdom), it seems that while whites are working to clarify whiteness, their Negro “friends” are blurring the lines further.

Chesnutt’s essay serves as a metaphor for the linguistic battle that has been waging between whites and blacks and has worked to keep the former superior and the latter inferior. However, such a battle does not affect white students who have grown up speaking Standard English at home; it affects those black and minority students who must contradict their own understanding of language to adopt the “right” stagnant language they learn in schools. Chesnutt and other black writers of the early Twentieth Century proved they could “pass” rhetorically in order to blur the color line.

However, toward the late Twentieth and early Twenty-First Century, such linguistic passing has created a wide chasm between the black masses and the black elite, or as Houston Baker calls them, the black centrists, who he describes as follows:

The virtual center, eagerly occupied by public spokesmen, politicians, and errant representatives of the new black intelligentsia is an almost exclusively rhetorical ground. It enables them to pass easily between the Scylla of structure and the Charybdis of ghetto-related black behavior with deft avoidance of the facts and incumbencies of the former. Centrist territory is a rhetorical demilitarized zone where honest, committed, and historically informed proclamations on cause and effect regarding race, culture, morality, and gender in the United States can be studiously avoided, fudged, or simply made to suit the audience on hand. (104)

The real danger of black centrists, according to Baker, is their ability to deny ethnicity as a factor in discrimination. When questions of racism arise, black centrists are more likely to support the white patriarchal ideal that “certain” blacks can’t succeed because of their own behavior while also representing a hope for those same blacks that if they just adhere to the demands of white patriarchal society—speak Standard English, be obedient and

grateful, and learn to acquiesce to the voice of the dominant group—they can succeed. In other words, centrists “are fully, and comprehensively educated in alternate responses” and play to whichever side they need to in order to advance their own success (105).

One clear example of such a centrist, according to Baker, is comedian and speaker Bill Cosby. At a 2004 public forum commemorating the *Brown vs. Board of Education* Supreme Court decision, Baker quotes Cosby as saying, ““I can’t even talk the way these people talk...“*Why you ain’t, Where you is?*”...Everybody knows it’s important to speak English except these knuckleheads”” (99). Baker goes on to quote Cosby’s rant against “knucklehead” blacks at the 2004 Rainbow/PUSH Coalition & Citizenship Education Fund’s conference:

“Stop beating up on your women because you can’t find a job,” he preached to the assembled audience. Cosby assured all who would listen that it was not he who should be blamed for “airing dirty laundry”: “Let me tell you something, your dirty laundry gets out of school at 2:30 every day, it’s cursing and calling each other n----- as they’re walking up and down the street. They think they’re hip. They can’t read; they can’t write. They’re laughing and giggling, and they’re going nowhere.” (99)

Such statements by the black centrists are not necessarily a call-out to black masses to make a change; because Cosby’s audiences at such events are white and/or elites, he is doing what he can to reiterate stereotypical images of black youth created by the white patriarchy. The message he drives home is that it isn’t his white patron’s fault that the black youth of today are lost; they just need to get with the program. According to Baker, “Centrists are the ‘Mr. Either-Ones—the crafty maskers—of present-day American public media life. An either/or sensibility is their stock in trade. They glide around history’s sharp edges and throw up faux-ethnic salutes to their best-paying customer. The

only thing they do not seem to need for a good night's sleep is the respect of the black majority" (105). And why would they not need the respect of their own people? Because playing to the black majority doesn't pay as well.

One clear literary example of the black centrist, or the black in white's (linguistic) clothing, is white Matthew Fisher (formerly black Max Disher) from George Shuyler's Black No More. After whitening his skin and moving South, Fisher realizes that the real wealth can be gained in the racist organizations such as the Knights of Nordica. He approaches the Imperial Grand Wizard, Mr. Givens, and explains his support for the group and for preserving the integrity of the white race. When Givens asks him to join the organization, Fisher agrees:

If he made a hit at the initial meeting, he would be sure to get on the staff. Once there he could go after the larger game. Unlike Givens, he had no belief in the racial integrity nonsense nor any confidence in the white masses whom he thought were destined to flock to the Knights of Nordica. On the contrary he despised and hated them. He had the average Negro's fear of the poor whites and only planned to use them as a stepladder to the real money. (Shuyler 53-54)

Fisher soon works his way up in the organization to become the voice of racist white hatred. However, as he speaks racism in his eloquent white voice, Fisher only thinks of himself:

For an hour Mathew told them at the top of his voice what they believed: i.e., that a white skin was a sure indication of the possession of superior intellectual and moral qualities; that all Negroes were inferior to them; that God had intended for the United States to be a white man's country and that with His help they could keep it so; that their sisters and daughters might marry Negroes, if Black-No-More, Incorporated, was permitted to continue its dangerous activities.



For an hour he spoke, interrupted at intervals by enthusiastic gales of applause, and as he spoke his eye wandered over the females in the audience, noting the comeliest ones. As he wound up with a spirited appeal for eager soldiers to join the Knights of Nordica at five dollars per head and the half-dozen “planted” emissaries led the march of suckers to the platform, he noted for the first time a girl who sat in the front row and gazed up at him raptly. (Shuyler 60)

The irony in Fisher’s speech is two-fold: first, Fisher is attacking the one thing that allows him to fit into the world of the Knights of Nordica; without Black-No-More, he would be unable to physically pass in such a racist world. Second, by speaking against Black-No-More, he rhetorically passes and is able to take full advantage of the white world; not only does he have access to its wealth but also to its women—the two main fears of the white community.

Baker calls such characters as Cosby and Fisher tricksters, and, to illustrate such a character, he relates the story of the slave who, after spying on the Big House, convinces his master that he can predict the future. His master makes a bet with a neighboring slave owner that the slave can predict what is under a large pot, but the slave says, “Well, he run a long time, but they cotched the ole coon at last” (157). When the bucket is lifted and a raccoon runs out, the slave’s false status as fortune teller is confirmed.<sup>15</sup> Baker says of the story and its connection to black centrists, “Of course, the comic end to the story turns upon words being spoken one way and taken another. The slave’s ‘trick’ is not just his surreptitious spying and scouting at the Big House, but also his way of speaking words that seem to mean something they don’t. A confession is taken for a revelation”

---

<sup>15</sup> This story also appears in Zora Neale Hurston’s Mules and Men. In Hurston’s version, John (the slave) makes the statement with no real proof (there is no mention of him making earlier predictions). The master tells the other slave owner, “I bet everything in de world I got on John ‘cause he don’t lie” (81). This naïve trust in the slave demonstrates how confident the slave owner is in his own control over the slave.

(157). Tricksters are rhetorical agents who bend language to their individual gain and who “manipulate sacred texts, founding documents, homespun wisdom, and hearthside truths” (158); in other words, tricksters prey on white patriarchal consciousness by manipulating the consciousness’s own narratives and truths. However, through such manipulation, the “truth” of the dominant consciousness is upheld and the trickster “got paid in full” (158).

Through wearing the mask of the white patriarchal consciousness, centrists and tricksters are only hurting one group—the black masses. According to Baker, “Black centrism elides a troubling and complex history, making it more palatable, thereby profitable. Black centrist intellectuals spin a tale of nostalgic Americana, replete with unkempt masses of jolly blackface darkies and a few rugged individualist heroes who beat the odds to earn themselves a seat at white America’s table” (116). By supporting the dominant view of blacks as “shiftless,” “criminals,” and “knuckleheads,” black centrists/tricksters are rewarded by the whites in power; by speaking and preaching Standard English they become the personification of black “success” while also creating a chasm between themselves and the black masses, leaving blacks to fend for themselves and their own language while those who have “made it” throw those who haven’t to the white wolves.

What black centrists forget to explain is the sacrifice that must be made by students who choose the road to “success” through Standard English. Young points out that being able to speak the “right” language has consequences for black students because the system is already rigged with or without “correct” English: “While the educational

guidelines for navigating the American class structure pay lip service to providing opportunities for all, the real function of those guidelines is to keep most of those born at the top on top” (Your Average Nigga). Therefore, it is “wrong to urge that we teach WEV just so BEV speakers may play climb-the-socioeconomic [sic] ladder when everybody knows the game is rigged and the rungs are weak. When black students fall and lose—as many inevitably will—they become brick and mortar in the foundation that sustains the current American class structure” (Your Average Nigga). Ferguson agrees that the “Schoolboys” who play to white consciousness and speak Standard English play a very precarious game. She says the goal of Schoolboys is to “[dilute] that part of yourself—that back part—which is defined as a problem”; such a goal causes “psychic strain as they weave back and forth across symbolic boundary lines. The ability to ‘act white,’ to perform the citational acts of that identity, is a tactic of survival, and a passport to admission to the circle of children who can be schooled” (Bad Boys 212). For the Schoolboy, race becomes abstract and the world becomes post-racial. One such example Ferguson gives is a boy named Ricky, whose parents placed him in a predominantly-white private school to help him gain the “‘cultural capital’ symbolized through language use and demeanor that will make possible his upward mobility” (214). However, by doing so, Ricky’s bilingual skills are stunted: “His isolation from other black kids in a private school has meant that he has not acquired even the bicultural skills and interpretive frame to move back and forth between the worlds of the school and that of the family” (214). Such limitations in learning and thinking can also lead to the silencing of blacks in power. Elaine Richardson explains that Supreme Court Justice Clarence

Thomas often chooses not to speak during oral arguments because “when he was a youth, people used to make fun of the Gullah that he spoke. He explained that this caused him to develop the habit of listening” (40). In the 2000 election, when he voted against a Florida recount, Richardson argues that both his voice and his silence “were political. Both can be seen as attempts to achieve racelessness, to appear to be apolitical, to transform the ways that this audience thought of him as a Black male who is conservative and Republican” (40). She argues that Thomas is one of many black leaders who are “the product[s] of a consciousness that has Black people working their way into the system, adopting or adapting dominant cultural values, gaining education and training that elevates them to positions inside of government where they can affect change, and carrying out policies to benefit Black people as a group. Yet Thomas’s silence does not allow him to fulfill this role” (41). Schoolboys, Centrists, and silenced leaders don’t advance the Black cause or its people, but they do create a division in the black community so that those who could speak for the black community don’t because it’s not a marketable option, and those who can’t speak Standard English end up voiceless with no “heroes” to speak for them. However, as we move into the Twenty-First Century, markets are changing and are creating openings for new types of black leaders.

### **The Marketability of the Black Tongue: Moving Beyond White Standards and Definitions**

As demonstrated, Fanon says that one of most important aspects of talking white is diction; he paints a picture of the black male student “[o]n the lookout for the slightest reaction of others, listening to himself speak and not trusting his own tongue, an

unfortunately lazy organ, he will lock himself in his room and read for hours— desperately working on his diction” (5). However, Fanon stresses that such a need for perfection also leads to insecurity: “the feeling of inferiority by Blacks is especially evident in the educated black man who is constantly trying to overcome it” (9). Just like with Charlie in The Garies and their Friends, the educated black is a spectacle, not a real educated man. As Fanon says, “there is nothing more sensational than a black man speaking correctly, for he is appropriating the white world” (19). The white community’s goal, then, is to control how that speech is used. The white community’s contention with John in DuBois’s text was that he was unhappy playing the part of happy Negro or spectacle once he had the Veil lifted and racism revealed. In quoting Jean-Paul Sartre, Fanon says, ““What would you expect to find when the muzzle that has silenced the voices of black men is removed? That they would thunder your praise? When these heads that our fathers have forced to the very ground are risen, do you expect to read adoration in their eyes?”” (12) To answer these questions, Dubois’ Judge would say yes. The black community would have nothing without the white community, he would say. And the white community deserves the blacks’ respect and devotion. This paternalism is what keeps black men in the position of black boys. According to Fanon, “A white man talking to a person of color behaves exactly like a grown-up with a kid, simpering, murmuring, fussing, and coddling. It’s not just one white person we have observed, but hundreds” (13-14). What is most insulting about such comments, according to Fanon, is “the ease with which they classify him, imprison him at an uncivilized and primitive level” (15). More importantly, however, the expectation of the “less-than” black language and the

talking-down-to imprisons blacks, and emasculates black male students, within a stereotype that will always keep them beneath their white counterparts, even if they are educated. This creates a double-edged sword in terms of language. To achieve success, a black student must be able to speak the white language; however, by doing so, they face complete alienation.

As we move into the Twenty-First Century, however, markets are shifting and black stock is rising. In 1964, Lerone Bennett, Jr., was the first to explain the need for black traditions in American culture. He said, “But culture is nothing if not a dialogue. The white man has influenced the Negro, particularly in the area of technique, but the Negro has had a comparable influence on the white man, particularly in the area of sensibility” (61). While the white man represents the rules, the machine, of society, the black man represents its soul, and as long as he can embrace his own identity, he can lead society beyond the white patriarchal paradigm:

Having given so much, it is within the Negro’s power to make this final gift to America: a society transformed by the spirit of compassion and creativity. He will make this gift, I think, when he accepts himself completely—his hair, his skin color, his nose formation, his emotions, his *everything*—and when he realizes that the Negro has as much to offer the white man as the white man has to offer the Negro. (73)

The first black influences came through music, with jazz and Motown influencing mainstream white musicians, and sometimes breaking through to the mainstream themselves. By the 1990s, rap and hip hop was expressing the rage of the young black male to mainstream audiences. However, as Mark Anthony Neal explains, the legibility of such artists were controlled to fit with the dominant narrative’s view of young black

men as criminals. He argues, “the constraints placed on hip-hop-infused identities are analogous to the historical difficulties experienced by those blacks desiring to be read as cosmopolitan—legitimate citizens of the world” (Looking for Leroy 38). No matter how rich a rapper could get, he would still be limited to the “thug” identity and would never be considered above criminal status.

Then, two hip-hop artists and moguls of the Twenty-First Century proved that one could be black and move up in the financial world—Jay-Z and Sean Combs. Neal’s examination of Jay-Z in particular illustrates the way both have been able to move hip-hop from a black mode of entertainment to a global one. Neal describes one particular performance where Jay-Z challenges the “thug” identity:

Jay-Z taped a performance eventually broadcast as part of MTV’s *Unplugged* series. Sitting on a stool wearing a Che Guevara t-shirt and jokingly referring to the session as “Jay-Z’s poetry reading,” Jay-Z begins his performance stating that “I go by a couple of names. . . . Sometimes they call me Jay-Z, sometimes they call me Jigga, sometimes they call me young hov’ [Iceberg], tonight I’m ‘H to the Izzo, V to the Izza’ [sung by vocalist Jaguar Wright].” Here Jay-Z articulates what has been a time-tested practice in hip-hop: the multiple personas. But whereas most hip-hop artists simply adopt alternative personas, often referencing underground drug lords or fictional Mafia figures, Jay-Z created a complex “hip-hop” identity that speaks to the concepts of fluidity, mobility, and social capital. (40-41)

What Neal is referring to is the way in which Jay-Z plays not just a black man with black vernacular, he is also playing a global cultural figure: He is a poet, a hip-hop artist, and strong proud member of the black community; however, in wearing a Che Guevara shirt, he is not only demonstrating his global awareness but also challenging capitalist society and proving that he is beyond their interrogating gaze.

According to Neal, Jay-Z demonstrates a “‘post-nigga’ identity that coyly destabilizes constructions of the essential ‘nigga’ that remains at the root of hip-hop’s circulation across the globe” (45). In other words, Jay-Z has “queered” the white patriarchy’s definition of the criminalized hip-hop artist by creating a discontinuity in the image of hip-hop. Jay-Z has also worked to expand hip-hop into a relationship with global trends. According to Neal, Jay-Z’s 2003 Black Album “accentuates a moment in Jay-Z’s career when an openness toward—dare I say, a willingness to be penetrated by— influences not in sync with mainstream hip-hop became more pronounced” (53). He experimented with Indian Bhangra music and even went so far as to mix parts of his Black Album with the Beatles’ White Album to illustrate the common roots between the two. According to Neal, Jay-Z

makes an explicit claim that contemporary hip-hop—as embodied by Jay-Z—is the source of a similar mania among contemporary American youth. Additionally the video [combining scenes Jay-Z performing “Encore” interspersed between video from the Beatles’ Hard Day’s Night] suggests that ‘blackness’ was an always/already subtext to the so-called British invasion, given the inspiration that the Beatles took from African American blues and rock-and-roll artists and the private spheres in which American youth consumed black music, in contrast to the culturally sanctioned performances of ‘blackness’ that were consumed via mainstream media[...]. (54-55)

Jay-Z challenges the white history of American music by illustrating the ways in which black music has always been in the shadows of popular white music while also pushing hip-hop onto (and meshing it with) the world stage.

Finally, Jay-Z, along with Russell Simmons and Sean Combs, moves the black culture into one of the most elite spaces of whiteness—high fashion. While urban fashion



has always been part of the “thug” marketability, the new hip-hop moguls moved into “what could be described as upscale or even metrosexual in the case of male fashion”; such a shift “mirrors their own ascendance to the higher echelons of American celebrity culture” (57). In fact, Jay-Z used himself to advertise for other companies: “The song and video for ‘Excuse me Miss’ are rife with product placements, with references to ‘S. Dots’ (the S. Carter Sneaker collection), Armadale (a Scottish-produced vodka that was briefly distributed in the United States by Roc-a-Fella), and Zino Platinum Crowns, upscale cigars targeted to hip-hop-generation consumers” (59). The interesting thing about such branding is that Jay-Z is making himself a conduit in the consumer market. Products that go through his black creativity become more marketable, both in hip-hop culture and in the world at large. By making himself a walking, talking billboard for high-end, upscale products (clothes, shoes, cars, alcohol, etc.), he is also moving the black male identity on up: “What is being bought and sold in Jay-Z as ‘proprietary intellectual property’? The branding of Jay-Z as an elite ‘product’? Yes, of course, but less pronounced is Jay-Z’s attempt—a simple gesture, really—to broaden the contours of a commercially viable black masculinity” (Looking for Leroy). In other words, Jay-Z and other hip-hop moguls are selling business savvy, high class, and both intellect and creativity to black male youth, giving them a new vision of black male power beyond the “thug” image. The most important thing Jay-Z does, however, is illustrate the Twenty-First Century move into “modern blackness.” Quoting cultural anthropologist Deborah A. Thomas, Neal argues,

According to Thomas, modern blackness “requires that we abandon the binaries of hegemony and resistance, global and local, and instead try to understand the range of cultural formations among...African descended people throughout the diaspora.” For

Thomas, modern blackness is “unapologetically presentist and decidedly mobile. It challenges the past-tenseness of ‘folk’ blackness and African heritage as well as the notion of an evolving future based on creole nationalists’ modernist visions.” (85-86)

In other words, modern blackness moves beyond the white/black binary to find its voice within the world as it weaves together experiences of blacks across the globe. By doing so, it also seeks to move beyond its white patriarchal definition to find new ways of expression.

### **The Future American and Rhetorical Disruption: Learning to Cross the Color Line with a Black Tongue**

In rhetorical and linguistic ways, the black tongue is also working its way into the American voice. In The Signifying Monkey Henry Louis Gates makes an argument about the rhetorical power behind African American rhetoric. In his introduction, Gates alludes to the two ways in which African Americans learn language:

It is amazing how much black people, in ritual settings such as barbershops and pool halls, street corners and family reunions, talk about talking. Why do they do this? Think they do it to pass these rituals along from one generation to the next? They do it to preserve the traditions of “the race.” Very few black people are not conscious, at some level, of peculiarly black texts of being. These are *our* texts, to be delighted in, enjoyed, contemplated, explicated, and willed through repetition to our daughters and to our sons. I acknowledge my father’s capacities, not only to pay him homage but because I learned to read the tradition by thinking intensely about one of its most salient aspects. This is my father’s book, even if cast in a language he does not use.  
(xii)

Gates is illustrating some interesting points here. First, while black students are learning Standard English in schools, often from white teachers or teachers pushing a white agenda, they are also learning the language of their race—on the streets, in their homes,

listening to the older generation talk. This second language, what Smitherman would call the mother tongue, is the language of “being.” Also, the last line creates the twist: “This is my father’s book, even if cast in a language he does not use.” Gates acknowledges that his book will discuss the acquisition and traditions of African American rhetorical structures but in an academic voice. Gates, then, is establishing himself firmly with one foot in each realm: While he demonstrates an understanding of the African American rhetorical tradition, structure, and context, he can explain it using the most sophisticated academic language. Gates makes himself, therefore, a trickster, who can play both sides of the rhetorical coin.<sup>16</sup> Maybe more to the point he has become the Future American by traversing both the black and white rhetorical landscapes. However, like the Centrists discussed in Baker’s text, Gates finds himself trapped within that white academic voice, leaving his audiences to wonder about his credibility—how can he talk the talk if he can’t walk the linguistic walk?

