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# Don't @ Me: The Power Structure of Language & Promoting Language Diversity in Academia

"Black Twitter" is a viable resource for Black users to verbalize social and cultural critiques, promote wellness, and exercise cultural hegemony. Its users utilize Twitter's digital platform to allow for a flow of collaborative discourse. "Black Twitter" users have mastered the ability to convey a message through both formal and informal approaches. The formality is present within their rhetoric and socially conscious topics of discussion. The informality is showcased through their use of language, grammar, slang, and the platform on which it's displayed. In this paper, I will explore vernacular insurrections and the importance of implementing language diversity in the classroom. I discuss ways in which the classroom can be a site of change. I do this by analyzing tweets from "Black Twitter" users and their use of African American Vernacular English. The standardized power structure of academia prioritizes who gets to occupy space within institutions and politicizes language by dictating the type of English that is appropriate for use. The power structure of language ignores the intersections of student identities in deeming non-standardized English as unprofessional, non-academic, and informal.

Carmen Kynard's book, *Vernacular Insurrections: Race, Black Protest, and the New Century in Composition-Literacies Studies,* explores twenty-first-century literacies, specifically those created by Black liberation movements, and how they work to impact our personal lives and academic institutions. Kynard defines her use of vernacular insurrections by writing:

> By channeling my thinking toward vernacular insurrections, I can see vernacular discourses as not only counterhegemonic, but also as affirmative of new, constantly mutating languages, identities, political methodologies, and social understandings that communities form in and of themselves, both inwardly and outwardly. Vernacular insurrections then are not merely the bits and pieces chipped off or chipping away at the dominant culture, but a whole new emergence. Institutionalized discourses are always effected by vernacular discourses, but the impact that I am going for is when vernacular discourses function as an insurrection, not merely an effect. (10)

Kynard regards vernacular discourses as a cultural practice that ties communities together. This practice is both a conscious and unconscious effort to link ideas, theories, and shared experiences that result in vernacular insurrections. Kynard explains vernacular insurrections are not "pieces chipped off or chipping away at the dominant culture, but a whole new emergence" (10). Vernacular insurrections have caused in-depth discussions for how we prioritize and regard

institutionalized discourses. She argues that institutionalized discourses have always been affected by vernacular discourses, but her approach is to discuss its profound insertion into dismantling how we understand language in academia.

In 2018, basketball player LeBron James opened a public elementary school in Akron, Ohio. After the first year of its opening, the school was celebrated for having "generated 'extraordinary' results" (Zillgitt). According to a USA Today article written by Jeff Zillgitt, 90% of students who started the school year at least one year behind grade level met or exceeded their expected growth in math and reading. Several other statistics showcasing the students' astounding results for the year were also mentioned in the article. The school was created as a haven for at-risk youth to be subjected to a positive academic community. The biggest lesson James' school teaches society is that if young minorities were all subject to the same resources as middle and upper-class white institutions, they would all prosper. There is no surprise these students excelled; that's what the school is designed for. However, if students were subject to an institution designed for their prosperity that included diverse teaching instruction and allowed language diversity, they'd propel even further. The success of James' school begins at the institutional level, causing a positive trickle-down effect to influence teacher instruction and ultimately the prosperity of their students. While many institutions fail to restructure or, as Kynard proposes, dismantle its hierarchical academic system, change can be enacted at the teacher and student level. In their text *Austerity Blues: Fighting for the Soul of Public Higher Education*, Stephen Brier and Michael Fabricant explore the timeline of public policy, technology, and privatization that has affected public education. The fostering of an "open-classroom culture" places leadership into the hands of classroom facilitators. They write:

> This open-classroom culture is the one most likely to nurture critical thinking, the articulation of ideas, and transmission of learning from the classroom to the larger world of work, community, and politics. These learning experiences can help facilitate new forms of student agency, risk-taking, and individual as well as collective trajectories outside the classroom. At its best, a public higher education should offer students the opportunity to build the confidence and expertise necessary to engage intellectual ideas and the work world from a critical and analytical perspective. (250)

The "open-classroom" enables students to think critically and articulate ideas. This framework allows students to channel their confidence to fully assert themselves into learning. It may not diversify learning curriculum entirely, but the "open-classroom" works to diversify learning strategies in an academic system fostering diverse individuals. Brier and Fabricant's model of learning illustrates how systemic change can be done on the micro-level as we work to dismantle a historically oppressive system of learning.

