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Speaking From Different Positions: Framing African American College Male Literacies as Institutional Critique



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Abstract: This essay explores Black male literacy practices as institutional critique at a large Midwestern land grant university. Through documenting a student's process of reinstatement at his university, I demonstrate how vernacular perspectives, language, and networking strategies are used for developing self-efficacy and critical literacies. Black college males can use critical literacies to effectively navigate asymmetrical power structures at predominately White universities.

Sitting in a small chair in a dormitory on the east side of campus, I listen as Anthony (not his real name) talks to me about what it feels like to be on academic probation. He sits at his compact computer desk with his back to me, staring at his laptop screen. "I just know that you gotta separate yourself from certain things," he says while he finishes up a homework assignment. "If you know what's best for you, just take the steps to do what you can to keep you here." He speaks with an air of urgency as he reflects on his semester. Barely 19 years old, Anthony's brief college tenure took on a new meaning, one wrought with anxieties of possibly being kicked out after his first year in college. He had not done so well the semester prior and needed to pass his first-year writing course to remain in academic good standing; but he was failing because he "talked too much in his writing." And the existential reality of that failure was crystallizing during that moment in Anthony's dorm room. A Michigan native, Anthony was the proverbial brotha from the hood coming to college with odds stacked against him: he was a Black male, raised in a lower income Black community, a first generation student, and was learning how to manage the social constraints of navigating a predominately White university. With his back turned to me, he articulated this awareness about who he was and the importance of this pivotal moment of his life. "Well since you out here on your own...you gotta have some confidence in yourself, passion, some commitment to just keep going...challenges you will face. You know what I'm sayin'? Besides, there ain't nothin' for me back home. I ain't goin' back home." Anthony's tone resonated a sense of hopelessness and hope, of looking back yet willfully looking forward. His current struggles were characterized not so much as roadblocks as they were his rite of passage into places of opportunity, a ticket out of Muskegon, Michigan, his hometown. The stakes were high to do well this semester. Failing his writing course and on the brink of academic suspension, literacy took on new meaning—one that was predicated on his ability to navigate academic demands.

For many Black college males, the composition course is a space where texts and writing practices make visible the ideological values embedded in language that have social and political implications for their subject formation. It is also a window into how Black males use language to transition into higher education. Participating in academic discourses often involves imagining possible selves in the wake of prevailing stereotypes about Black nihilism and academic underachievement. Framing the literate lives of Black males in college as a viable representation of how they negotiate a sense of self while navigating value systems can reveal how literacy learning invokes moments of tension, identity negotiation and transformation for African American male writers (Cushman 170; Cook-Gumperz 338). I take as an example Anthony's experiences as a college writer and how he comes to terms with conditions for academic success in his writing course. In the words of Mike Rose (216, 237), literacy in Anthony's experiences is not just about staying eligible as a student; it is intimately connected with respect, with a sense that he is not beaten. It is connected to the deepest impulse to survive and thrive as a young Black college male (and, I argue, as a writer). Anthony's narrative account suggests that we need to further understand how literacy occurs, is encouraged, or inhibited in social, political, or institutional contexts.

For Anthony, learning institutional literacies to articulate asymmetrical power relations was important in his interactions with gatekeepers. Furthermore, participating in institutional discourse gave Anthony a platform for critically engaging his literacy learning experiences as a student writer in the composition classroom and beyond. In the wake of low retention trends and cultures of insularity that pervade many of our predominantly White institutions, the stakes of literacy for many Black college males are actualized as they navigate academic discourse and negotiate with university gatekeepers. Anthony's rhetorical practices reveal his ability to leverage institutional literacies while using multiple subject positions as a Black college male to speak from different locations. He takes a critical approach to his learning experiences as a student and reveals how he learns to translate his fixed and fluid identities as an African American male writer and African American language speaker into academic and broader institutional discourses.

This project was not planned. Upon meeting Anthony, I was in the middle of writing a dissertation, working as assistant to the writing program administrator, and volunteering as a writing tutor at an after school study hall program. Anthony was a student whom I had met during this time. He had brought multiple essays over the course of the semester, and we worked on them together. When Anthony failed his composition course and decided to dispute his grade, my role as tutor took a drastic turn. During this time I became increasingly interested in how our institution was addressing the issue of retention for our Black males. Overall, African Americans represented 7.3 percent of our student body population. At the time, only three out of ten were graduating. Out of 993 total undergraduate Black males that were enrolled, 57% were graduating in six years, compared to 70% for other undergraduates on the same campus. Nationally, more than two-thirds (67.6%) of Black men who were starting college did not finish. And of the Black men who attended flagship public universities, only 34% attained their bachelor's degrees (Harper 3, 6). These are startling statistics, to say the least.

When I looked to my own discipline for answers, the lack of scholarship in composition and rhetoric on Black college males seemed to signify an ambivalence to engage connections (if any) between the literacy lives of our Black male writers, university retention, and how they were navigating the university. Thus, I saw Anthony's decision to dispute his grade and the subsequent writing process that developed as an opportunity to theorize Black male retention as rhetoric. By this I mean to reflect upon, document, and explore languages, policies, texts, and teaching and learning practices that constitute Black male literacy experiences and identity formation on a university campus. Due to a turn of events, this project became a collaborative effort for Anthony and me to use inquiry-based research and writing practices to participate in institutional discourses. We worked from our positions as student and gatekeeper to explore rhetorical strategies that were "critical," "action oriented," and could empower Anthony to invest in writing and research practices that had immediate and real world effects for him as a student and advocate for social and institutional change (Morrell, "Critical Participatory Action Research and Literacy Achievement" 3).

