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Critical Pedagogy

Black Voices Matter

SHENIKA HANKERSON

Writing with voice is writing in which someone has breathed. It has that fluency, rhythm, and liveliness that exist naturally in the speech of most people... Writing with real voice has the power to make you pay attention and understand—the words go deep. I want to say that it has nothing to do with the words on the page, only with the relationship of the words to the writer.

—Peter Elbow (1998)

In early 2000's, I was a first-year African American graduate student in The Department of English at a public university in midwestern United States. On campus, and especially in this department, being an African American graduate student was not the norm, and some of my peers reminded me of this fact, mostly without malice, even unconsciously, but more often than I would have liked. Take for example a situation that occurred in a literacy, learning, and instruction course that I was enrolled in. During a class discussion, a white male (let's call him John), weighed in on issues surrounding African American literacy and academic success. "Blacks perform lower because most of them are lazy," he asserted. "They don't like to do work, most of them don't graduate from high school, and most of them don't go to college," he continued further. John pursued his particular line of argument for a few minutes, while I looked to our white professor for recourse; I waited, silently, to see when she would stop John's disrespectful, degrading, and dishonest rant. She said nothing, but listened patiently to John. When he had finished, she simply moved on to the next topic—as if his points were somehow unremarkable, or even incontrovertible.

I had to speak up. "Wait," I protested in a high-pitched voice. Then, turning to John, I more forcefully objected. "I can't believe you would say something so demeaning! There are plenty of black people who graduate from high school and go on to college! In fact, there are quite a few black un-

dergraduate and graduate students here at our University! I myself am proof positive!" My defense of African American literacy was interrupted by the white professor, who decided to intervene by calling a ten-minute break. While the other students filed out the door, I was summoned to stay behind. To my surprise, the professor reprimanded me for being "confrontational." When I asked her what she thought about John's outburst, she said, sympathetically, "He was just expressing his feelings."

I will never forget this experience—primarily because of how I felt after leaving class that day. Why didn't the professor interpret my comments, like those of John, as merely an expression of feelings? Why was John allowed to voice his opinions, and I wasn't allowed to voice my own? In many ways, it was as if the professor was telling me that it was okay for a white male to use his *voice* to express his feelings about the African American culture, but it was not okay for me—an African American female—to use my *voice* to express my feelings about my own culture. In other words, similar to the words of Jacqueline Royster, I was expected "to sit as a well-mannered Other, silently, in a state of tolerance that requires me to be as expressionless as I can manage, while colleagues who occupy a place of entitlement different from my own talk about the history and achievements of people from my ethnic group, or even about their perceptions of our struggles" (p. 30). I would have similar experiences over the years, and ultimately, like Royster, I began to understand that there is power associated with the "authority to speak and to make meaning" (1996, p. 31).

Lately, I have been thinking about power, voice, and meaning—albeit from a writing stance. In specific, I have been thinking about the written disruptions that occur "when the subject matter is me and the voice is not mine" (Royster, 1996, p. 31). In this paper, I examine the ways in which Aaron, a young African American male from inner-city Detroit, Michigan engages with the concept of voice at home and at school—specifically, in a postsecondary first-year writing course. Aaron's story, told from the perspective of a *voice*

lens - that is a linguistically “sounded, heard, and existing in time” lens that is representative of a person’s social, historical, and cultural context (Elbow 2007, p. 174) - reveals the effects of power and privilege and their ability to alter one’s own sense of written voice. By telling Aaron’s story, I seek to expose systems of privilege surrounding the notion of voice and, in keeping with work by Jacqueline Royster (1996) and bell hooks (1989), hope to advance an understanding of voice as a subjective entity. Viewing voice subjectively affords Aaron—and other speakers of marginalized languages—a new and necessary sense of agency over their writing.