Kynard's argument for a new approach to instruction, rather than to restructure it, defines the difference between merely allowing students to physically access institutions and allowing them to prosper by sharpening the intellectual tools they already own. Kynard's central argument is a call to action for instructors to help dismantle our current system and design a new way to instruct students. Just as she positions insurrections as having more than just an effect on

standardized language, instructors have to force a change in how they approach teaching the curriculum. Kynard's argument shifts from theory to practice as she includes teaching interludes into her overall point. The fifth interlude is a call to implement cross-language writing in the classroom. She writes:

> ( . . . ) no institution has ever been excited about my detailed analyses of how racism is maintained on the campus, how the most color-conscious students of color are denigrated and marginalized, how standardized English is a myth that we privilege, or how skillfully students deploy ethnic rhetorics. Few seem to imagine that critical pedagogy, cross-language relations, and the acts of teaching folk to read and write well can function simultaneously. (245)

By decoding how racism is maintained on campuses, institutions will be forced to dismantle its current system and create a new one. Simply restructuring the institution is a practice that has been attempted for decades. Kynard argues that the racism embedded into the bourgeois whiteness of standardized academia will do students of color a disservice by merely trying to sprinkle bits and pieces of vernacular language into the curriculum. After all, restructuring the institution will always leave inclusionary gaps and holes that are unfilled and unaccounted for. Even today, historically white institutions that restructured their policies to allow admissions for Black and Brown students still struggle with adequate representation of minority students, let alone inclusive course instruction. By recreating an institution that willfully accepts "new literacy paradigms" (195), students will be allowed to flourish in a historically exclusive system. It may also allow for diverse research methodologies, innovative fields of study, and new interdisciplinary frameworks into many disciplines by providing students the tools and articulation to explore their learning strategies.

The classroom should serve as a learning playground for both teachers and students. Implementing classroom instruction that approaches learning as a fluid exchange of discourse and action between teachers and students prioritizes critical thinking and self-exploration. In their text "Spinning out of control: Dialogical transactions in an English classroom," Bob Fecho and Kristi Bruce Amatucci explore the relationship between an English teacher and a student. By analyzing the give and take transaction of their relationship, Fecho and Amatucci uncover how classroom learning can orchestrate learning of the internal self. They argue that

> the teaching of reading and writing must be seen as more than the learning of discrete skills to enable future employment. On the contrary, all transactions with texts should be viewed as providing learners with a range of ways to scrutinize their lives and the lives of others. We suggest that by taking a transactional and dialogical stance on the teaching of English, teachers and learners become inquirers into and ongoing co-constructors of their individual and collective selves. (5)

Their argument promotes a mode of learning that develops skills for students to use outside of the classroom. This method of teaching refutes the classroom to professional life approach to learning. Instead, "all transactions with texts" should prompt students to think critically about how the words they engage with apply to their individual lives. By exchanging critical discourse reaching

beyond the text to inquire about oneself, teachers and students are given the agency to question themselves and their external world. Through this form of exploration, teachers and students are allowed to question the text, themselves, each other, and various levels of the institution. Not only does this make for a classroom setting designed to promote agency, but enables students to practice a fluid mode of learning outside of the classroom.

Kynard's argument for cross-language writing in classrooms helps to position instructors to "challenge the ways and reasons they [students] have internalized racial/linguistic inferiority and shame or, on the flip side, a superiority in not sounding like the other young people of color on the block" (245). Language diversity works in two parts: allowing students to use their "mother tongues" and understanding the power structures that rejected their use of language in the first place. In her book, *Sites of Translation: What Multilinguals Can Teach Us about Digital Writing and Rhetoric,* Laura Gonzales writes:

> Because language is always connected to power, history, and ideology, it is important to recognize that language diversity is tied to differences in our lived experiences, in our access to and benefits from privilege, and in our cultural and racial backgrounds. To speak ethically of language fluidity, then, requires us to acknowledge the rhetorical and historical contexts in which this fluidity happens. (4-5)