Gates is clearly still playing in the tradition established by Chesnutt and other early Twentieth Century black writers. The Future American was first defined in Charles Chesnutt’s essay “The Future American: What the Race is Likely to Become in the Process of Time.” He explains,

The popular theory is that the future American race will consist of a harmonious fusion of the various European elements which now make up our heterogeneous population. The result is to be something infinitely superior to the best of the component elements. This perfection of type—for no good American could for a

---

<sup>16</sup> Gates is one that Baker refers to as a black centrist. Baker’s analysis of Gates’ memoir Colored People can be found in “Have Mask, Will Travel: Centrist from the Ivy League” (99-125) in Betrayal.

moment doubt that it will be as perfect as everything else American—is to be brought about by a combination of all the best characteristics of the different European races, and the elimination, by some strange alchemy, of all their undesirable traits. (47)

In Chesnut's time, the Future American could be represented by someone like Frederick Douglass, who had biological stakes in both black and white circles with the experience of a slave and the intellectual and rhetorical skills of a white man. However, within the collective consciousness, such an "awkward fact" as Douglass was either eliminated (as DuBois' John was) or re-appropriated through exceptionalism (as Fisher in Black No More or black centrists of the late Twentieth Century). Many writers, Baker among them, argue that such exceptions hurt, not help, the black community. As previously discussed, they point out that the academic black, the one who, like Charlie, succeeds professionally and/or academically, is the exception, not the rule. He (more often than not, a man) represents all that blacks could be, if they could just "act right" and "talk right." In The New Jim Crow, Michelle Alexander argues, "The current system of control depends on black exceptionalism; it is not disproved or undermined by it. Others may wonder how a racial caste system could exist when most Americans—of all colors—oppose race discrimination and endorse colorblindness. Yet...racial caste systems do not require racial hostility or overt bigotry to thrive. They need only racial indifference, as Martin Luther King Jr. warned more than forty-five years ago." Again, exceptionalism depends on a "blame-the-victim" mentality that allows the white patriarchy to deny racism and re-establish the freedom-for-all myth by showing that since some blacks can be successful, then all blacks can, while also easing white fears by claiming such examples are also

exceptions to the norm (one black man may become a lawyer, but he is an exception; therefore, more black lawyers are not waiting in the wings to take white jobs).

The separation between white and black rhetorical styles, however, has postponed anyone from claiming the label of Future American in recent decades. Even though such leaders as Martin Luther King, Jr., and Jesse Jackson have stepped up as the voice of the black people, their black rhetorical stance has kept them in the position of Black leader, not leader. However, one man has managed to cross the great divide to become an American leader—Barack Obama. In Articulate While Black, H. Samy Alim and Geneva Smitherman argue that Obama has crossed the color line by representing himself as rhetorically black and white and that crossing is what got him elected:

[D]espite the constant monitoring and mocking of Black Language, we maintain that Barack Obama's mastery of Black cultural modes of discourse was crucial to his being elected America's forty-fourth president. For some obvious reasons, we argue that the "brotha with the funny name" (as some Black folks called him) wouldn't have gotten elected if he couldn't kick it in a way that was "familiarily Black." (3)

Alim and Smitherman recognize that language has a "central role in positioning each of us and the groups that we belong to along the social hierarchy" (3). However, Obama has been able to play trickster 2.0 by taking what he needs from Standard English when he needs it and intermixing Black Rhetoric when he feels the need. In other words, he doesn't just play to the white elites; he also infuses black rhetorical stylings to challenge the idea that he is "passing" linguistically and, in doing so, keeps a connection to the black community.

There are a few rhetorical moves that Obama is prone to make that allows him to cross the rhetorical color line. First, he style shifts. According to Alim and Smitherman, “It’s one thing to know that you gotta say ‘the right things’ in terms of *content* but quite another to be able to say ‘the right things’ in the right way in terms of *style*. Barack was seen as someone who could speak directly and comfortably with folks across regions, generations, socioeconomic divisions, racial and ethnic groups, and political and religious views” (5), which proves Obama has learned the language shifts that happen around him—among the rich and poor, the black and white, the old and young—and has learned to maneuver, even dance, his way through the different nuances, much like, as Alim and Smitherman say, “many Black Americans who travel in and out of Black and White social worlds and work environments” (5). He’s done so well, in fact, that many white Americans surveyed by Alim and Smitherman believe that Obama speaks “normative English” while many blacks Americans can recognize the shifts in Obama’s rhetoric.

Second, Obama creates an ethos of the “cool and collected” politician with “a 21<sup>st</sup> century echo of African-American preacher style characterized by such strong orators as MLK” (Alim and Smitherman 15). This strategy is significant because while it conveys Obama’s confidence as a politician, it also makes his speeches passionate and interactive: “his delivery is not boring or monotonous, but rather like a song. The way Obama alters his pace, tone, and rhythm is similar to the way a preacher speaks, which is essentially close to singing. The intonation, emphasis, and pauses and silences that characterize his speaking style are churchy and religious” (15-16). Obama also at times relies on a call-and-response technique typical of the black church. This technique is significant because

it turns the speech into an event: “Shot through with action and interaction, call and response is concentric in quality, with the audience becoming both observers and participants in the speech event. The audience’s verbal and nonverbal responses co-sign the power of the speaker’s call” (18). Alim and Smitherman give an example of a particular call and response to an audience in South Carolina:

BARACK’S CALL: They’re tryna bamboozle you. [Pause]

CROWD’S RESPONSE: [Black woman seen waving her sign like a fan, Black men shaking their heads in recognition; crowd laughter] Yes!

BARACK’S CALL: It’s the same old okey-doke. [Pause]

CROWD’S RESPONSE: [laughter, agreement] That’s right!

BARACK’S CALL: [Looking out to audience with a half smile] Y’all know about okey-doke, right? [Pause]

CROWD’S RESPONSE: Yeah! Yes! [Laughter]

BARACK’S CALL: It’s the same old stuff!

CROWD’S RESPONSE: Yeahhh!

BARACK’S CALL: Just like if anybody starts gettin one of these emails sayin, “Obama is a *Muzlim*.” [Pause]

CROWD’S RESPONSE: Yes! They do it! (18-19)

The call and response technique works here for several reasons. First, this particular speech came in the context of conspiracy theories about his American citizenship and religion, with some arguing that Obama was an African Muslim. By using call and response, Obama is planting his rhetorical feet firmly in both the African American and the Christian foundations. His use of Ebonics throughout the speech appeals to his

primarily black audience while also declaring his language as an American tongue since Ebonics is solely an American dialect. Also, he is defining terms within his chosen language for his white audience (“okey doke” is the “same old stuff”) so that they are not alienated but can join in as well. Finally, Obama creates a situation where his audience confirms his American and Christian status by participating in the call and response.

According to Alim and Smitherman, these two strategies (style shifting and cool preacher rhetoric) are what got Obama elected. According to those they surveyed, “Barack Obama’s mastery of White mainstream English ways of speaking, or ‘standard’ English, particularly in terms of syntax, combined with his mastery of Black Culture’s modes of discourse, in terms of style, was an absolutely necessary combination for him to be elected America’s first Black president” (19-20). However, one particular rhetorical move not only brought him into the White House but allowed him to assert his claim to the role over and over. This particular move is the grenade in the Black rhetorical repertoire: signifying.

There are two types of signifying, the “white” way and the “black” way. In terms of Standard English, the signifier represents an idea or object that all within the discourse recognizes. Foucault describes it thus:

the ‘signifying’ structure of language (*langage*) always refers back to something else; objects are designated by it; meaning is intended by it; the subject is referred back to it by a number of signs even if he is not himself present in them. Language always seems to be inhabited by the other, the elsewhere, the distant; it is hollowed by absence. Is it not the locus in which something other than itself appears, does not its own existence seem to be dissipated in this function? (111)



In terms of this relationship between signifier and signified, consider the word “chair” as the signifier, or the thing that represents, and the actual wooden chair that is signified by that word. Also, think of a word such as “feudalism,” which is frozen within a particular time period, a particular discipline, and a particular culture. The idea is that language is taken out of a particular context, a particular event, and is frozen in meaning. There is no looking back; there doesn’t need to be a direct relationship with the word’s history. Therefore, going back to the idea of the collective consciousness, no one needs to know where the word came from or why that particular word is used and not others; all words and meaning are static.

According to Henry Louis Gates, Jr., signifying in the black tradition is a sophisticated process of turning Standard English on its head:

Thinking about the black concept of Signifiyin(g) is a bit like stumbling unaware into a hall of mirrors: the sign itself appears to be doubled, at the very least, and (re)doubled upon ever closer examination. It is not the sign itself, however, which has multiplied. If orientation prevails over madness, we soon realize that only the signifier has been doubled and (re)doubled, a signifier in this instance that is silent, a “sound-image” as Saussure defined the signifier, but a “sound-image sans sound.” The difficulty that we experience when thinking about the nature of the visual (re)doubling at work in a hall of mirrors is analogous to the difficulty we shall encounter in relating the black linguistic sign, “signification,” to the standard English sign, “signification.” This level of conceptual difficulty stems from—indeed, seems to have been intentionally inscribed within—the selection of the signifier “Signification” to represent a concept remarkably distinct from that concept represented by the standard English signifier, “signification.”... And, to compound the dizziness and the giddiness that we must experience in the vertiginous movement between these two “identical” signifiers, these two homonyms have everything to do with each other and, then again, absolutely nothing. (The Signifying Monkey 44-45)

In the black rhetorical tradition, Signifying has everything to do with context, speaker, and audience, and shifting meaning. Alim and Smitherman give an example of a

particular Signifying moment in Obama's presidency; as Obama was gearing up for a run at re-election, Donald Trump (known for not only his wealth but his verbal attacks on Obama's right as an American citizen) had also been preparing for his own campaign. At the White House correspondent's dinner, Obama mentioned Donald Trump, who was also attending the event:

“Donald Trump is here tonight. Now I know that he's taken some flack lately, but no one is happier, no one is prouder to put this birth certificate matter to rest than Donald. And that's because he can [letting out a laugh under his breath] finally get back to focusing on the issues that matter, like, did we fake the moon-landing? [Crowd laughter] What really happened in Roswell? [Crowd Laughter] And where are Biggie and Tupac? [Big laughter and applause] All kidding aside, obviously we all know about [gesturing out towards Trump] your credentials and breadth of experience [Crowd laughter]...um, for example, um...[Donald Trump is shown uncomfortably scratching the side of his neck with his index finger].... No, seriously, just recently in an episode of *Celebrity Apprentice* [Crowd laughter], at the Steakhouse, the men's cooking team did not impress the judges from Omaha Steaks, and there was a lotta blame to go around, but you, Mr. Trump, recognized that the real problem was a lack of leadership. And so ultimately you didn't blame Lil Jon or Meatloaf [Crowd laughter], you fired Gary Busey! [Crowd laughter] [Then, matter-of-factly, Barack adds] And these are the kinds of decisions that would keep me up at night.” [Uproarious crowd laughter and applause]. (10-11)

The Signifying is exhibited in Obama's praise of Trump as a concerned citizen, accomplished business man, and strong leader. However, the only evidence for Trump as a concerned citizen Obama mentioned are conspiracy theories against the President; he couldn't come up with any particular evidence for Trump's “credentials and breadth of experience” and made a show of stuttering and stumbling trying to come up with something; finally, the only evidence of Trump being a strong leader who makes tough decisions were events on Trump's reality show. Through his contradictory evidence, as well as the audience's understanding of the context between the two, the meaning of

Obama's words shift to reveal the opposite of what he is saying. In other words, Obama was letting Trump know in no uncertain terms that he, Barack Obama, was the powerful man in the room; he was the leader who solved the tough problems and had experience as a politician and a President; and he was not a man to be messed with. Also, his mention of "Biggie and Tupac," successful rappers who were murdered, shot an extra rhetorical bullet to remind Trump that he was not only President but he was the first Black President. Again, we can also see the call and response in the form of laughter. Obama starts first by laughing at the beginning of his speech; however, he made a point to pause and allow his audience a chance to continue the laughter. Considering this an event for esteemed members of the press, we can surmise that Obama is no longer just playing to a black audience; he is creating a situation where everyone in the room, and across the nation, regardless of color is joining in on the joke he is having at the expense of one of the richest white men in America.

Obama is a daunting figure for white patriarchy because he doesn't play by the rules of white patriarchy. He asserts his position as both Man and Black rhetorically and refuses to be a white puppet or an exception. In terms of teaching and language acquisition, Obama also models a way forward—a way of considering language in its various nuances and contexts, a way to think about how to develop a voice that people see as human and relatable and representative of the speaker, not just the dominant white culture.

## **Teaching Beyond Standard English: Code Switching and Code Meshing**

There is no question that teaching Standard English to students whose home language is either Black English, Spanglish, or some other diverse form of English that is anything but standard, is alienating and leads to frustration and oftentimes failure. However, even though Obama and other style shifters represent a new language transformation in terms of the way we see English in America, that trend is not necessarily valued in public school. Teachers realize that all standardized tests will continue to be in Standard English, and all students (and teachers) will be judged on how well students master the accepted language (or it masters them).

However, as Obama and other theorists prove, students should be able to explore different culturally linguistic and rhetorical language options. Linguistic theorists have looked to two particular models for teaching diverse language construction to students: first is code switching; second is code meshing.

Theorists such as Lisa Delpit have been proponents of code switching. She argues that teachers must inform minority students that there is a “culture of power” as well as codes and rules that dictate it, and knowing the rules gives marginalized students easier access to the dominant culture (25); therefore, students must know Standard English because it is the language of the culture of power. Delpit explains,

Although the problem is not necessarily inherent in the method, in some instances adherents of process approaches to writing create situations in which students ultimately find themselves held accountable for knowing a set of rules about which no one has ever directly informed them. Teachers do students no service to suggest, even implicitly, that “product” is not important. In this country, students will be judged on their product regardless of the process they utilized to achieve it. And that product, based as it is on the specific codes of a particular culture, is more readily produced when the directives of how to produce it are made explicit. (31)

In other words, if teachers allow students to write only in Black English and not teach them the rules of Standard English, the teachers do a disservice to the students and guarantee their marginalization.

However, that doesn't mean students shouldn't also have access to their own languages. As Delpit explains, “I believe in a diversity of style, and I believe the world will be diminished if cultural diversity is ever obliterated. Further, I believe strongly, as do my liberal colleagues, that each cultural group should have the right to maintain its own language style. When I speak, therefore, of the culture of power, I don't speak of how I wish things to be but of how they are” (39). According to Delpit, then, students must keep one foot planted in each language in order to be able to navigate between the two: “I do not believe that we should teach students to passively adopt an alternate code. They must be encouraged to understand the power realities in this country. Otherwise they will be unable to work to change these realities” (40). Students must learn both the importance and nuances of their own language while learning the language of the “culture of power”; such an education will teach them

the codes needed to participate fully in the mainstream of American life, not by being forced to attend to hollow, inane, decontextualized subskills, but rather within the context of meaningful communicative endeavors; that they must be allowed the

resource of the teacher's expert knowledge, while being helped to acknowledge their own "expertness" as well; and that even while students are assisted in learning the culture of power, they must also be helped to learn about the arbitrariness of those codes and about the power relationships they represent. (45)

In other words, students learn to value their own language while learning Standard English and in the process learn the appropriate time to switch from one code to the other.

However, in "Chapter Five: The Cost of Code Switching" in Other People's English, Vershawn Young argues that there are costs for students who code switch. He argues, "as a pedagogical practice code-switching is favored because of abiding segregationist beliefs within educational discourse and society. In other words, many well-intentioned teachers maintain that African Americans must be bicultural and bidialectal to thrive in the 'White and Black worlds' of America. However, this perspective can't last if racism erodes and if what counts as acceptable academic literacies and professional prose change." Young argues that code switching creates animosity between blacks who speak Black English and those who learn to sound White, creates a subordinate position for African American English in the classroom and society, and leads to linguistic confusion for students. The main issue with code switching is that it forces students into a place where they must "develop a double consciousness" ("Chapter Four: Linguistic Double Consciousness"); black students must always be conscious of how others are evaluating their linguistic representation. This position still leaves black speakers powerless as they navigate linguistic spaces.

Instead, Young believes code meshing, or the natural mixing of diverse languages, should be stressed rather than code switching. Young argues that combining linguistic and rhetorical styles is the new manifestation of the Future American linguist. He explains, “given the diverse language styles we witness daily in magazines, on TV, in books, and in politics, will it really need to take another 20 years to fully come about? I don’t think so; not if teachers participate in this change that should have happened long ago and that is occurring now” (“Chapter Four”) In Young’s opinion, code meshing “reflects our present America and speaks to the coming future of literacy” (“Chapter Four”). It’s up to the current teachers to model and value such speech so that future generations will be able to speak it with pride.

### **Language Teachers of the 21<sup>st</sup> Century: Can we Move Beyond Standard English?**

In a final call to teachers, Young asks,

If we cannot prepare [students] for the positive present and future of literate discourse and must resign ourselves to teaching them to perform linguistically for the prejudice of the past, then we must ask ourselves what the real function of our profession is, what the real purpose of the classroom is. Is it to make honorary Whites out of African Americans, celebrating those who can “make it in a White world”?

Should we teach students to embrace the by-product of racism, double consciousness, so that they can survive a neo-segregated society? Or do we want to produce students who will challenge the hegemony of one-way assimilation with linguistic talents akin to Barack Obama’s? Do we want a future that still caters to linguistic prejudice or one that ends it? And don’t we owe it to ourselves and certainly our students to at least give pause to these questions, to consider the possibilities that code-meshing for an enlightened now, and an even better tomorrow? (“Chapter Four”)

Although Young's argument is well thought out, in much the same way that traditional education sees Standard English, Young's theory of code-meshing is idealistic. However, both Young and Delpit leave pragmatic teachers with more questions than answers: How can we abandon code-switching and Standard English in some form if we may potentially doom our students (and ourselves<sup>17</sup>) to failure in the process? The question ends up in a chicken-or-egg conundrum: Do teachers have the power to change the way the wider culture sees language, or does the wider culture dictate what we teach? If we approach language instruction differently, through code-meshing, will we make a difference? And how best can we build a linguistic classroom culture that is welcoming to all regardless of previous language acquisitions? Such questions will be taken up in the next two chapters.

---

<sup>17</sup> Many new teacher evaluation systems take into consideration student scores to some percentage when evaluating teacher performance. If students cannot perform well due to a lack of Standard English preparation, teachers could face probation or worse. In the state of West Virginia, five percent of teacher evaluations is based on school performance goals and fifteen percent of English and Math teacher evaluations are based on student performance on standardized tests. (Mays)



CHAPTER IV  
BUILDING COMMUNITITIES THROUGH DEFINITIONS OF US AND THEM:  
A CASE STUDY OF AN INNER CITY SCHOOL IN A PREDOMINANTLY  
WHITE APPALACHIAN COUNTY

**Introduction**

The previous chapters have explored the theoretical creation of whiteness and blackness through linguistic and social construction. However, the effects of such creation are not theoretical; they are the experiences of teachers and students in classes throughout the country. As a high school teacher, I see these effects every day: how and why community is defined and redefined through the spaces that teachers and students negotiate—the classroom, the local communities, and the spaces in between—as well as the visible and invisible ways students are treated differently due to socioeconomic status, race, and gender. I also see how one positive critically-minded teacher can make a difference. By investigating the real world examples of the theoretical models previously discussed, the real characters at play can be analyzed, interrogated, and humanized, and the construction of community from the dominant collective consciousness in the overall community to the community built within a classroom can help bring theory into the real world.