Understanding Voice

Voice, an author’s distinctive style of expression, became a central point of discussion in composition studies around 1960. During this time advocates and critics expressed their enthusiasm and concern regarding the notion of voice in writing. Lately, however, arguments about voice have primarily gone MIA (missing in action); yet, as Peter Elbow (2007) rightfully indicates, “The concept of voice... is alive in our [composition] classrooms” (p. 169). It’s alive in our composition curriculums, learning outcome statements, and textbooks, but rarely does any one in the field of composition “[come] forward any more to argue for it or even to explore very seriously why it’s so alive” (Elbow, p. 171). In this paper, I will attempt to do both: to argue for the importance of voice while exploring its presence in composition. Ultimately, through the “nonmainstream version of English” lens of Aaron, I seek to understand how a “sense of order and rightness” gets disrupted when the written voice “is not mine” (Royster, 1996, p. 31)—a disposition which Elbow indicates “cries out for more attention” in composition (p. 171).

Finding Voice

I met Aaron in the fall of 2012. He was a first-year student in a first-year composition course I was instructing for the first time at MidMain University (pseudonym)—a predominantly white university. As the only African American student in the course, Aaron was attempting to negotiate his oral and written identity, while as an African American teacher, I was attempting to understand the state of affairs associated with teaching first-year composition in such a “white” environment. In some ways, we both felt a sense of slight unease. To be sure, both of us had prior affiliations (and thus an easy familiarity) with the predominately African American

culture of Detroit, Michigan: Aaron as a native, and me, as an instructor at its major university for more than eight years. This similarity was the spark, I believe, that ignited our initial - and then after - continuous exchange.

I discuss Aaron and my relationship in order to situate the context of the humanizing methodological stance that we used to approach our empirical study on written voice and composition. In “A Friend Who Understand Fully’: Notes on Humanizing Research in a Multiethnic Youth Community,” Django Paris (2011) calls a humanizing methodological stance necessary—especially when working with marginalized or oppressed groups (p. 140). A humanizing methodological stance places dignity and care at the forefront. Such a stance ensures the presence of ethical codes of conduct, codes that I adhered to in placing Aaron’s needs always above my own interests as a qualitative researcher for this study. Our work together is a true collaboration, and my commitment is, above all, to hearing his voice—and in exchange, having it be heard.

To explore issues relevant to voice, writing, power, and identity, Aaron and I analyzed qualitative data from the first-year writing course (not my own) that he was initially enrolled in at MidMain University. He withdrew just after the mid-point of the semester due to the negative feedback he believed he received about his writing “no matter how hard [he] tried.” This negative feedback led Aaron to question his writing ability. Thus this course offered us the opportunity to examine how voice gets (de)centralized from a student and instructor perspective.

We analyzed qualitative data from the Learning Memoir assignment that Aaron was required to complete. The Learning Memoir assignment asked students to “reflect on a learning-related event in [their] life.” It also prompted them to consider “voice” in writing. The qualitative data from the Learning Memoir assignment that we examined were: the instructor’s assignment sheet, Aaron’s final draft essay, and the instructor’s feedback of Aaron’s essay.

We analyzed the aforementioned qualitative data from a narrative interview perspective. As an unstructured conversation, the narrative interview allows participants to recount life experiences and can help researchers understand the meaning participants “attach to their experiences” (Elliot, 2005, p. 17). Furthermore, as Jane Elliot indicates, “interviews that attend to individuals’ narratives ... produce data that are more accurate, truthful, or trustworthy than structured interviews that ask each respondent a standardized set of questions” (p. 23).

Hearing Voice

*I would like to emphasize...that we look again at
"voice" and situate it within a world of symbols,
sound, and sense, recognizing that this world operates
symphonically.*

Jacqueline Royster (1996)