Gonzalez points out that language diversity intersects with our many lived experiences. Analyzing language as a source of power reveals the privilege in the ability to access it and its racialized hierarchy. Language diversity is a fluid practice. It situates language based on time, space, and audience, which intersects with who is utilizing language and for what purpose. Gonzalez argues, "language diversity can help researchers and teachers not only to theorize policies but to develop methodological frameworks and pedagogical practices that center linguistic diversity in and across cultural-rhetorical contexts" (58). The classroom setting is where most students utilize language diversity. The ways in which they translate instructor meanings of assignments, expectations and assessment methods illustrate a fluid practice of language (Gonzalez 60).

The majority of the Black population active on Twitter is referred to as "Black Twitter." Black users are most visible in the "trending topics," a real-time list of the most tweeted about subjects. Twitter's trending topics list frequently features topics in which Black users are the majority or have a direct association with Black American cultures (Florini 225). "Black Twitter" serves as a community for its Black users to share discourse centered around their cultural hegemony. In the article, "Tweets, Tweeps, and Signifyin': Communication and Cultural Performance on 'Black Twitter,'" Sarah Florini elaborates on the position of "Black Twitter" on the social media platform. She writes:

> However, I should be clear that Black Twitter does not exist in any unified or monolithic sense. Just as there is no "Black America" or single "Black culture," there is no "Black Twitter." What does exist are millions of Black users on Twitter networking, connecting, and engaging with others who have similar concerns, experiences, tastes, and cultural practices. Black people are not a monolith. (225)

"Black Twitter" showcases the diversity amongst Black identities who exist across the world. Intersections of geography, age, gender, and class from its users work together to concretize the fluidity of "Black Twitter's" platform. Although its users are based all over the world, there is a strong presence of African American Vernacular English (AAVE), or a variation of it, as the dominant language of choice. "Black Twitter" users exercise vernacular insurrections daily with how they express themselves within the social media platform. Similar to vernacular discourse as an insurrection on institutionalized discourse, Twitter's Black population has positioned itself as its own community that has a function and purpose far beyond the social media application.

AAVE utilizes the copy and deletion of words and sounds, an act present within all languages. In her article, Sarah Florini explores an interpretation of the act of copying and deletion of words as the practice of "signifyin'" by "Black Twitter" users. Florini defines the use of "signifyin'" as a mode to express Black cultural knowledge. "Signifyin' is a genre of linguistic performance that allows for the communication of multiple levels of meaning simultaneously, most frequently involving wordplay and misdirection" (224). The act of "signifyin'" is prominent within AAVE utilized by "Black Twitter" users. A tweet by user @niy_af states:

> "Until white people get sent home for straight hair, or get their hairstyles fucking cut off to participate in events. That argument will never be fucking valid. Yall are dumb. Straight hair is not limited to white people. Yall are blatantly ignorant" (12/5/19).

This tweet illustrates the intersection of culture, politics, and language used within most tweets by "Black Twitter" users. This user's tweet is in response to hair discrimination that targets Black people's, specifically Black women's, hair. The use of "yall," particularly without the apostrophe, is an example of the copy and deletion of language or "signifyin'" present within AAVE. This tweet also proves Kynard's point that language shouldn't exist to dictate what you know, but how you can relay a message. The tweet clearly expresses a critique of a racial injustice that has been studied by many academics. The positionality of the user within the argument is clear, and their use of formal and informal language is how many "Black Twitter" users express themselves.

Sarah Florini includes hashtags within her discussion of the prominent influence "Black Twitter" has on the social media platform. However, a more current form of interaction amongst Black users is mirroring the same message or style of a tweet to participate in a running joke, often without the use of hashtags. Twitter user @afrofutility tweeted:

> "you in her DMs im in her work cited page, we are not the same" (11/18/19).

And, user @sunisdoingokay mirrors the style by tweeting:

> "You in her likes I'm in her google docs via editing access" (11/20/19).