## **The Roles Black Male Students Play to Disrupt the Invisible Whiteness: The Good Bad Boys, the Troublemakers, and the Not-Learners**

Many researchers have argued (and proven) that mis-communication between black male students and white teachers often comes through various cultural mis-communications. For instance, Douglas Downcy and Shana Pribesh question why black students seem to face more disciplinary action from white teachers. According to their findings:

Although white teachers could overtly discriminate against black students, most scholars have described a more subtle process in which white teachers merely misinterpret black students' cultural style (Alexander, Entwisle, and Herman 1999; Allen and Boykin 1992; Ferguson 1998; Heath 1983; Rist 1970). The argument is that white teachers often misread black students' different behavioral styles (e.g., speech, dress, and energy level) as defiance. Black students may be puzzled to find that white teachers are angered by behavior that is unnoticed or even rewarded in the students' homes and neighborhoods. (268)

They go on to point out that one problem with the structure of education is that it models the values of suburban America, and they argue that because the school environment is often organized in a passive format (sit quietly, do your work independently, no talking unless talked to, etc.), many black students are unstimulated and out of place because their own learned behavior is not honored: "From this view, the onus of responsibility for problems between black students and white teachers lies more squarely with the teachers and the school than with the black children" (268). This concept is supported by Downey and Pribesh's determination that the discrepancy between black and white students' behavior is most diverse in a white teacher's classroom: "we found that black students are consistently rated as poorer classroom citizens than are white students, but our models

suggest that this pattern does not persist when teacher's race is taken into account. Indeed, if anything, there is some indication that once black students and white students are both placed with same-race teachers, and are similar on the other covariates in our models [grades, SES, etc.], black students' classroom behavior is rated more favorably than is white students" (277). Downey and Pribesh point to two possible issues causing the negative perception white teachers have of black students: on one side, it could be that black students are highly resistant to learning from a white teacher; on the other hand, it could be that white teachers do not comprehend the ways in which cultural differences play out in the classroom: "white teachers fail to appreciate black students' unique cultural style or possibly that white teachers use class-management styles that fail to motivate black students" (277). Although Downey and Pribesh explain that both options, to some extent, play a role in white teacher and black student relationships, their research proves that the cultural values and biases of the teacher, not the student, dictate how a student will be viewed within the classroom environment.

Also, according to Ann Ferguson, white teachers may be more prone to punish black male students to make them examples to deter other black males from the same behavior. She says, "The possibility of contagion must be eliminated. Those with reputations must be isolated, kept away from others. Kids are told to stay away from them" (96). This is particularly true of black male students labeled as "unsalvageable."

In order to navigate the school environment, and its values that are often invested in white, middle-class constructions of community, black boys who are not attempting to

play the Schoolboy <sup>18</sup>have to take on a bad boy persona. There are two in particular whose purpose is to “[position] oneself in the center of the room in a face-off with the teacher, the most powerful person up to that moment. Fundamental to the performance is engagement with power; authority is teased, challenged, even occasionally toppled from its secure heights for brief moments” (177). Similar to Malcolm X’s thumb tack scenario,<sup>19</sup> she gives a particular example of a boy named Horace; during a summer math class, a male teacher wrote names of students on the board and said, ““Whoever taught these students when they were young must have been dumb.”” In this scenario, the teacher not only insults the students but also their previous educational experience. Horace’s reply reverses the smart teacher/dumb student dichotomy: “So I said, ‘Oh, I didn’t remember that was you teaching me in first grade.’ Everyone in the room cracked up. I was laughing so hard, I was on the floor. He sent me to the office” (177). Horace took this opportunity to signify on the teacher in order to level the playing field. However, in the teacher’s mind, the playing field was how it should be, so the student had to be removed from the game (the classroom). Although Horace is punished for his comment, his comeback and delivery, constructed in a successful rhetorical moment that results in the students laughing at the teacher, is a high point: “For Horace, this is a success story, a moment of gratification in a day that brings few his way” (178). Ferguson calls this particular performance the “Good Bad Boy”; he “engages power, takes risks, makes the class laugh, and the teacher smile. Performances mark boundaries

---

<sup>18</sup> See Chapter Three

<sup>19</sup> See Chapter One

of ‘essential difference’—risk taking, brinkmanship. The open and public defiance of the teacher in order to get a laugh, make things happen, take center stage, be admired, is a resource for doing masculinity” ( 176). The Good Bad Boy does not adhere to the rules and cannot play the (good) Schoolboy; however, he is not angrily or openly confrontational. His role, instead, is to use humor to liven up the classroom community. Because of the signifying nature of his act, the teacher reads him as a fool, a jokester, instead of a clear threat to authority—sometimes the teacher smiles at the joke and slightly reprimands the student, and sometimes the joke goes too far and the student is removed from the classroom environment. One important factor behind the performance: It allows the black male student to bring elements of his black rhetorical culture to the classroom. According to Ferguson, “These rituals are not merely a way to pass time, but are also a site for constituting a gendered racial subjectivity. For African American boys, the performance of masculinity invokes cultural conventions of speech performance that draws on a black repertoire. Verbal performance is an important medium for black males to establish a reputation, make a name for yourself, and achieve status” (178-79). The problem comes in the way the white teacher interprets the interaction; if it is seen as a joke and nonthreatening, the student is verbally reprimanded, and the day goes on; however, if the teacher does sense a threat to his or her authority, the encounter escalates from a “simple verbal clash with an impertinent child into one interpreted as an intimidating threat”; in such a case the “self-representation epitomizes the very form the school seeks to exclude and eradicate. It is a masculine enactment of defiance played in a black key that is bound for punishment” (179).

Another role the black student often plays is that of Troublemaker. Unlike the Good Bad Boy, the Troublemaker does not hide behind humor or signifying to make his subjugation known. For instance, Ferguson describes a situation between black male student D'Andre and white teacher Laura. As the class discussed the L.A. Riots, some students said the white neighborhood of Simi Valley should have "gone up in smoke" instead of South Central L.A. When Laura mentioned that her uncle lives in Simi Valley, D'Andre commented, "I'd burn his house down too" (Ferguson 198). D'Andre was punished for his remark. According to Ferguson, "[Laura's] feelings were hurt that a child she had worked with closely in the classroom for almost a whole year would have said something so hateful to her. D'Andre was sent off to the Punishing Room for his remark. 'You must do something about that boy's attitude,' the teacher told the counselor. 'He's such a hostile kid. He says he doesn't like white people'" (198). The mis-communication between Laura and D'Andre happens on several levels. First, D'Andre looks at the situation through a critical lens toward the dominant narrative—why should poor black communities punish each other when it is the whites who are to blame for injustice? However, Laura wants to make the situation personal; in her opinion, if she had clearly established a rapport with D'Andre, he wouldn't want anyone in her family hurt. Second, D'Andre is expressing his own anger at the racism he faces as a black male student; however, Laura ignores the underlying anger and resentment and assumes his hate is aimed specifically at her, not at the white community in general. Although Troublemakers are the ones most likely to face disciplinary action and be extricated from the classroom, they serve a vital role in the school environment:

Troublemakers contest the school's claim to use neutral, race-blind criteria for judgments by articulating a counterdiscourse about a collective condition that contends that it is children's race that determines how punishment is meted out by school adults. They bring to the events of the school day knowledge and feelings about the racialized relations of power in the wider social world in which the school is embedded. They formulate a critique of the institutional racism that they encounter in school. This critique is experience in a myriad of ways: obliquely through the adoption of bodily attitudes, style, clothing, and language, as well as directly through political action using confrontational tactics. (198)

In other words, both the Troublemaker and the Good Bad Boy are important, especially within an inner city school where teachers are predominantly white but teach a large population of low SES minority students because both student types serve as the voice of the black community. They are not afraid to challenge the moments when their voice is supposed to be silent (when the Good Bad Boy signifies on the teacher) or blatantly and angrily point out racist ideologies (when the Troublemaker challenges the content or ideology being taught). However, because these personas are a threat to the idealistic classroom invested in the values and morals of white patriarchy while simultaneously claiming racial neutrality, both types also are aware of the fact that they will face disciplinary action.

When schools refuse to acknowledge the legitimacy of the black male student experience, it seems obvious that such students would become resistant to the education process. According to Downey and Pribesh,

The theory posits that black students resist schooling and other white-controlled institutions because of their historically subjugated relationship with whites and their perception of limited occupational opportunities. In an attempt to maintain their racial identity, black students develop peer groups that reject symbols and behaviors that are viewed as "white" (e.g., adhering to the student role). Academically successful black students, therefore, are at risk of being sanctioned by peers for "acting white" (Fordham and Ogbu 1986). (268)

Such behavior can be described as actively not-learning. According to Robert Kohl, "not-learning," which he defines as "the conscious decision not to learn something that you could learn" (XIII), is a choice students make within the classroom community. Kohl is quick to point out that "not-learning" is not a passive act: "Learning how to not-learn is an intellectual and social challenge; sometimes you have to work very hard at it. It consists of an active, often ingenious, willful rejection of even the most compassionate and well-designed teaching" (2). When students practice not-learning, they must distract themselves from the learning environment by "refusing to pay attention, acting dumb, scrambling one's thoughts, and overriding curiosity" (4). Such an act is willful and determined; it involves the student taking control of his education by staging his own silent protest against what is being taught or who is teaching it. Kohl explains, "Not learning tends to take place when someone has to deal with unavoidable challenges to her or his personal and family loyalties, integrity, and identity.... To agree to learn from a stranger who does not respect your integrity causes a major loss of self. The only alternative is to not-learn and reject the stranger's world" (6). To explain not-learning,



Kohl describes a nineteen year-old student named Rick who has learned to be “[a]n articulate, conscious not-learner starting in elementary school and honed his skills to perfection through middle and high school” (11). One particular challenge, though, was Introductory Algebra, which Rick failed three times although he is “very quick in math”:

There were emotional reasons Rick refused to learn algebra, but it’s essential to distinguish here between his decision to not-learn algebra and his ability to learn it. Rick could have learned algebra quite easily. There was nothing wrong with his mind, his ability to concentrate, or his ability to deal with abstract ideas. He could read, and he did read books he chose. He knew how to do very complex building projects and science experiments. He enjoyed playing around with athletic statistics and gambling odds. He just rejected the whole idea of being tested and measured against other students and, though he was forced to attend school, there was no way to force him to perform. He refused to learn and through that refusal gained power over his parents and teachers. As a free autonomous individual, he chose to not-learn, and that was what his parents and the school authorities didn’t know how to deal with. (11)

For students like Rick, not-learning is a lonely and frustrating road. Kohl explains, “Struggling to maintain integrity and hope may not always be the key to survival under conditions of oppression. Imitating your oppressors and trying to integrate yourself into their society might work better”; however, this would also require “swallowing one’s pride” and “giving up self-respect,” choices that are also hard for students to make (25).

All three roles—the Good Bad Boy, the Troublemaker, and the Not-Learner—are symptoms of the same problem: the marginalization of minority students (especially black male students) in the educational community. Such marginalization--through low expectations of students, disciplinary actions for expressing frustration, and not acknowledging their own cultural identities—create opportunities for students to react with rebellion and blatant anger. In order to fix the problem, according to Kohl, we must

fix the community: “Thus, before designing a strategy for teaching and learning, it’s essential to analyze the community. It is also crucial to research a variety of strategies, skills, techniques, and materials in order to be able to discover what has the greatest chance of working while at the same time maintaining students’ dignity and self-respect in a particular context. The curriculum should emerge from this analysis” (61). In this statement, we can define “community” in different ways: the classroom community—created in the relationships and interactions between teacher and students within a particular class period; the school community—created in the interactions between teachers, students, administrators, and other school personnel throughout the course of the day, week, school year, etc.; the neighboring community—created by the interaction between the school community and the neighboring communities (parents, businesses, local community members and leaders) that influence the school environment; and the collective consciousness—the defined “community” values and morals of the society at large. In examining one school community and its intermingling with the others, we will see how such communities influence each other.

### **Defining the Racial (and Racist) Community through the Narratives We Value**

When examining the ways that the collective consciousness filters down to classroom interactions with teachers and students, we must start by analyzing the community at large and how it interprets the dominant narrative. One type of community in particular that expresses a strong alignment with the white dominant narrative is one, such as an Appalachian community, that is predominantly white and of low socioeconomic status; such communities must grapple with holding onto whiteness while

facing ostracism for not living a middle-class or upper-middle-class life. Several theorists have explained the dilemma such communities have. According to Michelle Alexander, white elites have historically pitted poor whites against blacks. For instance, when black voting rights in the South were threatened due to literacy requirements, poor, illiterate whites feared that “they, as well as blacks, were in danger of losing the right to vote”; however, white elitist leaders “pursued an aggressive campaign of white supremacy in every state prior to black disenfranchisement” (34). When voting rights became about race rather than class, poor whites were more willing to support those in favor of disenfranchisement. In today’s drug war culture, she explains, poor whites are “far less likely to be imprisoned” due to their claim for whiteness: “The public symbols and constant reminders of black subjugation were [and still are] supported by the whites across the political spectrum, though the plight of poor whites remained largely unchanged. For them, the racial bribe was primarily psychological” (35). In other words, by claiming whiteness, although their circumstances don’t change, poor whites can at least feel superior in their racial affiliation.

In one particular Appalachian community, such claims played out in the rejection of “multicultural” texts. According to Carol Mason’s Reading Appalachia from Left to Right, it all started at the April 1974 meeting of the local Board of Education, which was scheduled to hear from the textbook selection committee and vote on the new adoption of language arts books for first through twelfth grade. The textbook committee outlined their ten months of work selecting textbooks that especially matched the “state-sanctioned mandate to include multiethnic and multiracial literature in the new

curriculum” (3). After hearing from the committee, School Board member Alice Moore objected to the books claiming they were connected to ““anti-American trends, and particular concerns over lessons in dialect that she and others referred to as ‘ghetto’ language” (3). The fact that Moore had not read the new textbooks did not slow down the momentum of the textbook controversy. Although Moore only managed to delay the textbook purchase, she became an icon and a mouthpiece for the protesters who fought the textbook adoption. While those supporting the textbook adoption saw the new books as “artful communication in relevant multiethnic social contexts,” those opposed went as far as to say the books “advocated unprincipled relativism, promoted antagonistic behavior, contained obscene material, put down Jesus Christ, and upheld communism” (3). Moore was not alone in her fight against the textbooks. Even though in the end, all but the most controversial texts were approved for classroom use three to two by the board members, and the controversial texts would be kept in the school libraries and could be checked out with parental permission, the vote did not end the debate. The following school year, twenty five percent of county students did not report to school the first day in protest, two thousand people attended an anti-textbook rally in a poor coal-mining community just outside the city, three thousand five hundred coal miners in the area went on strike to show their approval of the textbook opposition, and protests also shut down public transportation (3).

Although the controversy was never argued to be based on racial tension<sup>20</sup>, what is interesting is how it began both by ignoring whiteness while simultaneously aligning the local community with an American identity defined by whiteness. By using the term “ghetto,” Moore, according to Mason, connected the anti-American nature of the texts with their “blackness” and created an opposition between “American language” and Black English. Mason explains Moore’s objection as follows: “her objection to studying dialects seemed to be based on a fear of exposing Appalachian kids to black vernacular and coercing them to practice it” (46). Such language was “antithetical to endorsing ‘standard American speech,’ which she did not attempt to define” (47). It did not matter that many schools, especially those in outlying coal-mining communities, had their own difficulties with Standard English, by aligning themselves with the “standard American speech” proponents, protesters declared themselves a part of “white” America, with all its privileges. To continue this line of reasoning, according to Carol Mason, the fight over the proposed textbooks was not seen as a racial issue; instead, it was a “community” issue. Mason explains that protesters believed “the selected texts had the power to interfere with students’ sense of community—their sense of belonging to family, to Appalachia, and to America. According to the protesters, the multiethnic language arts curriculum represented a battle for ‘our children’s minds’ and ‘control over our children,’ who were being subjected to an ‘alien’ philosophy espoused by the books” (7). The protesters had a clear “we” in their minds as they made their argument: “We,” the white

---

<sup>20</sup> Mason explains that although the KKK was involved in many of the debates and in burning a cross at the mouth of Campbell’s Creek, such racist displays were done by outsiders who used the textbook controversy to add fuel to their own fires. According to Mason, such displays did not necessarily represent the attitudes of local residents.

Appalachian Americans invested in “our” whiteness, have “clear linguistic, literary, and moral standards,” and “they” were encroaching on those standards. But the “they” is not as clear. It could be a reference to the “multicultural” identities exhibited in the new textbooks. Mason relates the argument to the term “ethnicity”: while it can be synonymous with minority cultures, the protesters instead used the term to define their own culture, or “a shared sense of geography, traits, tradition, and practices that characterize a group of people” (8). The irony here is clear; in a culture where whiteness is invisible, the protesters had to fall back on the term “Appalachian” to hide the fact that they did not want their curriculum polluted with anything that was not part of their chosen “white” ethnicity.

There were two forms of pollution, or corruption, that the new textbooks represented. The first was a corruption of ideology. Many of the texts listed as controversial could have fallen into this category, such as Beat poets like Allen Ginsberg, Sigmund Freud, George Orwell’s Animal Farm, and Arthur Miller’s The Crucible (“The Great Textbook War”). The most widely debated texts, however, were those written by black authors. American Public Media tells the story of Moore’s introduction to a particular approved text The Autobiography of Malcolm X:

After the board approved the motion to adopt the books, Moore's husband showed her a quote from *The Autobiography of Malcolm X*.

"All praise is due to Allah that I moved to Boston when I did," the book said. "If I hadn't, I'd probably still be a brainwashed black Christian."

"Look what you just approved!" Moore's husband exclaimed. (“The Great Textbook War”)

Taken out of context, the text is insulting Christianity and declaring Islam as the true religion. How would white Christian children not be corrupted by such texts? The most controversial text, however, was Eldridge Cleaver's Soul on Ice. According to Mason, the book "or, more precisely, its notorious analysis of rape as an insurrectionary act, was cited often as the smoking gun, the evidence that corruption and 'moral degradation' were what the curriculum had to offer" (Mason 19-20). Texts such as Cleaver's, local minister Donald Dobbs argued, represented the most immoral of blacks and whites and should not be read by children (20). However, more importantly, it represented the fear of black men and their insatiable appetite for innocent white women. Another controversial textbook that corresponded with such a fear was what textbook committee Chair Nell Woods explained first started Moore's objections:

Wood remembered, "Several times I had this book pointed out to me. And in fact, at one of the meetings one of the protesters said, 'This is what it's all about'... Here's a little girl with a bouquet and a little black boy smelling the bouquet. And my contention is that this began racism in March (of 1974)." From Wood's point of view, protesters were objecting to the coupling of a black boy and a white girl, with the bouquet of daisies representing a romantic gesture or a sexual symbol. In such a reading, the image is an even more insidious version of the idea that black men rape white women. Alice Moore's portrayal of the rape of white women as a black revolutionary practice [Cleaver's text] and the teaching of dialectology as an indoctrination in black vernacular was seemingly underscored by the symbolic imagery of a black boy smelling a white girl's flowers. (Mason 51)

Although Cleaver's text and the cover of an elementary school textbook may seem like two separate issues, for Mason (and others within the community), both were endemic of a larger problem: the corruption of the (white) Appalachian culture of the area. This corruption comes through exposure to inadequate language or language that does not

represent the perceived dominant culture and to images that threaten the “innocence” of such a culture. Mason brings up an interesting point about the way in which the textbook debate illustrates the way education signifies the perceived communal identity. She argues that the 1974 textbook controversy illustrated the following:

These types of objections pointed to a fundamental truth about the power of textbooks and the process of education, which is that our sense of ourselves as “a people” is instilled in us by institutions such as schools, where we learn to relate to one another through verbal and written skills. Schools teach us a common language and conventions of communication that give a community its sense of identity, a sense of belonging, of being one of “the people,” or *ethnos*, to use the Greek term. (7)

In my opinion, Mason is giving too much credit to the schools and not enough to the dominant culture that informs it. Keep in mind that in most cases, texts were being challenged not because of what they said (as mentioned earlier, Moore and many other vocal opponents to the texts had not even read them) but for what they represented—a threat to the standard White curriculum the schools had always known and that supported the community’s investment in whiteness. As the textbook controversy raged on, it became clear that the community defined itself in terms of whiteness and refused to accept any other communal definition. Mason argues that the inclusion of multicultural texts, or as she puts it “new methods of schooling” can “alter that production of ethnicity, that production of understanding ourselves according to conventions of communication and norms of language usage” (7). I find her use of the word “alter” significant—it doesn’t expand or become more inclusive; it alters, changes, disrupts the status quo and the norm of linguistic and written traditions that are accepted as a natural part of the



community. For instance, when local minister Donald Dobbs spoke up at a school board meeting, he argued that the textbooks “were lowering standards by teaching students poor grammar in the form of dialectology” (Mason 19). Most students, being Appalachian, did not speak Standard English to begin with, especially those from large mining communities where some of the most notable protests were held. However, “Appalachian” English was fine...just as long as it wasn’t Black.