Aaron defines voice as "using my own words...own experience." Thus when Aaron talks about "voice," he speaks of it subjectively. In fact, as Aaron indicated in the narrative interview, when he sees the word "voice" in its written context, he thinks about it in his "home language" context (i.e. his family and community language). Aaron's perception is certainly not unusual. In "Language" anthropologist and linguist Edward Sapir (1933) calls language a primary "system of phonetic symbols for the expression of communicable thought and feeling" (p. 155). According to Sapir, from a historical perspective, writing emerged as a secondary component to language, and through its emergence, writing became an imitation of spoken language (p. 155). Literacy and language scholars Anne Haas Dyson and Geneva Smitherman (2009) forward a similar belief in "The Right (Write) Start: African American Language and the Discourse of Sounding Right." The authors draw on work by Bakhtin to call writing "a cultural extension of speech" (p. 975). Furthermore, symbols play a significant role in this equation. Some of Aaron's community linguistic practices are associated with African American verbal play. In "Honeyz and Playz Talkin that Talk," Geneva Smitherman (2006) equates African American verbal play with linguistic improvisation and manipulation of the "Word" (p. 64). Signification ("humorous statements of double meaning" that are often symbolic of a dis), The Dozens ("yo momma" jokes), and trash-talking (used to intimidate others), are all examples of African American verbal play (Smitherman, 2006, pp. 64-81). Thus when Aaron sees the word "voice," he sometimes thinks of his own symbolic, verbal play. Furthermore, when Aaron writes, he "draws on the repertoire of voices [that he] encountered in [his] experience of participating in genres and discourses, and [he] uniquely recombine a selection of the resources at [his] disposal for the purposes of the writing task at hand" (Ivanič & Camps, 2001, p.6). This process is social and cultural in nature and situated within the context of the everyday encounters of the writer along "with other people, other minds, and other texts, spoken and written" (Ivanič & Camps, 2001, p.6).

Viewing voice through this sound and symbol lens

makes sense to Aaron, me, and I would posit a host of other African Americans. As Geneva Smitherman (2006), John R. Rickford & Russell J. Rickford (2000), and Toni Morrison (as cited in LeClair, 1981) indicate, language, more specifically African American Language (AAL) - also called Ebonics, Black Language, Black English, African American English, and African American Vernacular English - plays a significant role in the lives of African Americans; in many ways, it makes up their identity. In *Spoken Soul: The Story of Black English*, renowned linguist John R. Rickford and his son Russell John Rickford explore the grammatical structure of this dynamic and rich language. According to the authors, AAL has distinctive grammatical structures that consist of:

- Optional *copula* (a *copula*, such as "is" or "are," may be omitted); ex: *He Ø going.*
- Marking plurality with *dem* (instead of them, these or those); ex: *Get dem pencils.*
- Invariant *be* (one of the most studied and celebrated grammatical features). The most known invariant *be* in AAL is the invariant habitual *be* (marks regular or habitual actions with *be* instead of "is" or "are"); ex: *They be at home every day.*
- The unstressed *been* and stressed *BEEN*. The stressed *BEEN* is used for emphasis as in the phrase *-I BEEN ready.*
- Double Negatives (a negative verb is used with a negative noun or pronoun); ex: *She wasn't no cheerleader.*

The authors further indicate:

that although it is common to think of [AAL] as a fixed entity, in everyday use it is dynamic and variable. Like dress and other kinds of social capital, speakers deploy it to greater or lesser extents to delineate identity, to mark differences of social class, gender, and age, and to express how comfortable they are with their audiences and topics. In short, it is a resource for commodity that speakers exploit or avoid, depending on their social backgrounds, relations, and attitudes, on what they want to achieve, and on how they want to come across in each interaction. (Rickford & Rickford, 2000, p.128)

Writing (and Erasing) Voice

When the subject matter is me and the voice is not mine, my sense of order and rightness is disrupted.

Jacqueline Royster (1996)

The instructor's assignment sheet for the Learning Memoir assignment was telling. The instructor asked students to "reflect and write about a learning-related event in

[their] life,” as well as, consider “voice” in their writing; however, the instructor also asked, or better yet, demanded that students engage with academic language as well. For example, academic language requirements were forwarded in both the Objectives and Grading Checklist sections of the assignment sheet. “To learn how to effectively use academic language in an essay” was one of the objectives for this assignment, and “Clear and precise sentence level rhetoric (grammar and style; see Section 10e ‘Using Academic Language’)” was a grading criterion for this assignment. Section 10e “Using Academic Language” was located in the required textbook for this first-year composition course. It begins by stating, “American academic writing relies on a dialect called standard American English. The dialect is also used in business, the professions, government, the media, and other sites of social and economic power where people of diverse backgrounds must communicate with one another.” The section (three pages total) continues by providing examples of what academic language should look like (formal) and what academic writing should not look like (informal).