Verbal performance, linguistic resources, and modes of interaction are key ways that Black users perform their racial identities, individually and collectively, on Twitter (Florini 234). "Black Twitter's" main function is allowing discourse to flow rapidly between its users. Many tweets

become popular and replicated if it conveys a message or joke that is largely understood by the community. Most popular tweets or trends are those that are relatable to the majority. While some people outside of the Black community may also relate to tweets from "Black Twitter," the racial and cultural identities along with the use of AAVE makes the content hard to mirror successfully. The similarities of these two tweets illustrate: 1) cultural hegemony at play and 2) how AAVE is a full language that is easily used and understood.

June Jordan's essay, "Nobody Mean More To Me Than You and The Future Life Of Willie Jordan," details her experience teaching "Black English" to predominantly Black students in New York. Jordan assigned the class a text written in Black English. To the instructor's surprise the students regarded the language of the text as written "wrong" (162). She compared their inability to see the connection between the language in the text to their own oration as "probably akin to the shock of seeing yourself in a photograph for the first time" (162). The lack of Black English representation mirroring their use of language displayed within a classroom setting caused the students to unintentionally expose internalized biases of their own identities. Jordan had the heavy task of helping her students to unlearn the negative projections stigmatizing their use of language. Both Jordan and her students illustrate how the classroom can be a site of change. By exposing students to a fluid model of learning which prompted them to question their identities, Jordan provided tools to allow students to unlock diverse levels of critical thinking.

Politics play an important role in the hierarchy of language. In the text *History of Sexuality Vol 1,* Foucault argues that discourse links objects that are not naturally linked. The construction is not of knowledge but of the relationship between power and knowledge working together to link things and the practice applied to that knowledge. The most dominant type of knowledge is when it includes bio-power, the power over life and regulating life. Foucault's model of thinking negates the idea that representation is based on truth. However, discourse makes the connection that is not present, therefore there is no representation because there is no truth there. The way we see things as automatically or naturally connected is constructed by knowledge to form things together. Language is a social construct. The ways in which we understand language, learn language, and differentiate the use of language as correct or incorrect is socially constructed. The construction is based on a hierarchy to separate individuals based class, education, and, in this case, race.

Many academic institutions regard other types of English, which differ from the standardized form, as replicas of the language. However, each language is full on its own with markers of syntax, grammar, and word completion which is influenced by culture, geography, and historical intersections. African American Vernacular English (AAVE) is a language spoken by Black and African American people. As a whole, the language takes on various forms based on geography, but incorporates cultural identity markers that allow Black people to use it homogeneously. In "African American Vernacular English is Not Standard English With Mistakes," Geoffrey K. Pullum argues, "most speakers of Standard English think that AAVE is a badly spoken version of their language, marred by a lot of ignorant mistakes in grammar and punctuation, or worse than that, an unimportant and mostly abusive repertoire of street slang used

by an ignorant urban underclass" (40). In no way does it seek to reconstruct standardized English as an attempt to copy its form. AAVE is a language that utilizes many slang terms that already exist in language and assigns new meanings. It is a well-thought-out language and dialect used dutifully by African Americans.

The disregard of AAVE as a definitive language is due to its close relation to another language of higher prestige (Pullum 39). The politics of the Black subjects who utilize AAVE influences its stigma as an incorrect form of communication. Languages like Spanish and French are not subject to the same level of ridicule as AAVE because the politics are vastly different. To reiterate, AAVE is not merely "Black slang" or a poorly mocked version of English. Pullum elaborates on the stereotypical myths of AAVE by writing:

> We call an expression slang when it represents a vivid, colloquial word or phrase associated with some subculture and not yet incorporated as part of the mainstream language. No subculture's slang could constitute a separate language. The mistake is like confusing a sprinkle of hot sauce with dinner. Slang is by definition parasitic on some larger and more encompassing host language. It has no grammar of its own; it is a small array of words and phrases used under the aegis of some ordinary language and in accordance with its grammar. The majority of slang words and phrases are in the language already and are merely assigned new slang meanings by some subpopulation. (40)

To regard AAVE as merely slang is to disregard the fluidity present within language and disregards the fluidity present within English. Slang is not a language, and to regard AAVE as such diminishes the eloquent cultural practice present within its use. Standardized English is just one form of English, just as Patois and British English are its own form of language. It is also important to note that an incorrect utterance in one language can be correct in another (Pullum 41). This practice of language fluidity gets tricky to understand when two languages are extremely similar.