There were members of the community, however, who argued that in order for the community to be more inclusive, it needed to embrace the multiculturalism that already existed there. One particular speaker was not afraid to point out the racism he saw embedded in the arguments of the protesters. Local pastor Ronald English—a strong black leader in the community, a member of the local chapter of the NAACP, and a member of the textbook review committee—argued that the textbooks were needed to instill “‘our collective commitment to racial balance and racial harmony,’ not, he added, ‘in terms of bodies being integrated but in terms of awareness and lifestyles’” (20). He argued that integration into schools was achieved “commendably and calmly” after *Brown vs. Board of Education* and that the new textbooks would be the next logical progression. English makes an important distinction between absolute Truth and experience in texts: “‘I think they have a message from the other side of the American experience that ought to be told. I would say also that the NAACP has endorsed the

multicultural approach as well as some of the kinds of texts that I have seen written in the supplementary materials” (21). His argument is that in order to advance as a culture, we need to be able to acknowledge the experiences of all those represented in the culture.

However, Moore rebuffs him by valuing only her own definition of culture:

Booker T. Washington is from this area and is a highly admired man in this area. I found one reference to Booker T. Washington in this series of books under objection, and this one reference is derogatory—a poem that is derogatory to Booker T. Washington. Now, I haven’t found anything that holds him up. (21)

Moore infers that she doesn’t mind someone with darker skin represented in the text, as long as that person comes from her culture and reaffirms her values. However, thinking beyond those intellectual and communal borders should be, in her opinion, out of the question for local students.

The irony behind the textbook controversy was how it ended. Partially because outside sources such as the KKK had become involved and tainted the community as a group of extreme racists (and partially because once the press died down so did the controversy), by the spring of 1975, the textbooks were in classrooms and life had moved on. However, the need to keep the local community invested in whiteness continued with the white flight of the 1990s.

### **White Flight and Economic/Racial Segregation in a Post-Integration Society**

As Mason points out, the goal of many opponents to the new textbooks was to protect their “culture” and community. However, between 1990 and 2000, many white families in particular neighborhoods in the community found it easier to leave rather than to watch the “corruption” of their communities as displaced blacks from other parts of

town took over the East End and West Side. With chemical plants closing and city renovations relocating black families to whiter parts of town, many residents who could afford to move left for the suburbs while those who couldn't afford to leave (black and white) were forced into what became a low socioeconomic inner city community.

According to local journalist Mandy Rorrer reporting in 2004, 15 percent of city residents were black, "but those residents are not spread equally through the city's neighborhoods." The more affluent neighborhood in the city "has a black population of about 1 percent - about 80 individuals out of 7,500 in the 2000 Census." However, low-income communities closer to the heart of the city have become darker in complexion as whites moved out. According to Rorrer, between the 1990 and 2000 census, the population of what is known as the West Side dropped by 3,000 people to 2,300; however, "Whites outnumbered blacks by roughly 6 to 1 in 1990; by 2000, that had dropped to 2 to 1," illustrating that more blacks had moved in to take the place of the exiting whites. The reasons for the white exodus are not clear, according to Rorrer. As chemical plants opened up in suburban areas (and factory work diminished downtown), many working-class whites left to find better paying jobs; others left the state entirely looking for better-paying jobs. According to Homer Davis, a former NAACP president, "In the 1970s, there were communities in the eastern part of [the county] that no longer exist....Any numbers you get for [the state] are going to be skewed, because people are leaving the state" (Rorrer). Those with little financial means, however, had nowhere left to go and were left stuck on either the East Side or the West Side, and according to Rorrer, those left "make less money, are less likely to own a car and are more likely to

rent their home.” According to United States Census information collected in 2010, currently the entire state has a much larger population that identifies as white compared to those who identify as black (93.8% white compared to 3.6% black and 1.5% biracial). In the county in question, however, those numbers shift somewhat as 88.9% identify as white, 7.6% identify as black, and 2.1% identify as biracial. Finally, in the above mentioned city, 78.4% identify as white, 15.5% identify as black, and 3.2% identify as biracial (“State and County Quick Facts”). Also, as demonstrated by Appendix 1: Change in City’s Population by Race and Age from 2000-2010, the white flight continued between 2000 and 2010 with the white population down 6.33% between the 2000 and 2010 census (2,723 residents) (denoted by red in the chart), and the black and biracial populations up 0.57% and 62.43% respectively (denoted as green and blue respectively). What is most interesting about the chart is the depiction of age mobility. Those, both black and white, who were between the ages of 30 and 50 were more likely to leave town; these are also the prime ages for employment. The group between the ages of 50 and 70 (retirement age) were the largest growing group in this period. Such statistics reinforce the idea that those who were able to leave and find employment elsewhere did; those who were trapped with limited means stayed.

Although Rorrer is quick to point out that racial tension was not an issue that caused white flight, her article does discuss the struggles of school integration. As part of her article, she interviewed Ethel Porter, an eighty-year-old retired nurse who was one of the first black students integrated into local white schools. Porter recalls that it was so rough that her two younger brothers opted to go into the U.S. Army rather than graduate:

"People talk about Birmingham and Selma [Ala.]," she said. "But [this city] wasn't much better" (Rorrer).

Porter also points out that black residents do express anger toward the city due to the demolition of the Triangle district, or what was originally the "poor black" part of town. It had been where "prostitution," "bootleggers," and other criminal activity had been contained. However, with new Interstates coming through and other urban development projects underway, by the 1980s and 1990s the city took over properties under eminent domain rulings, and criminal activity spread throughout the West Side and East End, where middle-class whites and blacks lived. According to Porter, "The Triangle District happened because it could. The people stood up and said no, but it didn't make a difference. They moved [to the East End] because this is where they were pushed. It left a bitter taste; it left distrust" (Rorrer). As the crime that was once contained within the Triangle district spread throughout East and West neighborhoods, once middle-class neighborhoods changed to inner-city communities with a low socioeconomic status and high crime rate. It also increased segregation in local high schools.

As mentioned in Rorrer's article, over the last several decades, containment has once again become the name of the community game as white upper- and middle-class communities were established in the hills around the city and black communities gathered around the flats of the East and West Sides.<sup>21</sup> According to the school system's "Data" page, the school system is made up of eight different high schools; however, only two

---

<sup>21</sup> The flats refer to the flat land around the rivers that run through the city. The hills refer to the steeper, inclined neighborhoods surrounding the flats. While considered part of the East or West Side, they are predominantly made up of middle-class white communities.

(both classified as urban) are composed of a black population of over 100 students (SCHS and CHS) while two (classified as rural) have a black population too insignificant to calculate (HHHS and SHS), according to the state department of education (See Appendix 2: County High Schools Composition 2012-13). The two schools with the largest black population do share some similarities. Their Language Arts Proficiency scores from 2012-2013 are similar, with CHS slightly ahead in overall and white student proficiency and slightly behind on black student proficiency (See Appendix 4: County High Schools Language Proficiency Scores 2012-13). What is interesting when looking at the data is that in all schools except for SCHS and CHS the white and overall proficiency rates almost mirror each other, whose black proficiency scores lower the overall proficiency. This may infer that the county overall is committed to language instruction that is more invested in strategies geared toward white students rather than minority students. The main difference between the two urban schools may also be a major cause of the disparity in their graduation rates: the high number of Low SES<sup>22</sup> students at CHS. According to the data in Appendix 2, in the 2012-13 school year, with a population of approximately 1,000, SCHS had a Low SES population of 384 (approximately 1/3 of the students). With a population of almost 1300 students, CHS had a Low SES population of 601 (approximately 1/2 of the students). In comparing this with Appendix 3: County High School's Graduation Rate 2012-13, graduation rates for all student groups represented were lower at CHS in comparison to SCHS.

---

<sup>22</sup> Socioeconomic Status

## **Building a Holistic Community, Inside and Out**

CHS represents the perfect storm in terms of student achievement: a high inner-city population with high numbers of low SES students and a large segregated black population. The goal of creating the school atmosphere, however, has focused on making CHS its own community. According to Herbert Kohl, the goal of any school is to create a community that fits its student body: “Thus, before designing a strategy for teaching and learning, it’s essential to analyze the situation and learn about the community. It is also crucial to research a variety of strategies, skills, techniques, and materials in order to be able to discover what has the greatest chance of working while at the same time maintaining students’ dignity and self-respect in a particular context” (“I Won’t Learn From You” 61). In order to create a more inclusive environment, its principals, faculty, and students have worked to create a diverse environment. For instance, at seven a.m. the day begins, and students mill around outside the school building as soul music from a satellite radio station blares over the intercom, the choice of principal Mr. G. Thus sets the soulful yet contradictory tone for the rest of the day—in a predominantly white state with mostly white (female) teachers, CHS also touts one of the state’s few black male principals (and the only black high school principal) as well as one of the largest black student populations in the state. Within such a precarious situation, CHS has worked to define itself through creating its own definition of the school’s community; however, it must also battle outside stereotypes that are prescribed to the East End and West Side created through both the racist history of the area (as seen through the textbook controversy) and the segregation of black and low SES students into CHS (as well as

SCHS). Schools such as CHS must find a way to move beyond the social narrative imposed on an “inner city” school and expose the potential in its student body.

CHS was first opened in 1988 to consolidate East End and West Side schools, both of which suffered from low enrollment due to the white flight mentioned above. As the school’s website touts, and Mr. G is often heard saying, CHS was built with the idea of “a World Class, 21<sup>st</sup> Century education to keep pace with the rapid changes taking place in business, industry, and higher education thus enabling our students to compete on par with students throughout the world and not just locally...resulting from the advent of globalization” (“History”). The website goes on to list the school’s specific objectives:

- (Modeling High Expectations)  
To encourage intelligent behavior by upholding and modeling high expectations for achievement.
- (Providing Learners Individualized Assistance)  
To provide each learner a personalized education in an environment which systematically takes into account individual student characteristics and effective instructional practices.
- (Helping Students Become Information, Communication, and Technology Literate)  
To foster the spirit of inquiry, students will access, process, evaluate, interpret, and disseminate information – while developing technological competence – as they become critical thinkers and life-long learners.
- (Helping Students Become Critical Thinkers)  
To provide an atmosphere where students feel free to explore and develop their individual strengths, talents and values, while understanding and accepting the values and talents of others as they seek to come to terms with their environment.
- (Preparing Students to Work Cooperatively, Responsibly)  
To prepare students as global citizens who work cooperatively, responsibly and productively within family, business and community. (“Mission and Goals”)

Such statements infer an education built on holistic understanding of not only individual students and their representative cultures but also a need to build the school as a



community and as a piece of the outer communities that students will enter. Also, both the second and third goals focus on critical thinking, with the third goal (“Helping Students Become Critical Thinkers”) inviting students to think through not only abstract concepts taught in class, but also “understanding and accepting the values and talents of others.” Throughout the campus, such community is exhibited in the way students treat each other: there are no student-enforced segregated racial or class groups. Students of all colors and genders sit in groups at lunch talking or playing games in the common courtyard during lunch. Inter-racial couples are often seen holding hands in the hall, and code meshing is just part of the culture. However, space for difference is allowed as well, such as with the very visible LGBT community organized around the school’s GSA (Gay-Straight Alliance) which works to educate the school and outside communities and encourages teachers to post “safe zone” stickers at their doors for students in need.<sup>23</sup>

On the inside, then, CHS is very much a community of students, teachers, and administrators working together; however, on the outside, there is resistance against Mr. G because of his embodiment of a black man in power over a high school in a predominantly white community and state. Often appearing in local, state, and sometimes national news, Mr. G has demonstrated that a holistic approach to identity means accepting himself and his students for who they are, and for Mr. G, his identity rests firmly in his embodiment as a black man from the local coal fields who “made it” and became an influential figure within the school system, county, and state. This illegibility

---

<sup>23</sup> The GSA organization also led the school’s Constitution Day assembly by highlighting Supreme Court cases that have enforced the rights of safety and freedom for all Americans.

is hard for many parents and white community members to swallow, especially since Mr. G is not afraid to perform his black masculinity by challenging white expectations. In one particular controversy that made national news in 2012, parents complained about Mr. G's insistence that students stand during morning observances, which included the playing of the "Star-Spangled Banner" and the saying of the Pledge of Allegiance. Parents did not object on such observances every day, just on Fridays when Giles ended the morning observances by playing "Lift Ev'ry Voice and Sing," also known as "The Negro National Hymn" (See Appendix 5: "Lift Ev'ry Voice and Sing" by James Weldon Johnson (1900) for the lyrics of the song). In December 2012, two students and a parent went to the school board to complain, not that students were made to stand during all morning observances, but that students were made to stand during the specific Friday observance when what they called the "Black National Anthem" was played (Boucher). According to Kim Bailey, the mother protesting the song, her son "chose not to stand and was sent to the office several times because of his decision, she said. She also said [G] made statements over the loudspeaker about the situation that 'ostracized' her son"; in her opinion, there was only one national anthem, and it should be honored as such (Boucher). G commented that the song was not meant to stand for any racial meaning but represented the school motto that "Everybody is somebody" at the school. The song itself represents the idea that while hard times are bound to happen, hope can still be found: "Stony the road we trod,/ Bitter the chast'ning rod,/ Felt in the days when hope unborn had died;/ Yet with a steady beat,/ Have not our weary feet/ Come to the place for which our fathers sighed?" ("Lift Ev'ry Voice" 794). Although G claims that he never made a

statement declaring the song as the “Black National Anthem,” the fact that the song comes from his experiences as a black man and was written by a black man taints the song for white parents and community members, just as the picture of the black boy smelling the white girl’s flowers did previous decades ago. In January 2013, once again the school board stepped in and ruled that students should not be told to stand during any morning observance. The issue, according to a family friend of the student and mother had nothing to do with race; instead, it had to do with the fact that the student ““believes that something is being forced on him that should not be forced on him”” (Boucher). The board agreed, and board member Pete Thaw argued, ““Our business is to educate children”” (Boucher), not make them listen to controversial (black) songs. This issue illustrates the interconnectedness of all overlapping community: you cannot separate the school culture from the community influences. Also, you cannot separate the community from the collective consciousness.

Finally, within the school community, G represents black male success. According to Julie Landsman, the most important resource for black male students is a black male role model that embodies the potential and ultimate success black men can earn outside of legible arenas such as sports, comedy, music, etc. Landsman describes the discussion between a black college student serving as mentor and a black male high school student:

Across from Travis is a man who looks like him, who is an intellectual like him, and who is black like him. And I am sure David’s blackness is crucial to the transfixed and joyous look on Travis’s face.

Travis has often been teased by other students about being “too white,” about being too smart, about not being hip enough or “black” enough. His teachers have told him that there are many black men who look like him, who are smart and studious and

who do not lose their blackness. Now, I believe our words seem to make sense to him. He sees a black man who is smart and who studies and who is black, too, and something seems to have clicked for him, settled in in a pleasurable way. (23-24)

For CHS, Mr. G is the personification of the process of growing up black, and every black male student knows his story. Mr. G tells of growing up poor in a three-room house with six brothers and sisters in a coal-mining town. When students think of him, he wants them to see him through his own history:

My rhetorical style has become pretty much a sort of not a contrived but an intended aspect of my delivery. What I've learned is that first of all, I don't see myself the way most people see me. They see me as a stoical, professional no-nonsense black-and-white hard core elitist sort of a person, and someone who is powerful and intimidating and a force to be reckoned with. I see myself as little Clinton... who had nothing, and we had no inside toilet, and we raised hogs and chickens and mom canned. I cut hair for fifty cents as a senior and sold whiskey bottles to bootleggers. I had three pairs of pants my senior year and my sister bought them. At graduation all my clothes but my underwear was hand-me-downs, and I had to wear one blue sock and one black sock. (Personal Interview)

Every student at CHS knows these stories, and they know that Mr. G had dreams of being “the first black NFL coach to win the Super Bowl.” However, he got in trouble his junior year and was unable to participate in sports, and his senior year his team was one of the worst in the state, so there were no scholarship opportunities for him. He ended up mining coal and then joining the military; afterwards, he was able to attend a local black college through the GI bill.

Mr. G personifies this history through both his storytelling and his rhetorical code meshing, proving he can both walk the black walk and talk the black talk. His rhetorical style plays to the audience in much the same way Obama plays to his audiences. For

instance, at the first assembly of the year, all students sat silently listening to Mr. G speak except for the first-year students. Mr. G stopped what he was saying and walked over to where the senior class was sitting. “They don’t know yet,” he said, pointing a thumb behind him at the freshman class. The senior class laughed. Again, he said, “They don’t know, but they will learn. We have to teach them.” This direct address reinforces the idea of community in several ways: first, it was sending a message to the freshman class that they were a “they” and had not earned their community membership yet; second, it created a “we”—the students who were following the rules, being respectful, and taking in the stories; and finally, it was spoken through a call and response style that was recognizable in black culture. This last statement is what makes Mr. G a role model for the Twenty-First Century: He refuses to play up to white expectations and instead embraces his blackness. According to Mr. G,

I was not a full-fledged citizen and cared for compared to my white counterpart. And then to live through the 1960s and all those scars and wounds. My attitude reflects the value system that I have developed over the years. It is not going to be that no one has a place here. It is not going to be that one group has a space and others don’t. (Personal Interview)

Mr. G plays out this philosophy in his own personification, through his speech, his actions (the overall caricature of Mr. G that those throughout the community envision is his large straw cowboy hat and the claw device he uses to pick up trash around the high school every day). He explains that although CHS is the magnet school for the arts, it is not something he stresses because he does not want to limit the legibility of the school. Also, he doesn’t want such activities to be talent-based but a means for various students

to explore interests in sports, the arts, and other avenues. In other words, through his use of language and the way he organizes the school, Mr. G exemplifies that exclusion does not have a place in education; no matter how you talk or where you come from, you are welcome, respected, and valued at CHS.

### **Creating Community in the Classroom: Building Relationships Through Language and Action**

The smallest educational community, and arguably the most influential, is the classroom itself; however, as white teachers work to create a positive learning environment for all students, they must understand the resistance, anger, and frustration that black students, especially males, bring with them to class. CHS has almost eighty teachers; of the 28 surveyed, only two identified as African American and three identified as male (one African American male responded), illustrating the majority of the CHS faculty to be white and female. The major questions such teachers need to wrestle with is how to read against the dominant narrative to help move past cultural legibilities and stereotypes.

According to educator Julie Landsman, such a wide gap in experiences between the teacher and her students can create mis-communications and misunderstandings: “A gesture, a tone of voice, a casualness about learning a name, the way a white person turns aside when a black student wants to talk or has his hand up: all these accumulate in the lives of the students who enter my room. It is all we can do to find common ground” (7-8). Oftentimes what is most obvious, however, is the differences, not the commonalities. As Landsman explains,

There are certain things that I, a white person, cannot *know*. According to my American Heritage Dictionary, to *know* is to “understand as fact or truth, to apprehend clearly and with certainty; to have established or fixed in mind or memory.” My memories are white. I cannot *know* what it is like to be another color than my own white color. I cannot *know* what it is like to be poor.

To *understand* is defined as: “to perceive the meaning of, grasp the idea of, comprehend, to be thoroughly familiar with, apprehend clearly the character, nature, or subtleties of, to be conversant.” I am convinced that if I can *imagine*, I might be able to *understand*. (12)

Her imagining, therefore, means taking a reflexive position by putting herself mentally and emotionally in the place of her students:

I was raised to believe I will always eat. I cannot say I know what it is like to be afraid I will not eat. To understand hungry students, then, what I have to imagine is wanting for food.

I am someone who was raised to believe I should be welcomed wherever I go. If I am a reader of fiction, I might try to *imagine* the character, a young black woman, being followed around each store she enters, living in the suburbs, trying to find clothes for her children before school starts.

I believe we are all entitled to the things I have: food, warmth, a house, a way to get from home to work and back again, a safe place for my child to grow, the freedom to wander through stores without being followed or harassed. Because I have had these basic necessities, I have to continually imagine what it is like not to have such things. (13)

For Landsman, this imagining is a “way in”—a way of thinking through the experiences of her students and understanding that not everyone lives a white middle-class life.

Landsman and others also advocate for honesty with students, especially about our own limitations in terms of understanding. To illustrate, Landsman tells the following story:

One morning Leah was talking about her daughter, Jamika. She said that she needed to find some day care for her just for two days a week. I said something about welfare, and asked if they gave her a voucher for day-care expenses.

“You think I take welfare, huh, Landsman? I don’t take no welfare. My moms takes care of Jamika, ‘cept now she got a job Mondays and Wednesdays. You think we all on welfare, huh, jus’ cause we black and we got kids. You take welfare when you had your son?”

I told her, no, I didn’t take welfare. And I was silent. She turned back to her computer that day, hurt. I apologized quietly and went back to my desk. I felt my face fall, my cheeks flush up. After all these years I still make classic mistakes in unsubtle ways, like the assumption of welfare, and in subtle ways, with a tone of voice, a gesture.