Essentially, the areas noted above served as context cues for Aaron. Although he wanted to use his “own words...own experiences” when composing his Learning Memoir, he felt that he wouldn’t be able to do so successfully. Thus only a small section of Aaron’s Learning Memoir about language learning and negotiation across school and community contexts, with a particular focus on football community contexts, contained his voice (one paragraph with six sentences). The rest of his essay contained an “attempt to use a standard American English” voice.

What is important to note is that Aaron’s “sense of order and rightness” did get disrupted when he attempted to use a standard American English voice. His “I was jus tryin ta get the sentences to make sense” attempts were plagued with what most writing teachers would call “awkward” “vague” or “unclear” word choices. In fact, Aaron’s instructor did make similar comments. Take for example the following excerpt:

“Learning has expanded in America from whence it once been hundreds of years ago.”

Instructor’s comment: “Confusing sentence—check your word usage” (from whence was circled)

“I would use the language of what I was learning from the [football] community and it afflicted my grades in some papers.”

Instructor’s comment: “Unclear sentence—check your word usage” (afflicted was circled)

When asked to elaborate on the meaning of these sentences, Aaron indicated (in laughter), “I was jus pullin words from the dictionary, and pullin stuff from the Internet...tryin to use academic language.”

It is also important to note that when Aaron did use his “own words...own experiences” (i.e., his own voice) in the one paragraph—six sentence passage of his essay he was criticized for doing so. The instructor criticized phrases such as:

“I’ve gotten a lot better though”

Instructor’s comment: “Casual language”
(gotten was underlined)

“...called me a monster”

Instructor’s comment: “Slang—avoid this”

“The guys they helped me”

Instructor’s comment: “they” crossed out

Aaron’s phrases are certainly indicative of his lived, linguistic experiences. In fact, the phrase “called me a monster” is indicative of “Black Semantics” which “is broadly conceived to encompass the totality of idioms, terms, and expressions that are commonly used by Black Americans” (Smitherman, 1977, p. 43). Black Semantic language draws from four traditions “West African language background; servitude and oppression; music and ‘cool talk’; the traditional black church” (Smitherman, 1977, p. 43) and includes phrases such as “called me a monster” (the best to do it, winner) and “Ain a thang: It’s okay, everything’s fine, no problem” (for the latter phrase, see Smitherman, 2006, p. 21). Furthermore, the phrase “The guys they helped me” is indicative of a double subject—which Rickford & Rickford prove is common in AAL (2000, p. 125).

So, how does a “sense of order and rightness” get disrupted when the written voice is not situated subjectively? It gets disrupted in numerous ways. As seen via the initial excerpt from Aaron’s essay, a sense of “order and rightness” becomes a sense of confusion. Instead of using clear and effective words and phrases, Aaron used awkward, vague, and unclear words and phrases. Thus it would be safe to say that attempting to write in a voice that was not his caused Aaron to produce more unwanted connotations or meanings than if he wrote in a voice that was his. Also, as seen via the initial excerpt from Aaron’s essay, the true meaning of voice was completely neglected. In exchange, a different voice emerged—one that was not his or symbolic of standard American English. These findings led Aaron to question “voice.” At the end of

our study, he asked, “So what type of voice we expected to have in writing classes?”

Respecting Voice

When students’ home languages – spoken or written – are denied, their voices become muted and they become invisible in the larger society.

NCTE “Resolution on the Student’s Right to Incorporate Heritage and Home Languages in Writing”

Given that “voice” still plays a key role in composition—appearing in composition textbooks, syllabi, assignment sheets, and learning outcome statements—it is important that it is revived as a topic of scholarly study. To allow voice to go undertheorized is to permit the concept and its consequences to be disregarded—at least in the realm of the academe. Thus, I argue, it is necessary to acknowledge that “voice” is alive and well in instructional spaces and students’ lived spaces. As composition educators, our practice must live up to the values articulated by the NCTE “Resolution on the Student’s Right to Incorporate Heritage and Home Languages in Writing”—values that ask us to honor, preserve, and protect students’ voices and values that tell us:

When students have opportunities to incorporate home languages in their construction of written texts, they (a) draw on a rich range of linguistic and cultural resources to express complex thought, (b) accelerate their acquisition of academic discourses, (c) develop multilingual abilities, (d) become more semantically and syntactically adept as they develop abilities in text comprehension and construction, and (e) enlarge their competency in public discourse.