In a live discussion, fashion designer Kerby Jean-Raymond and writer and producer Lena Waithe sat down to discuss Waithe's film, *Queen & Slim*. The two spoke about their positionality within the entertainment industry as Black creatives. They tackled AAVE and how Waithe is able to construct dialogue to properly illustrate her Black characters; she states, "I do believe Black people have a broken English. It's a mix between southern, city and slavery" (04:17-04:22). Waithe's understanding of how Black history influences their articulation and communication allows her to construct dialogue. However, this quote illustrates the common misconception present within many people who aren't fully aware of the fluidity present within language. Black people's language is not broken. There shouldn't be an urgency or duty to fix Black people's articulation, because it is their own. The language is shaped by rich cultural experiences and histories. One can't fix history, because it has already happened. Similarly, the way Black people express themselves is rooted in centuries of their struggle to understand a language that was forced upon our ancestors. As Pullum argues, Black people's expression of slang does not encompass their mode of language in its entirety. The "mix between southern, city and slavery" present within AAVE represents the intersections of identity and the power structure of language.

Being able to conform to standardized English practices in literacy is a privilege. The construction of language is based on an individual's ability to perform it as it was intended. Those unable to perform the standardized form of language are ostracized or unable to flourish in academic institutions. In *Talkin That Talk: Language, Culture and Education in African America,* Geneva Smitherman argues, "what is needed in the English classroom and in all departments is a better understanding of the nature of dialect and a shift in attitudes towards it" (34). Just as most disciplines, English departments struggle with the ability to welcome colloquial language in its classroom and instruction. The bias of standardized English in academic institutions works to bridge the gap between the students who struggle to perform it and the access to knowledge. Early on in education, students are drilled with the idea that standardized English is the only form of English that is appropriate. Just like language in general, English is fluid and has been, and continues to be, reshaped by the copy and deletion of words.

In garnering a better understanding of the nature of language and dialect, academic departments can spend more time helping students critically analyze information and interpret work in their own dialect. Tests should not be focused on whether students can think, speak, or write in the institutional dialect, but on whether they can think, speak, and write in their own dialects (Geneva 34). Allowing students to use their own dialect can help them better understand course work in methods that help them retain information, rather than memorize material.

Language evolves over time. Understanding its evolution causes for interdisciplinary studies across multiple disciplines to explore various histories that have intersected to cause the constant evolution. In *Language Evolution* Christiansen and Kirby write

> We believe that at least part of the answer is that a deep understanding of language evolution can only come from concerted, joint effort of researchers from a huge range of disciplines. We must understand how our brains and minds work; how language is structured and what it is used for; how early language and modern language differ from each other and from other communication systems; in what ways the biology of hominids has changed; how we manage to acquire language during development; and how learning, culture and evolution interact. (2)

The study of language is a healthy task to uncover. This excerpt explains the need for researchers across various disciplines to work together in order to understand how language has become socially constructed and fluid. If the origin of language is so complex to track, how can we promote one usage of English as most appropriate? How can we teach students that language is an ever-evolving chain of culture and history, yet force them to disregard their interpretation of language? Academic institutions not only do their students a disservice, but also its ability to diversify its instruction and learning materials, by promoting a stagnant representation of language.

The power structure of language works to decentralize students' identities by prioritizing one spoken language over another. Standardized English forces boundaries on how students express their voice by categorizing other Englishes as unacceptable in academic settings. The

dismantling of this power structure can start with how teachers instruct their students. Learning is a transactional act that should push students and teachers to think beyond the text. At its core, learning should enable students to engage in critical discourse to aid in how they understand their identities. Education fails to implement student agency by stigmatizing language and instilling internalized systems of hierarchy. By allowing an inclusive learning environment, teachers will help students understand how language works and why the current language structure works to oppress them. Overall, the institution needs a completely new system to aid in empowering the voices of students. Communication is not just what you say, but how you say things. Allowing students to discuss materials in their natural dialect may allow for new ideas to come forth and help to diversify academic disciplines.

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