Leah came back the next day, full of stories, and showed me pictures of her child. She has always been good at starting over. (16)

This moment is crucial, especially in comparison to earlier stories. First, in comparison to the sympathetic white teacher of Chapter One, Landsman acknowledges her shortcomings, not just to the reader but also to her student when she verbally apologizes. Also, the silence afterward is significant—rather than changing the subject or moving on with class, both student and teacher take a moment to acknowledge the miscommunication that has happened and reflect on the cultural meaning behind it. Third, there is a moving-on in terms of building the relationship, but that momentum of that forgiveness is initiated by the student who “has always been good at starting over.” Such an acknowledgement means that there is not only an act of forgiveness on the part of the student but also a willingness to continue cultivating a relationship. Finally, in comparison with the Good Bad Boy or Troublemaker, the student is not sent out for speaking against the teacher. Instead, both student and teacher gain insight from the



exchange and can grow in their relationship as well as in the understanding of the two different experiences being brought together.

According to Gary Howard, honesty is only one part of building a strong classroom community. For him, honesty is important because it allows teachers to move beyond the dominant narrative: “Honesty begins for Whites when we learn to question our own assumptions and acknowledge the limitations of our culturally conditioned perceptions of truth” (73). Being honest isn’t just acknowledging awkward moments with students but understanding our own constructed truths and how they affect the community we want to create. As Howard says, “When White educators acknowledge both our insecurity and privilege when dealing with issues of race, and when we begin to question the influence of the dominance paradigm in our work with students, we actually gain credibility with our colleagues and students from other racial and ethnic groups” (74).

However, honesty is only the first step in building relationships and a strong community with students. The next step for Howard is empathy. He explains, “Empathy means ‘to feel with.’ Empathy requires the suspension of assumptions, the letting go of ego, and the release of the privilege of non-engagement. In this sense, empathy is the antithesis to dominance. It requires all of our senses and focuses our attention on the perspective and worldview of another person” (77). Much like Landsman’s imagining, Howard’s idea of empathy moves the teacher to take on the mental and emotional burdens of the student to understand his or her worldview. However, unlike Landsman, Howard’s concept focuses on the significance of reality. While Landsman imagines fictional characters to understand her students, Howard wants to understand the students’

reality. However, imagination is still part of the equation. In listening to an Iranian friend tell of his life and experiences, Howard says, “I did not *become* Iranian or Muslim when I listened to my friend’s story, but I could attune my empathetic capacity to his feelings as a father. I could not fully *know* what he was experiencing, but I could be *with* him in this moment” (77). Therefore, for Howard empathy isn’t imagining life as another character but building an emotional bridge between his experiences and those of “others” around him.

Next, teachers must be willing to advocate for students. As Howard says, “Every organization has its own circle of power, an in-group of influence that is populated by those individuals who, through a combination of numbers, position, resources, and access to privileged information, are able to exert disproportionate control over the decision-making process” (80). Howard believes teachers need to serve as a conduit both for opening doors for marginalized students and “reeducating” colleagues who “are not ready for such inclusion” (80). This becomes a way of connecting communities, as we work to reeducate the public about who our students are and advocating for them in terms of jobs, honor societies, and other events. To create advocacy at CHS, all assemblies will be run by students and faculty, with no outside speakers involved. The first such assembly, held 17 September 2014 (the annual Constitution Day Assembly) was conducted by the GSA (Gay-Straight Alliance) focusing on the ways marginalized people and/or groups have advocated for themselves and used constitutional law to change discriminatory situations. Tied to advocacy, according to Howard, is the last step—action. We must be willing to model action for our students in the following ways:

1. To know who we are racially and culturally
2. To learn about and value cultures different from our own
3. To view social reality through the lens of multiple perspectives
4. To understand the history and dynamics of dominance
5. To understand in ourselves and our students a passion for justice and the skills for social action (Howard 85)

These acts of acknowledgement—verbal acts as well as modeling—demonstrate that we are sincere; instead of just talking a good talk, we walk the walk of critical interrogation and justice.

One of the main philosophies of CHS is that all students can succeed through a strong, supportive community. According to Mr. G,

The troubled kids are trying to find themselves. High school for many of those kids is a challenging time as they deal with those issues. High school teachers need to be cognizant of those eyes on them looking to see how to be an adult, and whether a teacher accepts that or not is inconsequential. Many students, even those who have the ideal situation, there's still a nihilism, a distrust of adults. You may not listen to parents, but you might a teacher.

For the black males, you have to find the kids out and develop meaningful relationships. Look past all that [stereotypes and legibilities]. First, try to get to who that kid really is, and relate to that and let them know you are on their side....

They are wanting someone to tell them what to do or who to be. We need to be consistent in what we say and do and how we say and do them. I have high expectations and that's how I operate with them from the most casual to most formal situations. (Personal Interview)

According to the survey completed by CHS teachers, the faculty of CHS have contradictory ideas on student experience and language. All but one (27 out of 28) agreed or strongly agreed that knowledge comes through students' personal experience, and all either agreed or strongly agreed that regardless of gender or ethnic background all

students can succeed if given the right training; however, all but one also agreed or strongly agreed that the main focus of a composition classroom should be “writing correctly and speaking correctly.” In other words, teachers are not making the correlation between experience and language.

Because of this lack of correlation, black male students and other minority students enter the high school environment demonstrating resistance to especially the language arts classroom. For instance, in Mrs. S’s freshman English classroom at the beginning of the school year, resistance and suspicion can still be felt. Because Mrs. S (a white teacher with six years’ experience at CHS) has no formal seating chart organized, the resistance to writing and speaking is apparent through the spaces students choose to occupy.

Organized into groups of four or five, the groups are segregated by race and gender. In the front of the room are three groups made up of predominantly white and what look to be middle-class students (based on clothing and appearance). In the middle of the room are groups of predominantly light-skinned and white male students as well as a group of black females. In the back are two groups made up of predominantly black male students: One group of three black male students; another of two black males, a black female, and two white males. This choice demonstrates those willing and eager to learn are in the front of the room where they can more easily access the teacher’s attention while those in the back are focused on avoiding the teacher’s gaze and hiding from participation.

The two groups in the back catch my interest the most. In the former group, a particular boy (M), sits with his body slumped. When Mrs. S is working with other students, he brags to the two girls in front of him how he has better grades than they do

and he is smarter; however, as the teacher circles around, he pulls his head down in his hoodie so as not to be called on. Only when the teacher turns on the mic giving students a chance to lead the question and answer portion of the class do the black males in the former group perk up. J throws his hand in the air and gets to play MC as he goes over the grammar warm-up on the board. As the grammar lesson starts, Mrs. S sits down on a desk to one side of the room, visually representing the power shift from her to her students, who start to debate whether “this year civics seem to be my favorite subject” is correct. Rather than using the terms “right” or “wrong,” Mrs. S chimes in by saying that English can be “quirky” in that because civics is one class, it is considered one thing. As the discussion continues, she calls on one student (N) who has his hand up, but she accidentally mispronounces his name. For the rest of the class, N refuses to participate, slumping down in his seat.

As students begin to listen to the teacher read To Kill a Mockingbird, Mrs. S stops to discuss a scene where the teacher is critical of Scout’s ability to read. When Mrs. S asks why the teacher (who is white) might be suspicious, another black male student from the mixed group in the back answers, “Because she’s black.” Although this doesn’t fit with the details of the story, it is an interesting point that illustrates the student’s own suspicion of white teachers. To gauge how students feel about teachers, Mrs. S stops and asks if they have ever had a teacher who was always right or needed things done “their way.” Students nod in agreement, but no one is willing to go out on a limb and say anything incriminating. The importance of the question, though, is not that it leads to a discussion but that it opens a door for future trust. In essence, Mrs. S is revealing the

“game” that some teachers play and acknowledging the hegemonic relationship between teachers and students. By giving this wink to the system, she illustrates that she is willing to listen to students who do feel threatened in her class and in the educational system as a whole.

After reading through the chapter, Mrs. S moves into having students read through rough drafts explaining a time when the student had to overcome obstacles. As she moves around the room, she asks N, who is still reluctant to work, to get his draft out. As the teacher moves on, knowing I am also an English teacher, N asks me if I want to read his draft. His wording is interesting; he never implies he wants me to read it—he just wants to know if I am interested. His essay explains briefly in strong Black English his life in New York before he moved to his current state. He explains the bullets flying and how unsafe he “be feelin.” I wondered what Mrs. S would say about the language. In the earlier grammar lesson, she had stressed the need to code switch. She said that as a coach, she often wore sweats to games, or when she was lying around the house, she would wear comfortable, old clothes. But when she was working, she dressed her best. She said her English is the same as well; she talks differently in the classroom and at home and on the field.

In discussing the lesson with her, Mrs. S acknowledges resistance in the classroom but realizes that such resistance normally comes from personal experiences that have happened outside her classroom and are not toward her lessons. In other words, she acknowledges that students have bad days, and those bad days don’t stop at her classroom door. However, she allows students to make important decisions about

classroom structure, like allowing them to choose where they sit, to make sure that students are comfortable and feel some ownership in the class. In terms of language acquisition, she says that she does move students from where they are to a more “Standard” English as students progress from narrative to informative and argumentative types of writing: “Students are encouraged to adopt a casual tone, such as language with narratives, then move into more formal language when writing informational and argumentative pieces. The same holds true for the oral language—I express the difference between and among environments and we examine how we adapt our language to fit each environment” (Personal Interview). However, as with most teachers who focus on code switching, Mrs. S says her goal is to teach students to critically analyze the ways that context informs language: “Again, there is a time and a place for how and to what degree people express themselves, whether it be written or oral. With explanation, I see nothing wrong with code meshing and/or switching, as long as the students understand the how, why, and when of the concepts” (Personal Interview).

Mrs. S demonstrates an awareness of student agency in her class. She doesn’t seek to control black males’ bodies and allows them to “hide” as some of them do when they feel uncomfortable (which is seen in a head down on a desk or hidden in a hoodie or staring down at the ground). She allows them to talk in groups with one spokesperson to share out and does not force groups or students to talk when they don’t want to share. In the end, though, this comfort leads students to engage as they start to feel safe.

## **How Realistic is Radical Teaching?**

As we look to the future, there are things as teachers we can do to move toward a more diverse Twenty-First Century education. However, there are still hindrances placing obstacles in our path. The dominant culture itself finds its way into our classroom through the assigned texts and curriculum that are designated by the top of the social hierarchy and passed down. However, we can teach such texts with a critical eye and model such readings for our students. As I look around CHS at the meshing going on between various economic, social, and cultural groups, I see the future. However, if students are forced to segregate into “correct (White) English” and “incorrect (cultural) English,” such cultural shifting and meshing cannot be sustained, and we fall back into archaic language instruction that will not work for future generations. The focus of the next chapter is looking ahead—how can we train teachers to go beyond the collective consciousness and the narratives it stresses to build more inclusive communities in our classrooms?



CHAPTER V  
RADICALIZING EDUCATION:  
MOVING FROM TRADITIONAL TO EXPERIENTIAL TEACHING

**Introduction**

In order to change the resistance that many teachers experience with black male students, we need to do more than just make superficial changes in the curriculum, such as add in a black or Hispanic author, or plan a “multicultural” unit during Black History Month. Instead, as discussed in Chapter Four, we as teachers need to change the way we view education and our roles as teachers. We need to see ourselves not just as dealers of knowledge, but as advocates for change and political agents who prepare the next generation for the future of rhetorical and linguistic expression. Many theorists have proposed their own versions of this over the decades; now is the time to put them into action.

**The Fragmented Student versus the Whole Student: Traditional Pedagogy as Seen through Pragmatism**

As early as the American Renaissance, theorist Ralph Waldo Emerson defined education as more than just sitting in a classroom. In “An American Scholar,” Emerson argues for an education based on American values and experiences; he argues, “The millions that around us are rushing into life cannot always be fed on the mere remains of foreign harvests.” More importantly, according to Emerson, the American educational

system should deal with the American Scholar as a whole being, not just as a machine trained for a particular field. As he says, “This original unit, this fountain of power, has been so distributed to multitudes, has been so minutely subdivided and peddled out, that it is spilled into drops, and cannot be gathered. The state of society is one in which the members have suffered amputation from the trunk and strut about so many walking monsters—a good finger, a neck, a stomach, an elbow, but never a man.” This “thing,” as Emerson calls it, cannot be a man because it lacks “the true dignity of his ministry.” Even the scholar himself becomes only a “*Man Thinking*” and often thinking “other men’s thoughts.” In so doing, the student loses his power by not being able to acknowledge the wholeness of his physical experience and his metaphysical mind working together: “Is not indeed every man a student, and do not all things exist for the student’s behoof? And, finally, is not the true scholar the only true master?” Without seeing education as coming from both intellect and experience, the student is lost in someone else’s thoughts or in his own experience without reflection. Only when a student is whole can s/he truly learn.

Over one hundred fifty years later, Mike Rose makes the same argument in Why School? where he describes the educational system as fragmented:

We have a strong tendency in our segmented, siloed world to consider separately social topics that should be considered together. We put into place a testing program without thinking ahead to how it might redefine teaching or about the model of the mind implied in it. We also believe that the testing program alone will correct political and bureaucratic stagnation and compensate for the need for teacher development or for the burdens poor kids bring to schools. (6)

As Emerson implied, the goal of today's educational system, according to Rose, fragments the students into not parts but departmentalized scores and state-mandated standards. As a functional system, schools are not taking into account the wholeness of either teachers or students. Students are no longer thinking and experiential beings but scores obtained from various content areas with standardized tests. This isn't good pedagogy, according to Rose, because "[a] good education helps us make sense of the world and find our way in it" (31). However, the goal of education, especially under programs such as No Child Left Behind, is not meant to teach students to navigate the world. Rose tells us, "A test that would include, say, the writing of an essay, or a music recital, or the performance of an experiment embodies different notions of cognition and instruction than do the typical tasks on standardized tests: multiple choice items, matching, fill-ins" (46). Such tests, Rose argues, forces schools and teachers to "compress" the curriculum to focus only on high-stakes material: math over art, grammar over style, memorization over critical thinking. Such education also differentiates learning between affluent and at-risk students: "poor kids get an education of skills and routine, a lower-tier education, while students in more affluent districts get a robust course of study" (48). Therefore, those students with more familial and community support who speak in the language of the dominant culture get rewarded with rigor in the form of more complicated texts. Those who don't must be taught through rote-memorization and drilling pedagogies. Citing the work of Jeannie Oakes, Ira Shor said,

“The neediest received the least and the most successful got the most, an upside-down formula appropriate only in a system based in inequality” (141). This does not mean, however, that successful students receive a critical and engaging education:

Oakes also found, interestingly, that students in all tracks, high to low, were offered passive teacher-talk education. Most teachers were still pouring knowledge into students at all levels. High-track students did not have a participatory, student-centered curriculum in the schools she observed, but in the higher tracks, where white kids were overrepresented, students were exposed to academic, challenging material to stimulate their intellects and aspirations.... In contrast, lower-track kids experienced punitive and disapproving attitudes from teachers[...][and were] subjected to stern discipline, rote drills, and shallow subject matter. They were already treated as the underclass of society. (141)

Successful students are not held to the strict disciplinary standards that the at-risk (often minority and/or poor) students are while being allowed to read more challenging texts. In other words, each group is being trained for the future they are expected to have—high-performing students (often middle-class and/or white) are taught the language of academia and the texts “educated” people are expected to know; low-performing students (often poor and/or minority) are taught to follow the rules, sit quietly, and obey authority.

Rose argues that such an education is part of creating a strong capitalist society where good education leads to productivity. In the 1910s and 1920s, in line with ideals of industrial mass production, some school districts judged teacher performance on how many math or grammar problems a child could solve in a minute. Now, we have superintendents and school board members who are more experienced in corporate America than in the classroom: “Kids go to school to get themselves and the nation ready for the global marketplace, and this rhetoric of job preparation and competition can play

into reductive definitions of teaching and learning” (56). This ideology turns every individual in the educational process, from superintendent to student, into a cog in the educational machine whose goal is to learn the process of Americanization, not the ideas behind the process. Rose goes on to say,

In the case of education, pedagogical wisdom and experiential knowledge of schools are dismissed as a soft or airy distraction. A professor of management tells a class of aspiring principals that the more they know about the particulars of instruction, the less effective they’ll be, for that nitty-gritty knowledge will blur their perception of the problem and the application of universal principles of management—as fitting for a hospital or a manufacturing plant as for a school. (57)

In such a model, school becomes devoid of thinking. Teachers are not seen as intellectual professionals but as professional babysitters filling students with knowledge they must regurgitate during assessments. It also creates a top-down structure where orders come from on high without anyone else really comprehending the process or pedagogy behind the instructions. Rose argues, “Teaching and learning are not simply a managerial problem. Reformers need to incorporate rather than disregard the rich wisdom of the classroom, for the history of policy failure is littered with cases where local knowledge and circumstance were ignored” (58). If we are going to allow students to be agents within the classroom who work to form a community, the teacher must also be empowered to take control of his or her own curriculum. Without that professional control, the structure of the American educational system can’t change.

This last point is essential to my argument because it stresses what both Emerson and Rose see as the key to a good education—experience. Emerson was the first American philosopher to establish the dichotomy between traditional education and

experiential education. In “Experience,” he explains, “The history of literature is a sum of very few ideas, and of very few original tales,—all the rest being variations of these. So in this great society wide lying around us, a critical analysis would find very few spontaneous actions. It is almost all custom and gross sense. Here are even fewer opinions, and these seem organic in the speakers, and do not disturb the universal necessity.” In other words, as Foucault would say, we learn social and historical narratives, and all knowledge fits within these narratives—America is the land of the free; all men are created equal; freedom and justice for all. However, Emerson argues that truth does not lie in these canned narratives, but in our own experiences: “Life is a train of moods like a string of beads, and, as we pass through them, they prove to be many-colored lenses which paint the world their own hue, and each shows only what lies in its focus.... We animate what we can, and we see only what we animate. Nature and books belong to the eyes that see them. It depends on the mood of the man, whether he shall see the sunset or the fine poem.” This seems similar to the old saying that truth is in the eye of the beholder, but such an idea gives subjectivity to the seer. The world, and its narratives, are defined not by the dominant narrative but by the individual. Universal and historical truths created by dominant narratives can be challenged by individual lenses.

This does not mean that the individual lens holds whole truth; instead, each holds a stilted, biased, personal truth. Emerson goes on to say, “We have learned that we do not see directly, nor immediately, and that we have no means of correcting these colored and distorting lenses which we are, or of computing the amount of their errors. Perhaps these subject-lenses have a creative power; perhaps there are no objects.” This line is crucial

when considering the difference between traditional pedagogy, in which there is one right truth that we must learn in order to pass a test versus pedagogy that acknowledges the multi-dimensional knowledge through different experiences and perspectives. It means that all students, instead of being objectified machines, are their own subjects who must learn to define the truths they encounter, like a rock being smoothed and shaped in a stream. It also means that by sharing various experiences—experiences between teachers and students, between texts and students, between students from varied cultures and lifestyles—truth becomes multi-dimensional and more easily interrogated. But what would such an education look like?

### **Creating a Transformative Classroom through Holistic Experience**

Building on the ideas of Emerson and other theorists, John Dewey, the father of pragmatism, worked to define an educational system based on the cyclical relationship between experience and reflection. In Experience and Education, Dewey describes traditional education as follows:

The subject-matter of education consists of bodies of information and of skills that have been worked out in the past; therefore the chief business of the school is to transmit them to the new generation. In the past, there have also been developed standards and rules of conduct; moral training consists of forming habits of action in conformity with these rules and standards. Finally, the general pattern of school organization (by which I mean the relations of pupils to one another and to the teachers) constitutes the school as a kind of institution sharply marked off from other social institutions.

For most school systems, such a model applies. In the county discussed in Chapter Four, teachers are accountable for certain standards throughout the year, called Next Generation standards.<sup>24</sup> According to the state’s Department of Education, the Next Generation standards, which all teachers must adhere to by the 2014-2015 school year, are defined as follows:

[The state's] Next Generation Content Standards and Objectives make the way teachers teach more focused and flexible while making the way students learn more engaging and personalized.

The Next Generation Standards represent the next logical step in the progression of the statewide movement called EducateWV: Enhancing Learning. For Now. For the Future.

Nearly 100 teachers spent months tweaking [the state’s] mathematics and English language arts Content Standards and Objectives. What transpired is described as "fewer, focused and deeper" next generation standards which will truly prepare students to be college and career ready.