I conclude by providing recommendations for composition educators. My hope is that these recommendations will help us continuously consider and remain true to honoring, preserving, and protecting the voice in writing practices of AAL-speaking, and by extension, all culturally and linguistically diverse students:

1. Recognize that AAL is:
not ‘Broken’ English nor ‘sloppy’ speech. Nor is it merely ‘slang.’ Nor is it some bizarre form of language spoken by baggy-pants-wearing Black youth. [AAL] *is* a set of communication patterns and

practices resulting from Africans’ appropriation and transformation of a foreign tongue during the African Holocaust.” (Smitherman, 2000, p. 19)

As Smitherman (2000) further points out, about 90% of African Americans use some feature(s) of this language (p. 19). Thus it is imperative that we educate ourselves about the “stylistic, phonological, lexical, and grammatical features that distinguish it from academic as well as mainstream American English” (Ball & Lardner, 2005, p. 145) in order to dismantle any hegemonic language attitudes or perceptions that we may hold about AAL—attitudes and perceptions that similar to Aaron’s instructor, may cause us to erroneously criticize Black Semantics phrases such as “...called me a monster.” This type of criticism perpetuates white supremacist ideologies, as well as, hinders the writing experiences and outcomes of culturally and linguistically diverse students.

2. Safeguard the linguistic rights of AAL-speaking students. We can do this by shifting our attention to culturally sustaining pedagogy (Paris, 2012). According to Paris:

The term culturally sustaining requires that our pedagogies be more than responsive of or relevant to the cultural experiences and practices of young people—it requires that they support young people in sustaining the cultural and linguistic competence of their communities while simultaneously offering access to dominant cultural competence. Culturally sustaining pedagogy, then, has as its explicit goal supporting multilingualism and multiculturalism in practice and perspective for students and teachers. That is, culturally sustaining pedagogy seeks to perpetuate and foster—to sustain—linguistic, literate, and cultural pluralism as part of the democratic project of schooling. (p. 95)

Furthermore, as Alim & Paris (2017) assert, culturally sustaining pedagogy centers the rich literate practices of culturally and linguistically diverse students. As a result, it provides them with access to both learning and achievement (p. 6). This, in turn, will prevent educational instances of the linguistic stigmatization and language-shaming that has been known to contribute to the academic demise of culturally and linguistically diverse students. In honor of this culturally sustaining pedagogy recommendation, I leave you with a brief corresponding three-week lesson plan for teaching “voice” in writing:

The "Voice" in Writing Activity/Assignment	The Purpose	The Timeline
Distribute a "Voice" in Writing Attitudinal Questionnaire concerning students' voice in writing beliefs, perceptions, experiences, and practices	Allows course participants (students and instructor) to uncover, explore, and illuminate perspectives about voice in writing	Week One: Day One
Ask students to read historical, theoretical, practical, and context-based passages from Peter Elbow's "Voice in Writing Again: Embracing Contraries"	Teaches students about the historical, theoretical, practical, and context-based orientations of voice in writing—especially as it relates to composition studies	Week One
Introduce students to Chapter One of June Jordan's <i>His Own Where</i> and Gloria Anzaldúa's "To live in the Borderlands means you"	Provides students with resourceful material for learning about the social, cultural, and regional contexts that often underpin voice in writing; teaches against the myth that there is only one way to present voice in writing	Week Two
Invite students to bring in samples of writing from home that exemplifies voice in writing	Helps students recognize the social, cultural, and regional contexts that are associated with their own voice in writing practices	Week Three

Table 1: Teaching Voice in Writing: A Brief Three-Week Lesson Plan

Notes

- The conversation regarding voice in writing could continue, as deemed appropriate, throughout the semester.
- Writing instructors could also hold writing conferences with students in order to understand students' choice of voice in writing. If needed, further student-instructor discussion and negotiation can happen at this time. Ultimately the goal is to help students discover, refine, and assert their "voice" while writing within and across various personal, professional, and academic contexts.

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