The Next Generation Standards are designed to focus on fewer concepts while stressing deeper learning and understanding.

Most importantly, these standards define the knowledge and skills students should have within their K-12 education careers so that they will graduate high school able to succeed in entry-level, credit-bearing academic college courses and in workforce training programs. (“Next Generation”)

At moments, the Department of Education description contradicts Dewey’s definition of traditional education. It focuses on an “engaging and personalized” education that is meant to prepare students “to be college and career ready” and thus takes its cues from the outside world. However, the underlying structure of Next Generation, and all other

---

<sup>24</sup> Next Generation standards were designed by the state Department of Education as an alternative to the national common core standards.



state-determined standards models is, of course, uniform standards. Such models are created vertically and horizontally so that all students throughout the state are learning the same skills during an assigned amount of time (typically a traditional school year) and a standardized test at the end of the year ensures student comprehension of such skills.

This fits with the description that Dewey gives of traditional education:

The main purpose or objective is to prepare the young for future responsibilities and for success in life, by means of acquisition of the organized bodies of information and prepared forms of skill which is the material of instruction. Since the subject-matter as well as standards of proper conduct are handed down from the past, the attitude of pupils must, upon the whole, be one of docility, receptivity, and obedience. Books, especially textbooks, are the chief representatives of the lore and wisdom of the past, while teachers are the organs through which pupils are brought into effective connection with the material. Teachers are the agents through which knowledge and skills are communicated and rules of conduct enforced.

An examination within public education would reveal that most classrooms model, and/or are encouraged to model, this pedagogical definition. Teachers must control student actions and learning by keeping records that they are following state standards. In the previously-mentioned school system, administrators evaluate teachers on how well they keep lesson and unit plans that follow state standards, analyze state-mandated benchmark scores to evaluate student strengths and weaknesses, tailor classroom activities to teach to those objectives, and monitor student conduct, including dress, language, body positioning, and visible “engagement.” Within this model of education, there is a neat, clear hierarchy: states establish standards, county and school administrators establish rules, teachers enforce said standards and rules, and students follow them. According to Dewey,

Learning here means acquisition of what already is incorporated in books and in the heads of the elders. Moreover, that which is taught is thought of as essentially static. It is taught as a finished product, with little regard either to the ways in which it was originally built up or to changes that will surely occur in the future. It is to a large extent the cultural product of societies that assumed the future would be much like the past, and yet it is used as educational food in a society where change is the rule, not the exception.

When looking at the state of the modern educational model of today, pragmatic theorists ask if we are preparing students for the future or mass producing a static ideal of what society should be.

An alternative form of education Dewey suggests is education based on personal and/or communal experience. According to Dewey, pedagogy based on experiences creates an opportunity for teachers and students to move beyond the hegemonic power structure of the traditional classroom:

When external control is rejected, the problem becomes that of finding the factors of control that are inherent within experience. When external authority is rejected, it does not follow that all authority should be rejected, but rather that there is need to search for a more effective source of authority. Because the older education imposed the knowledge, methods, and the rules of conduct of the mature person upon the young, it does not follow, except upon the basis of the extreme *Either-Or* philosophy, that the knowledge and skill of the mature person has no directive value for the experience of the immature. On the contrary, basing education upon personal experience may mean more multiplied and more intimate contacts between the mature and the immature than ever existed in the traditional school, and consequently more, rather than less, guidance by others. The problem, then, is: how these contacts can be established without violating the principle of learning through personal experience. The solution of this problem requires a well thought-out philosophy of the social factors that operate in the constitution of individual experience.

The question that many theorists have wrestled with is what types of experience can lead to pedagogical development. Dewey defines those that are not conducive to learning as mis-educative experiences: “Any experience is mis-educative that has the effect of arresting or distorting the growth of further experience.” This definition overlaps with Carter Woodson’s ideals of mis-education. In The Mis-Education of the Negro, Woodson declares, “The Negro will never be able to show all of his originality as long as his efforts are directed from without by those who socially proscribe him. Such ‘friends’ will unconsciously keep him in the ghetto” (28). Instead, Woodson argues that education needs to “inspire people to live more abundantly, to learn to begin with life as they find it, and make it better” (29). This is also the aim of Dewey’s experiential education.

To help illustrate the ways in which such education should be constructed, Gary Howard created his “Achievement Triangle” (See Appendix 7: Gary Howard’s Achievement Triangle with Dimensions of Knowing and Action”). In thinking of Aristotle’s triangular relationship between audience, speaker, and issue, Howard’s triangle works similarly, requiring teachers to “know my self,” “know my students,” and “know my practice.” Howard’s triangle, however, does not focus on content—instead it focuses on the student/teacher relationship and the ways in which teacher practice relates to the teacher as a whole being, and the ways in which students relate or react to the practice. Implicit in such a triangle is Dewey’s action/reflection model: As the teacher grows in his or her practice and develops as a person, s/he must be conscious of the ways such changes affect the learning community. In the same vein, a teacher must be willing to develop an awareness of how specific classrooms (or students) affect who s/he is and

how s/he practices his/her craft. Howard explains, “knowing our practice, knowing our selves, and knowing our students—these are the essential elements of knowledge that keep good teachers engaged and effective in our classrooms.... These are arenas of knowing that allow us to do our work as transformationist White teachers” (127).

Transformationist describes not only the teacher but the classroom as a whole, as each of the three sides of the triangle transforms the other two, making the classroom a dynamic, integral community.

When all three are balanced, the classroom is a place of dynamic rigor, relationships, and responsiveness. Howard explains that “‘knowing my self’ means having a deep sense of my identity as a White person, acknowledging that race matters in my life, and holding a passionate commitment to confront and unravel issues of dominance in my own experience” (128). When “knowing my self” intersects with “knowing my practice,” according to Howard, it reinforces the experience/reflection loop and strengthens the teacher and student intellectual growth: “From this intersection of self and practice, we develop a life-long commitment to personal growth and a passion for equity in our professional life. From this passion grows our commitment to be focused and rigorous in our work, not rigor for its own sake, but a seriousness about our practice that is energized by our deep desire to overturn the effects of injustice and dominance in the lives of our students” (129). In knowing my self as a teacher and knowing my students, I am able to build what Howard calls an “authentic professional relationship,” which he defines as “one that communicates clearly to my students through my words, my actions, and my attitudes the following sense of connection: ‘I see you. I acknowledge your presence in

this classroom. I know your name and I can pronounce it correctly. I respect your life experiences and your intelligence. I believe in you and I will hold both you and myself accountable to honor your capacity to learn. I enjoy being in this work with you” (130). Making such a statement takes more than just intellect; it takes authentic empathy and compassion as well as respect. It also shows value for the experiences of the classroom because it establishes such work as joyful.

Finally, where “knowing my students” and “knowing my practice” meet is the intersection that Howard calls “the rubber-hits-the-road dimension” because it is where “our students connect with the curriculum through our pedagogy” (130). We are the conduits through which students must pass to gain understanding. Rather than passively filling students with knowledge, we are responsible for engaging them, filling in gaps, and finding a way to connect our curriculum to the experiences of each student, or, as Howard explains, “‘Responsiveness’ has to do with our capacity as teachers to know and connect with the actual lived experience, personhood, and learning modalities of the students who are in our classroom” (131). In order to do so, teachers cannot follow a strict curriculum map that has been created outside this triangle. Instead, it requires teachers to learn about rafting while going down the rapids; teachers must be willing to change with the flow of the class, anticipate rough patches, and make the ride safe but energized for students.

Dewey defines his experiential education as an ongoing process that changes the habits of the student: “The basic characteristic of habit is that every experience enacted and undergone modifies the one who acts and undergoes, while this modification affects,

whether we wish it or not, the quality of subsequent experiences. For it is a somewhat different person who enters into them.” Dewey’s insight mirrors Howard’s achievement triangle: both see learning as dynamic, reflective, and built on student-teacher relationships. The habits Dewey refers to are the choices that are enacted once that reflection process has evolved and formed attitudes that affect a student holistically: “From this point of view, the principle of continuity of experience means that every experience both takes up something from those which have gone before and modifies in some way the quality of those which come after.” Dewey isn’t just talking about the role of student. Instead, he is calling on teachers to learn from their own experiences. The role of the teacher, according to Dewey, is to acknowledge and evaluate experiences:

The greater maturity of experience which should belong to the adult as educator puts him in a position to evaluate each experience of the young in a way in which the one having the less mature experience cannot do. It is then the business of the educator to see in what direction an experience is heading. . . . Failure to take the moving force of an experience into account so as to judge and direct it on the ground of what it is moving into means disloyalty to the principle of experience itself. The disloyalty operates in two directions. The educator is false to the understanding that he should have obtained from his own past experience. He is also unfaithful to the fact that all human experience is ultimately social: that it involves contact and communication. The mature person, to put it in moral terms, has no right to withhold from the young on given occasions whatever capacity for sympathetic understanding his own experience has given him.

Here, Dewey implies that teachers are responsible for monitoring student experience to facilitate the cycle of learning as well as for acknowledging the personal experiences that have shaped their own pedagogical understanding. In other words, the teacher must see the student holistically—physically, intellectually, and emotionally—in order to judge the engagement and learning occurring within the educational experience.

Such moments of experiential clarity are important within the process of becoming a more critical teacher. In Rhetorical Listening: Identification, Gender, Whiteness, Krista Radcliffe defines such experiential clarity as “rhetorical listening,” which “signifies a stance of openness that a person may choose to assume in relation to *any* person, text, or culture” (17). According to Ratcliffe, listening itself is not enough because it raises more complications than it resolves:

Why is it so hard to listen to one another? Why is it so hard to identify with one another when we feel excluded? Why is it so hard to focus simultaneously on commonalities and differences? Why is it so hard to resist a guilt/blame logic when listening? And how do power differentials of particular standpoints and cultural logics influence our ability to listen? Any definition of listening must account for these questions—and others. (3)

Rhetorical listening, however, opens up the act of listening as one that is imaginative, intellectual, social, and emotional. Such listening challenges the “*logos* of Western civilization” by constructing a space “wherein listeners may employ their agency...to foster conscious identifications that may, in turn, facilitate communication” by the following actions:

1. Promoting an *understanding* of self and other
  2. Proceeding within an *accountability* logic
  3. Locating identifications across *commonalities* and *differences*
  4. Analyzing *claims* as well as *cultural logics* within which these claims function
- (26)

Rhetorical listening moves the listening into a space where Landsman's concept of imagination meets the realities of experiences not my own; as a teacher, I can analyze truth outside dominant narratives and through the lens of other cultural logics and reaffirm the agency of both myself as listener and my student as speaker.

Rhetorical listening also allows teachers to see beyond the identifications created by dominant narratives. As Ratcliffe points out, "identification is inextricably linked with identity but does not directly correspond to it. In other words, although an identification may inform a person's identity, a person's identity cannot be reduced to a single identification. No single identification solely defines a person's identity; he or she is a compilation of many identifications" (51). When I as teacher define a student only through the dominant narrative, the student's identification is fixed and one-dimensional—that student is an honor student or athlete or Troublemaker or future criminal. My views of the student also influence my practice as teacher and the students' comprehension of his own identity. However, when I as teacher look beyond the dominant narrative to explore the student's many identities, real listening and learning (involving rigor, relationships, and responsiveness) can develop.

In her text Bad Boys: Public Schools in the Making of Black Masculinity, Ann Arnett Ferguson illustrates the ways a lack of openness and listening affects the student/teacher relationship. She explains that while oftentimes certain students were tracked as doctors or engineers, a predominant number of black male students were on the "prison track." In her observations at Rosa Parks Elementary School, Ferguson recognized the following trend:



Though African American boys made up only one-quarter of the student body at Rosa Parks, they accounted for nearly half the number of students sent to the Punishing Room for major and minor misdeeds in 1991-92. Three-quarters of those suspended that year were boys, and, of those, four-fifths were African American. In the course of my study it became clear that school labeling practices and the exercise of rules operated as part of a hidden curriculum to marginalize and isolate black male youth in disciplinary spaces and brand them as criminally inclined. (2)

More importantly, she observed teachers telling students they were “bound for jail” or their future involved “‘doing time’ inside prison walls” (2-3). She asks, “What does school trouble mean under such deleterious circumstances? How does a ten-year-old black boy fashion a sense of self within this context?” (3) Such caricatured assumptions about students limit their potential and support the hegemonic system that defines them as criminals. More importantly, it guarantees that students most aligned with white middle-class ideologies will succeed, and those who threaten the same ideology won’t.

Instead, however, when teachers are open to observing and listening to the experiences of students in and out of the classroom, they develop a true sense of the effects of racial discrimination and privilege. Rhetorical listening, however, is a process. Ratcliffe tells us, “Rhetorical listening with the intent to understand, not master, discourses is not a quick fix not a happy-ever-after solution; rather it is an ongoing process” (33). Howard says of his own transformation, “It was one that burned away the walls of my encapsulation. It was engagement with real people in a context totally different from any former life in the suburbs. Something powerful has to happen to us and for us, something we cannot dismiss. Yet even the deep changes of this intense time were only the beginning of my personal transformations” (17). Echoing Ratcliffe’s moves through rhetorical listening, Howard claims that the first step in becoming culturally

aware is to acknowledge both differences and commonalities: “We must become aware of both our differentness from, and our relatedness to, other people and their cultural realities. Whether we deepen in our awareness and continue to grow through such experiences, or merely shrink back into the safety of isolation, is determined by our reaction to the inevitable fear of stepping outside the boundary of ignorance” (15). The dualistic nature of acknowledging both differences and similarities is that it creates an empathic link. We are able to understand our own privilege as white teachers as well as recognize that our similarities prove that the system, not the student, is what creates the inequality. In other words, it creates an opportunity to move beyond blaming the victim and focus on creating opportunities for acknowledging and celebrating student thought and creativity. But such movement cannot be accomplished quickly or easily. According to Howard,

I have come to realize that our efforts to “reeducate White America” must go beyond the mere recitation of other groups’ suffering at the hands of White people. It must also go beyond “appreciating other cultures.” And it must go beyond acknowledging our own racism, complicity, and privilege. Confronting the realities of my collective history has been a necessary step in the evolution of my White multicultural identity, but it has not been sufficient. Embracing the negative aspects of whiteness does not suffice as a cultural identity. Oppression has been a part of my history, but it does not fully define me. For myself, my children, and my White students and colleagues, I want to provide more than mere acknowledgement of our legacy of hate. I want to provide more than valuing and appreciating other peoples’ culture—and more than working to overcome the realities of racism and oppression. These are necessary aspects of an emerging White identity, but they do not create a whole and authentic person. (23)

The goal for teachers, then, is not to recognize the way difference combines with hegemonic disparities in power because these concepts are still only theoretical and do not connect with true experience. The goal is to recognize the ways in which we enact racism in our lives, acknowledge it, and work to overcome dominant narratives to see our students as individual holistic identities.

According to Dewey, experience should be what shapes the educational process. Teachers should learn from listening to their students and their experiences, see students in a holistic sense as emotional, intellectual, and cultural beings, and engage them in experiences that facilitate growth:

On one side, it is [the teacher's] business to be on the alert to see what attitudes and habitual tendencies are being created. In this direction he must, if he is an educator, be able to judge what attitudes are actually conducive to continued growth and what are detrimental. He must, in addition, have that sympathetic understanding of individuals as individuals which gives him an idea of what is actually going on in the minds of those who are learning. It is, among other things, the need for these abilities on the part of the parent and teacher which makes a system of education based upon living experience a more difficult affair to conduct successfully than it is to follow the patterns of traditional education.

In this model, the classroom is an ever-evolving system where teachers are learning and experiencing along with students. They learn about each students' experiences and tailor the classroom experiences to facilitate growth.

### **Language, Praxis, and Texts: Working with What the Educational System Gives**

#### **You**

In Paulo Freire's work, however, he defines experience as not just the connection between teacher and student but student and text. Too often, he argues, the material we

bring into the classroom does not connect with the students' experiences outside school: "What positive view can peasants or urban workers gain for their role in the world? How can they critically understand their concrete oppressive situation through literacy work in which they are instructed to learn phrases like 'the wing of the bird' or 'Eva saw the grape'?" (The Politics of Education 9) Such benign and sterile texts are devoid of any experiential meaning and do not promote cultural growth, according to Freire, "By relying on words that transmit an ideology of accommodation, such literacy work reinforces the 'culture of silence' that dominates most people. This kind of literacy can never be an instrument for transforming the real world" (The Politics of Education 9).

As education is structured now, according to Freire, there is a dichotomy between those who think and those who act: "It's not that strange, then, for verbalists to retreat to their ivory tower and see little merit in those who are committed to action, while activists consider those who conceptualize an act as 'noxious intellectuals,' 'theoreticians,' or 'philosophers' who do nothing but undercut their work" (Politics of Education 11). We need to model for our students a cyclical process of thinking and acting to enable education to be a holistic process that can change society for the better. However, as a teacher I have to be aware of the theories I bring into class, not only through my practice but also through my state-mandated texts: "A theory that is supposed to inform the general experience of the dominant classes, of which educational practice is a dimension, can't be the same as one that lends support to the rejustification of the dominant classes in their practice" (Politics of Education 12). Therefore, I need to keep a critical eye on the ways in which my teaching practices are guided by the theories I (and my school board)

adhere to. The educational goal, according to Freire, is to “perceive reality as a totality,” not just as a set of skills that must be mastered; students need to develop a “lucid vision of their reality” and not be fed the particular view that those in power want digested (Politics of Education 14).

The first issue with the current educational design is that it focuses on skill and production, not the act of processing. In order for education to occur, however, learners must be able to see themselves and their experiences in the educational process. According to Freire, students must be able to “perceive the deep structure of language along with mastering the mechanics of vocabulary”: “When she or he begins to perceive the close relationship between language-thought and reality in her or his own transformation, she or he will see the need for new forms of comprehension and, also, expression” (Politics of Education 22). The problem with the traditional structure of education is that language acquisition is a rote skill where students are drilled on Standard English or told to memorize vocabulary words. For instance, in the structure of most English/Language Arts classrooms, students work on vocabulary, grammar, writing, and reading as if the skills occurred in different realms; therefore, they never quite grasp the way grammar and vocabulary work to create various meanings in the words and sentences they read and write. Such structure also limits their ability to think through the process of creating meaning through texts, analyzing linguistic and grammatical deviations writers use to create voice and experience through style. In a traditional, segmented classroom, students learn to pass a test, but they don’t learn to read actively,

write with style, and experiment with connotation and voice. More importantly, students do not learn to read against hegemonic discourse.

Also, many black and other minority students never see themselves in a positive light, if at all, in literature based on the European tradition. Through denying the experience of black students, especially black males, the traditional educational system devalues such an experience. In the Next Generation English/Language Arts standards, three specific standards for the eleventh grade level focuses on specific content:

- ELA 11.R.C3.1: Analyze multiple interpretations of a story, drama or poem (e.g. recorded or live production of a play or recorded novel or poetry), evaluating how each version interprets the source text. (Include at least one play by Shakespeare and one play by an American dramatist.)
- ELA.11.R.C3.2: demonstrate knowledge of eighteenth-, nineteenth-, and early-twentieth-century foundational works of American literature, including how two or more literary texts from the same period treat similar themes or topics.
- ELA.11.R.C3.5: analyze seventeenth-, eighteenth-, and nineteenth-century foundational U.S. informational documents of historical and literary significance (including *The Declaration of Independence*, the *Preamble to the Constitution*, the *Bill of Rights*, and Lincoln's *Second Inaugural Address*) for their themes, purposes and rhetorical features. ("English Language Arts (ELA) Grade 11")

These eleventh grade standards infer a strong European lean. Within the Next Generation standards, as an eleventh grade teacher, I must cover Shakespeare, one other American playwright, and rhetorical texts that reinforce the idea of America's devotion to freedom and justice. In the list of exemplar texts chosen by the Common Core Initiative (see Appendix 7: Exemplar Texts recommended by the Common Core for 11 and 12 Grades), only two black fictional authors, one black playwright and one black poet, appear on the list, and all four are women, not men. The only text by a black male writer to appear is Richard Wright's Black Boy, which is included in informational texts. Langston Hughes,

Frederick Douglass, Malcolm X, Martin Luther King, Jr., and many others are excluded from the list. This does not mean that teachers can't bring in such texts, but keep in mind the administrators are watching, and suggested texts are privileged.

In terms of speaking and language, Standard English is also stressed in the Next Generation objectives:

- ELA.11.SL.C14.3: adapt speech to a variety of contexts and tasks, demonstrating a command of formal English when indicated or appropriate.
- ELA.11.L.C15.1: demonstrate command of the conventions of standard English grammar and usage when writing or speaking.
  - Apply the understanding that usage is a matter of convention, can change over time and is sometimes contested.
  - Resolve issues of complex or contested usage, consulting references (e.g. *Merriam-Webster's Dictionary of English Usage*, *Garner's Modern American Usage*) as needed
- Demonstrate command of the conventions of standard English capitalization, punctuation and spelling when writing
  - Observe hyphenation conventions.
  - Spell correctly. (“English Language Arts (ELA) Grade 11”)

The standards do not allow for cultural language analysis, code meshing, or code switching. If English teachers are to do their jobs correctly, they must make sure students are fluent in Standard English only. As Woodson says, “When a Negro has finished his education in our schools, then, he has been equipped to begin the life of an Americanized or Europeanized white man, but before he steps from the threshold of his alma mater he is told by his teachers that he must go back to his own people from whom he has been estranged by a vision of ideals which in his disillusionment he will realize that he cannot attain” (6). Woodson says that the goal is to linguistically and culturally whiten black students and “remove the pretext for the barriers between the races. They do not realize,

however, that even if the Negroes do successfully imitate the whites, nothing new has thereby been accomplished” (7). What is being denied, however, is not just black culture, but the gifts that black students bring to the classroom: “each race has certain gifts which the others do not possess. It is by the development of these gifts that every race must justify its right to exist” (8). In other words, erasing black culture from the classroom ignores the voices that black history and literary traditions have brought to the American culture while also ignoring the voices of our black students.

What literacy education should do, according to Freire, is find texts that connect to the students’ transformative experience, texts that “can’t be just a description of the new reality, or a mere retelling of a paternalistic theme. One must consider content, form, the potential for other uses, and increasing complexity when developing these texts” (The Power of Education 22). This includes the texts written by students as well as those taken from outside sources. The act of literacy education should be one in which critical experience goes on between teachers, students, and text. Texts become the avenue, not for learning what it means to fit within a cultural system, but in decoding such a system to learn how it affects our experiences outside the educational environment.

However, we don’t have to all read the texts with the same dominant reading; allowing students to find the gaps where they find themselves absent from the texts or read against the dominant European narrative of a text can allow students to learn to read against society as a whole. Ira Shor refers to this as *desocialization*, which he defines as “questioning the social behaviors and experiences in school and daily life that make us into the people we are. It involves critically examining learned behavior, received values,



familiar language, habitual perceptions, existing knowledge and power relations, and traditional discourse in class and out” (114). For instance, as we move into studying The Great Gatsby by F. Scott Fitzgerald, students are analyzing the concept of the American Dream. While students define the main concepts of the American Dream—opportunity for all, individual effort leads to success, and progress from generation to generation—I also assign them Langston Hughes’ “Let America Be America Again” (Appendix 8: “Let America Be America Again” by Langston Hughes). As students paraphrase the different voices in the poem—the idealist, the marginalized, and the questioner—they must also define the American Dream for each. When we return to the concepts of American Dream, students must then actively read the American Dream with a critical eye on the three voices created by Hughes. By doing so, as we enter into The Great Gatsby, students have a foundation for analyzing who has power and/or voice, who doesn’t, and how class (and race) play into the power dynamics. As we read the text, then, students are able to dissect the ways in which the dominant narrative is created through ideas of wealth and privilege, find those who have voice and those who are voiceless, and define how race, gender, and class play into character development.

Educators must also use literacy education to decode the different forms of language and why some are privileged over others. Although the above standards stress Standard English while the textbooks and worksheets provided to teachers stress drilling practice, we must be open to exploring the ways language itself plays out in social and cultural scenarios. As Keith Gilyard says in Let’s Flip the Script, “A major mission for us is to continue, the best we can, to disturb the intellectual comfort zones of those whose views

of language variety would penalize rather than aid students. Our understanding of language and our language itself must be superior if we are to reflect our discipline at its most accomplished level and help move educational programs forward productively” (19-20). The stress here is on the ownership of language. The idea of one Standard English is theoretical, not practical, and as we move into the Twenty-First Century and embrace speakers like Barack Obama and others who code mesh and code switch, the impracticality of Standard English will become further revealed. We as educators must learn to see language as the vessel by which our students express their experiences and the link between theory and practice.

### **Teacher Education: Preparing the Future**

Praxis, the explicit connection between theory and practice, seems essential to the educational process; however, most teachers never hear about it or learn to develop it in the teacher education. In Mis-Education of the Negro, Woodson asks a crucial question: “The only question which concerns us here is whether these ‘educated’ persons are actually equipped to face the ordeal before them or unconsciously contribute to their own undoing by perpetuating the regime of the oppressor” (xi). I would argue that teacher education programs today are constructed to reproduce traditional teacher pedagogies rather than to move teachers into more experiential-based pragmatic or critical pedagogies. Krista Ratcliffe confirms my hypothesis when she explains, “Nothing in my education, academic or otherwise, had prepared me to recognize or articulate whiteness, and certainly nothing in my education had provided me with strategies for resisting certain versions of whiteness that may privilege me but oppress others” (7). One major

obstacle to developing a pragmatic and/or critical teaching style is that theory and practice themselves are divided within the teacher education programs. Teachers either learn teaching philosophy or methods, classroom management or lesson plan design. The fragmentation of coursework does not lend itself to creating a holistic image of the act of teaching. One clear example of this is the traditional language courses preservice teachers take. In 1998, Elaine Richardson analyzed data from a survey of CCCC and NCTE teachers and professors to determine their understanding of linguistic education. She discovered a strong dichotomy between white high school teachers and college professors of color. For instance, participants were asked to agree or disagree with the following statement: “Students who use nonstandard dialects should be taught in Standard English” (53). Also, according to her findings, high school teachers (NCTE members) with a bachelor’s degree only and between one and/or fifteen years of teaching experience were more likely to agree with the statement while people of color teaching at the university level (CCCC) with doctorates and/or fifteen or more years of experience tended to disagree. She argues that such a discrepancy has as much to do with training as it does to personal experience.<sup>25</sup> According to those surveyed, one third of the participants had no language training whatsoever (55). High school teachers were also more likely to acknowledge “History of the English Language” or “Linguistics for Teachers” over “American Dialects” or “African American English” as important courses for preservice teachers (55). Those who had taken the latter courses, however, were more

---

<sup>25</sup> White high school teachers with a bachelor’s degree only and/or fifteen plus years of experience were more likely to identify both past and present language as Standard American English, demonstrating a high personal commitment to teaching Standard English (Richardson 57).

likely to disagree with the stress on Standard English in the classroom (56). Overall, Richardson argues that as we move further into the Twenty-First Century, it is crucial for teachers to have such courses because it creates opportunities for better listening to and comprehending the voices of our diverse students; however, teacher training programs do not make such courses a requirement, leaving new teachers with little defense against mis-communications.

Also, when diversity is discussed within teacher education, it normally relates to multiculturalism. According to Gilyard, multiculturalism in teacher education is “[f]lawed as an educational concept at the outset” (18); its goal is mainly to add token units, lessons, or readings that can be added to lesson plans and checked off to meet a standard or administrative requirement. Gilyard goes on to say, “it is now hopelessly clichéd and does what all clichés do: name a complex phenomenon vaguely. It is best used to describe a population, not an educational program, for any coherent program has to take up deeper questions” (18). We can’t engage our students if they can’t see themselves and their experiences in our classes. We can’t motivate students when they don’t see their cultural experiences as something valued in the class. And we can’t educate students if we are only stressing ideas that alienate them.

### **Time for a Change: Teachers Becoming Radical**

As we move into the Twenty-First Century, we face a change in American culture. Our first black U.S. President has been elected and models diversity in the way he walks, talks, and values American culture. By mid-century, whites will be the minority and the minorities will be most representative of what America looks like and sounds like. Our

goal as educators has always been to prepare students for the world ahead of them; however, as the world changes so must we.

First, we have to learn to see ourselves as both intellectuals and practitioners. We need to understand how our theoretical frameworks affect our classroom environment and experiences. We also need to challenge the hegemonic power that will keep the majority of our society powerless and voiceless. We need to learn to see our role as activists as much as educators, or include activism in the definition of education. Finally, we need to learn to see our students as whole beings, not as identifications assigned to them by cultural stereotypes. More importantly, we need to understand what causes black male students to become alienated by the educational process and help to bring them back.

## WORKS CITED

- Alexander, Michelle. The New Jim Crow: Mass Incarceration in the Age of Colorblindness. Revised Edition. New York: New Press, 2010. Kindle.
- Alim, H. Samy, and Geneva Smitherman. Articulate While Black: Barack Obama, Language, and Race in the U.S. New York: Oxford UP, 2012. Kindle.
- Anzaldúa, Gloria. "How to Tame a Wild Tongue." Borderlands/La Frontera: The New Mestiza. 3<sup>rd</sup> edition. San Francisco: Aunt Lute Books, 2007. Print.
- Baker, Houston A., Jr. Betrayal: How the Black Intellectuals Have Abandoned the Ideals of the Civil Rights Era. New York: Columbia UP, 2008. Print.
- Bennett, Lerone, Jr. The Black Mood and Other Essays. New York: Barnes & Noble, 1964. Print.
- Boucher, Dave. "Capital High School Morning Observances Get Changed." Charleston Daily-Mail. 6 December 2012. Web. 15 September 2014.
- "Charleston, West Virginia Population: Census 2010 and 2000 Interactive Map, Demographics, Statistics, Quick Facts." CensusViewer. MoonShadow, 2012. Web. 15 September 2014.
- Chesnutt, Charles. "Dave's Neckliss." Selected Writings. New Riverside Edition. Ed. SallyAnn H. Ferguson. New York: Houghton Mifflin, 2001. 188-198. Print.

---. "The Future American: What the Race is Likely to Become in the Process of Time."

Selected Writings. New Riverside Edition. Ed. SallyAnn Ferguson. New York: Houghton Mifflin, 2001. Print. 47-5.

---. "What is a White Man?" Selected Writings. New Riverside Edition. Ed. SallyAnn Ferguson. New York: Houghton Mifflin, 2001. Print. 24-32.

CNN Staff. "Dueling Narratives in Michael Brown Shooting." CNN U.S. 6 Sept. 2014. Web. 25 Sept. 2014.

"Common Core State Standards for English Language Arts and Literacy in History/Social Studies, Science, and Technical Subjects." Common Core State Standards Initiative: Preparing America's Students for College and Career. Common Core State Standards Initiative, 2014. Web. 16 August 2014.

"Data." West Virginia Department of Education. West Virginia Department of Education, n.d. Web. 15 September 2014.

Delpit, Lisa D. Other People's Children: Cultural Conflict in the Classroom. New York: New Press, 2006. Print.

Delpit, Lisa, and Joanne Kilgour Dowdy, eds. The Skin That We Speak: Thoughts on Language and Culture in the Classroom. New York: New Press, 2008. Kindle.

Dewey, John. Experience and Education. New York: Touchstone, 1938. Kindle.

Douglass, Frederick. Narrative of the Life of Frederick Douglass. In The Classic Slave Narrative. Ed. Henry Louis Gates, Jr. New York: Signet, 2002. Print. 323-436.

- Downey, Douglas B., and Shana Pribesh. "Why Race Matters: Teachers' Evaluations of Student Classroom Behavior." Sociology of Education 77.4 (2004): 267-282. Print.
- DuBois, W.E.B. "Of the Coming of John." The Souls of Black Folk. 363-377. In Three Negro Classics. New York: Harper Collins, 1965. Print.
- Emerson, Ralph Waldo. "The American Scholar." Ralph Waldo Emerson Collection. Ed. Peter Knox. Annotated Classics, 15 Feb. 2014. Kindle.
- . "Experience." Ralph Waldo Emerson Collection. Ed. Peter Knox. Annotated Classics, 15 Feb. 2014. Kindle.
- "English Language Arts (ELA) Grade 11." West Virginia Department of Education. West Virginia Department of Education, n.d. Web. 16 August 2014.
- Fanon, Frantz. Black Skin, White Masks. English translation edition. Trans. Richard Philcox. New York: Grove Press, 2008. Kindle.
- Ferguson, Ann Arnett. Bad Boys: Public Schools in the Making of Black Masculinity. Ann Arbor: U of Michigan P, 2000. Print.
- Foucault, Michel. The Archeology of Knowledge and the Discourse of Language. Trans. A. M. Sheridan Smith. New York: Pantheon, 1972. Print.
- Freire, Paulo. Pedagogy of the Oppressed. 30<sup>th</sup> Anniversary Edition. Trans. Myra Berman Ramos. New York: Continuum, 1993. Print.
- . The Politics of Education: Culture, Power, and Liberation. Trans. Donalddo Macedo. Westport: Bergin & Garvey, 1985. Kindle.
- Gates, Henry Louis, Jr. The Signifying Monkey: A Theory of African-American Literary Criticism. New York: Oxford UP, 1988. Kindle.



- Gilyard, Keith. Let's Flip the Script: An African American Discourse on Language, Literature and Learning. Detroit: Wayne State UP, 1996. Print.
- "The Great Textbook War." American RadioWorks. National Public Media, 2014. Web. 2 August 2014.
- Hilliard, Asa III. "Language, Culture, and the Assessment of African American Children." Delpit and Dowdy 87-106.
- "History." Capital High School: Magnet School for the Performing Arts. Capital High School, 2014. Web. 15 September 2014.
- Holt Elements of Literature Fifth Course. New York: Holt, Rinehart, and Winston, 2007. Print.
- Hooks, bell. Teaching Critical Thinking. New York: Routledge, 2009. Kindle.
- . We Real Cool: Black Men and Masculinity. New York: Routledge, 2004. Kindle.
- Howard, Gary. We Can't Teach What We Don't Know: White Teachers, Multicultural Schools. Second Edition. New York: Teachers College Press, 2006. Print.
- Hughes, Langston. "Father and Son." The Ways of White Folks. Vintage Classics Edition. New York: Knopf, 1933. Kindle.
- . "Let America Be America Again." Academy of American Poets. Academy of American Poets, n.d. Web. 15 September 2014.
- Hurston, Zora Neale. Mules and Men. New York: Harper, 1975. Print.
- Johnson, James Weldon. The Autobiography of the Ex-Colored Man. 391-511. In Three Negro Classics. New York: HarperCollins, 1965. Print.

- . "Lift Ev'ry Voice and Sing." Norton Anthology of American American Literature.  
Second Edition. Eds. Henry Louis Gates, Jr., and Nellie Y. McKay. New York:  
Norton, 2004. Print. 794.
- Knoblauch, C.H., and Lil Brannon. Critical Teaching and the Idea of Literacy.  
Portsmouth: Boynton/Cook, 1993. Print.
- Kohl, Herbert. "I Won't Learn from You" and Other Thoughts on Creative  
Maladjustment. New York: New Press, 1994. Print.
- . "Topsy-Turvies: Teacher Talk and Student Talk." Delpit and Downey 146-162.
- Kohn, Sally. "How college sports cheat student athletes." CNN. CNN, 2014. 27 October  
2014. Web. 30 October 2014.
- Landman, Julie. A White Teacher Talks about Race. Lanham: Scarecrow Press, 2001.  
Print.
- Lipsitz, George. The Possessive Investment of Whiteness: How White People Profit from  
Identity Politics. Philadelphia: Temple UP, 2006. Kindle.
- Mason, Carol. Reading Appalachia From Left to Right: Conservatives and the 1974  
Kanawha County Textbook Controversy. Ithaca: Cornell UP, 2009. Print.
- Mays, Mackenzie. "Unions fight state teacher evaluation policy." Charleston Gazette-  
Mail. The Charleston Gazette, 14 May 2014. Web. 15 Sept. 2014.
- "Mission and Goals." Capital High School: Magnet School for the Performing Arts.  
Capital High School, 2014. Web. 15 September 2014.
- Mr. G. Personal Interview. 10 October 2014.
- Mrs. S. Personal Interview. 12 October 2014.

Neal, Mark Anthony. Looking for Leroy: Illegible Black Masculinities. New York: NYUP, 2013. Kindle.

----- New Black Man. New York: Routledge, 2006. Print.

“Next Generation: West Virginia Content Standards and Objectives.” West Virginia Department of Education. West Virginia Department of Education, n.d. Web. 16 August 2014.

Noble, Safiya Umoja. “Teaching Trayvon: Race, Media, and the Politics of Spectacle.” The Black Scholar. 44.1 (Spring 2014): 12-29. Print.

Ratcliffe, Krista. Rhetorical Listening: Identification, Gender, Whiteness. Carbondale: S Illinois UP, 2005. Print.

Richardson, Elaine. “Race, Class(es), Gender, and Age: The Making of Knowledge about Language Diversity.” Language Diversity in the Classroom: From Intention to Practice. Ed. Geneva Smitherman and Victor Villanueva. Carbondale: S Illinois UP, 2003. Print. 40-66.

Rorrer, Mandy. “White Flight’s Effect on Charleston and Putnam.” Charleston Gazette. The Charleston Gazette, 18 April 2004. Web. 15 September 2014.

Rose, Mike. Why School? Reclaiming Education for All of Us. New York: New Press, 2009. Kindle.

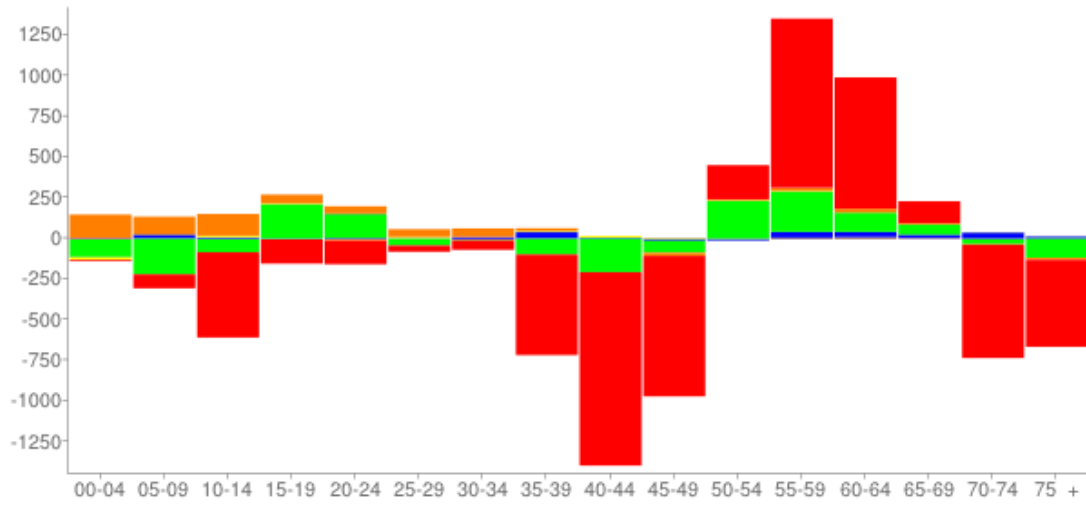
Savali, Kirsten West. “Poison Ivy: Typical White Stereotypes and Black Exceptionalism.” Clutch. Sutton New Media, 2014. Web. 10 October 2014.

- Schott Foundation for Public Education. The Urgency of Now: Schott 50 State Report on Public Education and Black Males 2012. Cambridge, MA: Schott Foundation for Public Education, n.d. Web. 30 September 2014.
- Shor, Ira. Empowering Education: Critical Teaching for Social Change. Chicago: U of Chicago P, 1992. Print.
- Shuyler, George. Black No More. Olympic Press: 2007. Kindle.
- Smitherman, Geneva. Talkin that Talk: Language, Culture and Education in African America. New York: Routledge, 2003. Kindle.
- “State and County Quick Facts.” United States Census Bureau. U.S. Department of Commerce, 8 July 2014. Web. 15 September 2014.
- Toldson, Ivory A. “HBCUs are my Brother’s Keeper.” White House Initiative on HBCUs. U.S. Department of Education, 14 Mar 2014. Web. 29 Mar 2014.
- Trew, Tony. “Theory and ideology at work.” Language and Control. Eds. Roger Fowler, Bob Hodge, Gunther Kress, Tony Trew. Routledge: London, 1979. Print. 94-116.
- Webb, Frank. The Garies and their Friends. 1857. Amazon, 2012. Kindle.
- West, Cornel. Race Matters. New York: Beacon, 2001. Kindle.
- Woodson, Carter. The Mis-Education of the Negro. Africa World Press Edition. Trenton: Africa World Press, 1990. Kindle.
- Vygotsky, Lev. Thought and Language. Ed. Alex Kozulin. Cambridge: MIT Press, 1986. Print.
- X, Malcolm and Alex Haley. The Autobiography of Malcolm X. New York: Ballantine, 1965. Print.

- Young, Vershawn Ashanti. "Chapter Five: The Costs of Code-Switching." Other People's English: Code-Meshing, Code-Switching, and African American Literacy. Eds. Vershawn Ashanti Young, Rusty Barrett, Y'Shanda Young-Rivera, Kim Brian Lovejoy. New York: Teachers College P, 2014. Kindle.
- . "Chapter Four: Linguistic Double Consciousness." Other People's English: Code-Meshing, Code-Switching, and African American Literacy. Eds. Vershawn Ashanti Young, Rusty Barrett, Y'Shanda Young-Rivera, Kim Brian Lovejoy. New York: Teachers College P, 2014. Kindle.
- . Your Average Nigga: Performing Race, Literacy, and Masculinity. Detroit: Wayne State UP, 2007. Kindle.

APPENDIX A

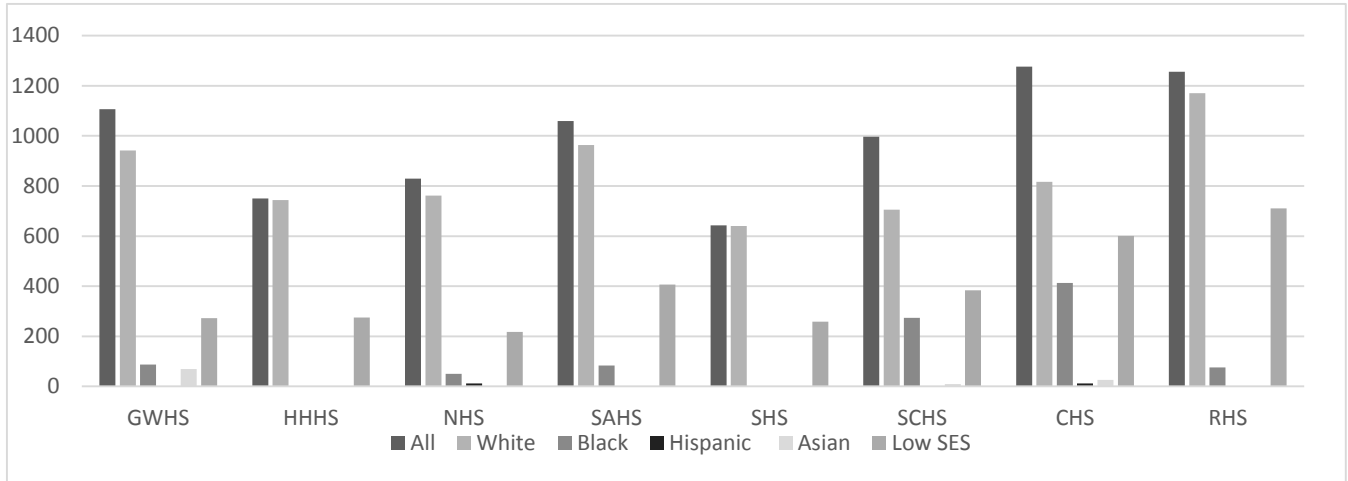
CHANGE IN CITY'S POPULATION BY RACE AND AGE FROM  
2000-2010



Information taken from "Charleston, West Virginia"

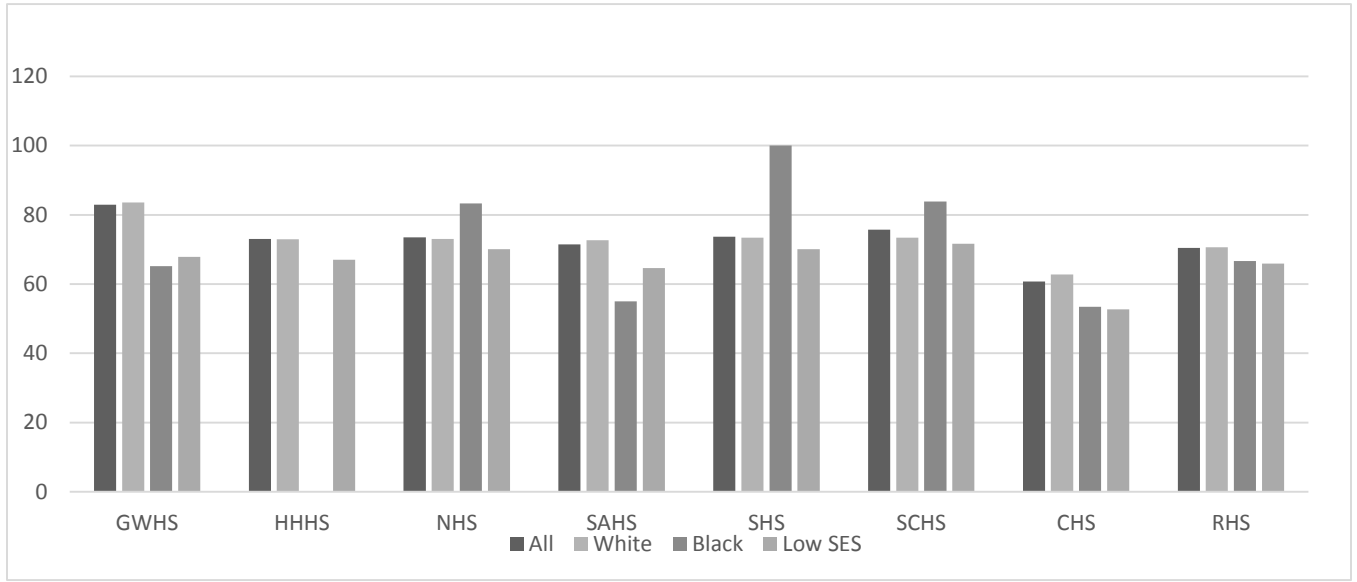
## APPENDIX B

### COUNTY HIGH SCHOOLS' COMPOSITION 2012-2013\*



APPENDIX C

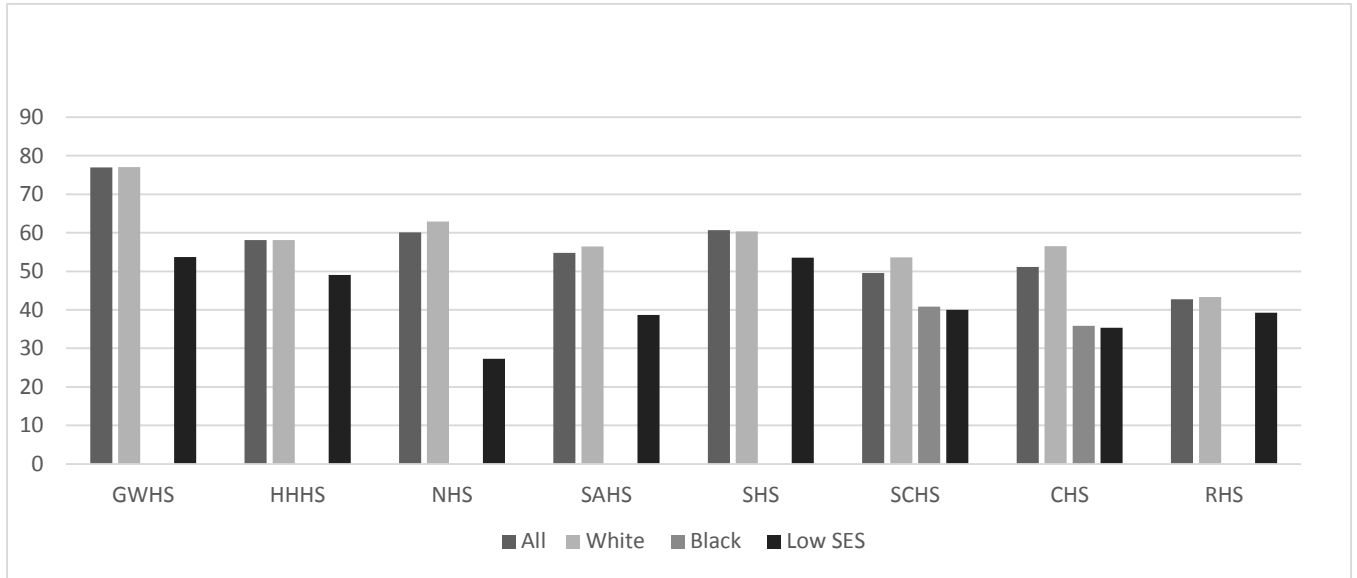
COUNTY HIGH SCHOOLS' GRADUATION RATES 2012-2013\*





APPENDIX D

COUNTY HIGH SCHOOLS' PROFICIENCY SCORES 2012-2013\*



\*All information for charts taken from "Data"

APPENDIX E

“LIFT EV’RY VOICE AND SING” BY JAMES WELDON JOHNSON

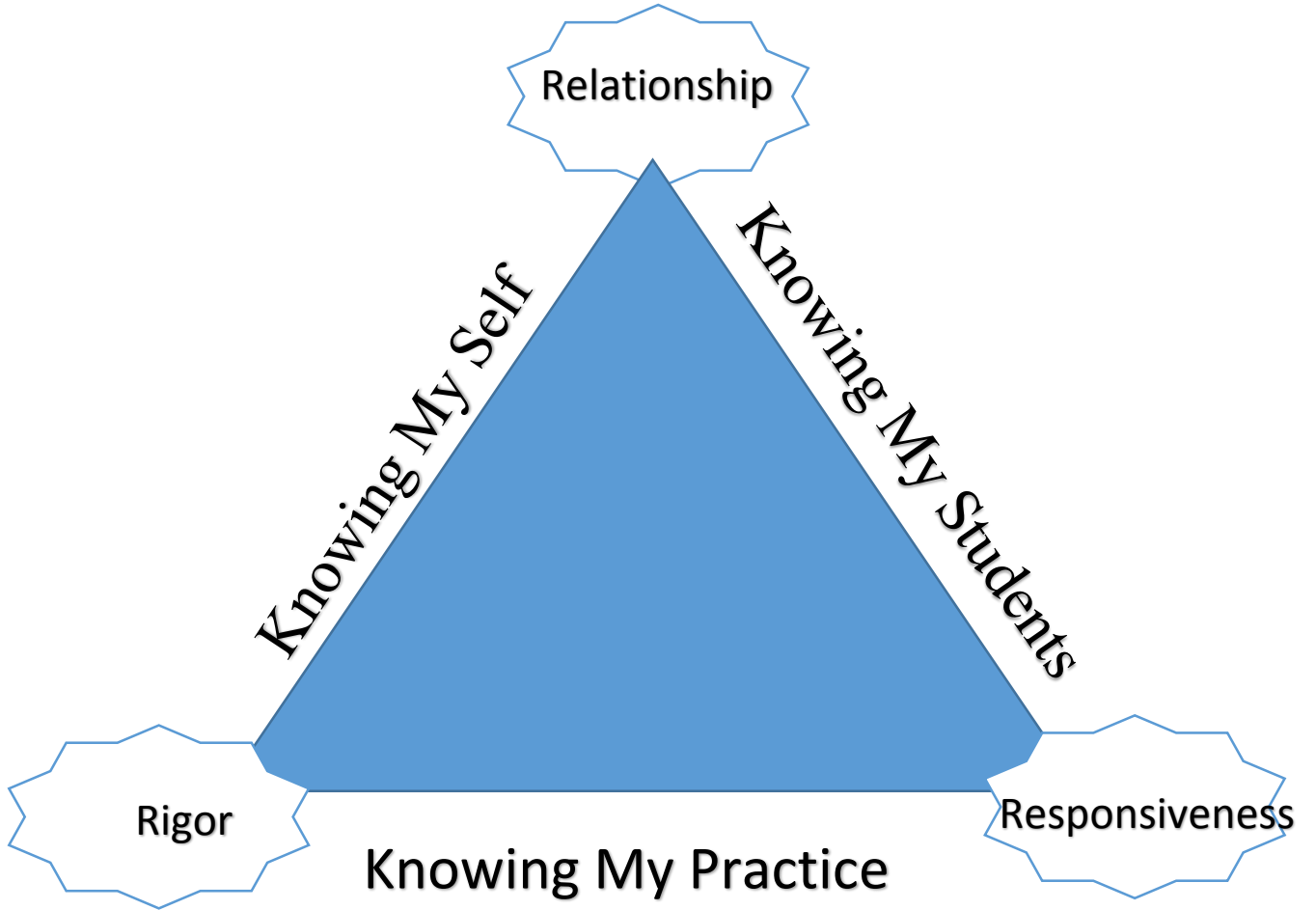
Lift ev’ry voice and sing,  
Till earth and heaven ring,  
Ring with the harmonies of Liberty;  
Let our rejoicing rise  
High as the list’ning skies,  
Let it resound loud as the rolling sea.  
Sing a son full of the faith that the dark past has taught us,  
Sing a song full of the hope that the present has brought us;  
Facing the rising sun of our new day begun,  
Let us march on till victory is won.

Stony the road we trod,  
Bitter the chast’ning rod,  
Felt in the days when hope unborn had died;  
Yet with a steady beat,  
Have not our weary feet  
Come to the place for which our fathers sighed?  
We have come over a way that with tears has been watered,  
We have come, treading our path through the blood of the slaughtered,  
Out from the gloomy past,

Till now we stand at last  
Where the white gleam of our bright star is cast.  
God of our weary years,  
God of our silent tears,  
Thou who hast brought us thus far on our way;  
Thou who hast by Thy might,  
Led us into the light,  
Keep us forever in the path, we pray.  
Lest our feet stray from the places, our God, where we met Thee,  
Lest our hearts, drunk with the wine of the world, we forget Thee;  
Shadowed beneath Thy hand,  
May we forever stand,  
True to our God,  
True to our native land.

APPENDIX F

GARY HOWARD'S ACHIEVEMENT TRIANGLE WITH DIMENSIONS OF  
KNOWING AND ACTION



## APPENDIX G

### EXEMPLAR TEXTS RECOMMENDED BY THE COMMON CORE FOR 11 AND 12

#### GRADES

English/Language Arts classes

Fiction

Chaucer, Geoffrey. *The Canterbury Tales*

de Cervantes, Miguel. *Don Quixote*

Austen, Jane. *Pride and Prejudice*

Poe, Edgar Allan. "The Cask of Amontillado."

Brontë, Charlotte. *Jane Eyre*

Hawthorne, Nathaniel. *The Scarlet Letter*

Dostoevsky, Fyodor. *Crime and Punishment*

Jewett, Sarah Orne. "A White Heron."

Melville, Herman. *Billy Budd, Sailor*

Chekhov, Anton. "Home."

Fitzgerald, F. Scott. *The Great Gatsby*

Faulkner, William. *As I Lay Dying*

Hemingway, Ernest. *A Farewell to Arms*

Hurston, Zora Neale. *Their Eyes Were Watching God*

Borges, Jorge Luis. "The Garden of Forking Paths."

Bellow, Saul. *The Adventures of Augie March*

Morrison, Toni. *The Bluest Eye*

Garcia, Cristina. *Dreaming in Cuban*

Lahiri, Jhumpa. *The Namesake*

Drama

Shakespeare, William. *The Tragedy of Hamlet*

Molière, Jean-Baptiste Poquelin. *Tartuffe*

Wilde, Oscar. *The Importance of Being Earnest*

Wilder, Thornton. *Our Town: A Play in Three Acts*

Miller, Arthur. *Death of a Salesman*

Hansberry, Lorraine. *A Raisin in the Sun*

Soyinka, Wole. *Death and the King's Horseman: A Play*

Poetry

Li Po. "A Poem of Changgan."

Donne, John. "A Valediction Forbidding Mourning."

Wheatley, Phyllis. "On Being Brought From Africa to America."

Keats, John. "Ode on a Grecian Urn."

Whitman, Walt. "Song of Myself."

Dickinson, Emily. "Because I Could Not Stop for Death."

Tagore, Rabindranath. "Song VII."

Eliot, T. S. "The Love Song of J. Alfred Prufrock."

Pound, Ezra. "The River Merchant's Wife: A Letter."

Frost, Robert. "Mending Wall."

Neruda, Pablo. "Ode to My Suit."

Bishop, Elizabeth. "Sestina."

Ortiz Cofer, Judith. "The Latin Deli: An Ars Poetica."

Dove, Rita. "Demeter's Prayer to Hades."

Collins, Billy. "Man Listening to Disc."

Informational Texts

Paine, Thomas. Common Sense

Jefferson, Thomas. The Declaration of Independence

United States. The Bill of Rights (Amendments One through Ten of the United States Constitution).

Thoreau, Henry David. Walden

Emerson, Ralph Waldo. "Society and Solitude."

Porter, Horace. "Lee Surrenders to Grant, April 9th, 1865."

Chesterton, G. K. "The Fallacy of Success."

Mencken, H. L. The American Language, 4th Edition

Wright, Richard. Black Boy

Orwell, George. "Politics and the English Language."

Hofstadter, Richard. "Abraham Lincoln and the Self-Made Myth."

Tan, Amy. "Mother Tongue."

Anaya, Rudolfo. "Take the Tortillas Out of Your Poetry."<sup>26</sup>

---

<sup>26</sup> List taken from "Common Core State Standards for English Language Arts and Literacy in History/Social Studies, Science, and Technical Subjects."

APPENDIX H

“LET AMERICA BE AMERICA AGAIN” BY LANGSTON HUGHES

Let America be America again.

Let it be the dream it used to be.

Let it be the pioneer on the plain

Seeking a home where he himself is free.

(America never was America to me.)

Let America be the dream the dreamers dreamed—

Let it be that great strong land of love

Where never kings connive nor tyrants scheme

That any man be crushed by one above.

(It never was America to me.)

O, let my land be a land where Liberty

Is crowned with no false patriotic wreath,

But opportunity is real, and life is free,

Equality is in the air we breathe.



(There's never been equality for me,  
Nor freedom in this "homeland of the free.")  
*Say, who are you that mumbles in the dark?*  
*And who are you that draws your veil across the stars?*

I am the poor white, fooled and pushed apart,  
I am the Negro bearing slavery's scars.  
I am the red man driven from the land,  
I am the immigrant clutching the hope I seek—  
And finding only the same old stupid plan  
Of dog eat dog, of mighty crush the weak.

I am the young man, full of strength and hope,  
Tangled in that ancient endless chain  
Of profit, power, gain, of grab the land!  
Of grab the gold! Of grab the ways of satisfying need!  
Of work the men! Of take the pay!  
Of owning everything for one's own greed!

I am the farmer, bondsman to the soil.  
I am the worker sold to the machine.  
I am the Negro, servant to you all.

I am the people, humble, hungry, mean—  
Hungry yet today despite the dream.  
Beaten yet today—O, Pioneers!  
I am the man who never got ahead,  
The poorest worker bartered through the years.

Yet I'm the one who dreamt our basic dream  
In the Old World while still a serf of kings,  
Who dreamt a dream so strong, so brave, so true,  
That even yet its mighty daring sings  
In every brick and stone, in every furrow turned  
That's made America the land it has become.  
O, I'm the man who sailed those early seas  
In search of what I meant to be my home—  
For I'm the one who left dark Ireland's shore,  
And Poland's plain, and England's grassy lea,  
And torn from Black Africa's strand I came  
To build a "homeland of the free."

The free?

Who said the free? Not me?

Surely not me? The millions on relief today?

The millions shot down when we strike?  
The millions who have nothing for our pay?  
For all the dreams we've dreamed  
And all the songs we've sung  
And all the hopes we've held  
And all the flags we've hung,  
The millions who have nothing for our pay—  
Except the dream that's almost dead today.

O, let America be America again—  
The land that never has been yet—  
And yet must be—the land where *every* man is free.  
The land that's mine—the poor man's, Indian's, Negro's, ME—  
Who made America,  
Whose sweat and blood, whose faith and pain,  
Whose hand at the foundry, whose plow in the rain,  
Must bring back our mighty dream again.  
Sure, call me any ugly name you choose—  
The steel of freedom does not stain.  
From those who live like leeches on the people's lives,  
We must take back our land again,  
America!

O, yes,  
I say it plain,  
America never was America to me,  
And yet I swear this oath—  
America will be!

Out of the rack and ruin of our gangster death,  
The rape and rot of graft, and stealth, and lies,  
We, the people, must redeem  
The land, the mines, the plants, the rivers.  
The mountains and the endless plain—  
All, all the stretch of these great green states—  
And make America again!