The conversation in composition and rhetoric surrounding the literate lives of Black college males is understudied and undertheorized. Black male literacies need to be a prime time issue in higher education, especially in our ongoing conversations about language rights and retention. My interactions with Anthony over the course of two academic years reveal how he employs institutional literacies for reinstatement after he is placed on academic suspension. His experience reveals that we must engage how Black males balance the plurality of language practices and identities they embody while attending predominantly White institutions. This will extend the debate in current discourse on language politics in our field. Furthermore, positioning Black male identity formations at the nexus of institutional failure, literacy, and effective student research practices makes visible how we can frame student writing as rhetorical action.

Where Have We Been and Where Are We Going?: Conversations on Black College Males and Literacy

Much of this scholarship on Black males navigating higher education addresses the problem of retention and ways to improve Black college males' overall social and academic experiences (Cuyjet; Harper and Griffin; Schmidt). Such scholarship generates a conversation in the field of composition and rhetoric that addresses the role literacy learning, classroom teaching practices and student/teacher relationships play in Black male retention. This scholarship also speaks more broadly to how students of color benefit from and succeed in learning environments that are culturally sensitive to individual experiences and subject positions. For example, when many Black males do not engage with meaningful and significant texts (Tatum xii, Kirkland 376), it can prompt ambivalence towards learning (Fordham 34). While this ambivalence can cast Black males as apathetic and disinterested, David Wallace and Anissa Bell assert that it lessens the tension that comes with assimilating to mainstream culture (317). The composition course can be a space where these tensions can be put in relationship to understanding literacy as a social, cultural, and political process of navigating a language community. When given meaningful texts and critical literacies to work with, Black students in homogenous learning environments can develop the language to articulate

these tensions and become empowered to “move to social action” (Pough 467).

Teachers play an important role in cultivating learning environments and writing opportunities that makes this possible. When faced with helping Black language speakers make linguistic shifts in their discursive practices, we can use our status to facilitate their oral and literate language use for achievement (Cushman 15). But like Wallace and Bell, I also believe that our teaching practices can be “part of the problem of inequity” for Black males (313). We can reify their status as both racial and linguistic minorities when we “enforce the literacy system as a device for excluding people” (Holzman 31). More specifically, inadequate teaching approaches to Black college males can fail to frame their literacies (and identities) within the contact zones of academic discourse. In *Making Connections: Addressing the Pitfalls of White Faculty/Black Male Student Communication*, Lisa Gonsalves asserts that Black males lack trust in White professors who do not initiate consistent student-interactions with them (436). When Black males read their White professors as apathetic to their existential realities and learning experience they can develop “a psyche of invisibility” and buy into false assumptions that their voice and presence does not matter (Tatum xviii). Developing culturally sensitive and careful approaches to Black male language and learning practices positions us to be better sponsors of Black male literacies.

To be clear, having Black writing teachers does not guarantee successful learning experiences either. bell hooks asserts in *Rock My Soul* that “merely being taught by teachers who are Black has not and will not solve the problem if the teachers have been socialized to internalize racist thinking” (88). Black teachers who harbor language attitudes that Black students should only use “correct” English—meaning correct by White English standards—can reject the totality of Black speech by African American language users (Smitherman 170). Teaching correctness through penalizing Black language practices happens when we ignore the validity of students’ native languages. Geneva Smitherman has attributed this language attitude to a vision of upward mobility for Black Americans that “has come to mean the eradication of Black language (and Black culture) and the adoption of linguistic norms of the White middle class” (173). Scholarship that catalogues the ineffectiveness of pejorative approaches to native language practices identifies its potential ethnocentric outcomes, especially when students identify native language practices as central to their cultural and racial identities. In following Lisa Delpit, we must acknowledge and validate students’ home language without using it to limit students’ potential. This gives students the opportunity to play a role in mastering and traversing dominant discourses (163, 165).

I align Anthony’s experience within a theoretical framework that locates institutional critique at the intersections of Black male identity formation and language and literacy practices. In Wallace and Bell’s study of Black college male life, they reveal that status quos at predominantly White institutions can have racist implications and favor those who fit its expectations (312). This creates institutional attitudes towards Black males, and in many cases educators do not question assumptions they hold and adopt attitudes that are unsupportive and even hostile towards the Black males they teach (Noguera xxi). Tatum argues that the turmoil many Black males often face in institutionalized learning environments is often the product of “ineffective teaching strategies and teachers’ negative views of Black males and their learning potential” (34). Thus, Black males’ reaction to institutional turmoil must be put in relationship to social influences that have “defined or constructed a Black male identity largely through negative images and exclusion” (Campbell 71). However, many Black males use critical literacies to challenge turmoil. As Alice Brand has pointed out, self-sponsored writing provides productive opportunities to “liberate” negative emotions, especially when students are writing on their own and not in the classroom (298-9). Black males can use writing to develop political and social awareness of their institutional locations through critical literacies that “pinpoint the systematic, historical causes of their oppression” (Cushman 247).

Anthony demonstrates the ability to navigate and manipulate multiple language systems while maintaining an awareness of self and his culture. As he writes within and beyond the classroom, maintaining his sense of self as a Black male was critical to how he invents and performs institutional critique. I use Porter et al’s definition of institutional critique because it frames universities as rhetorical, thus enabling someone like Anthony to challenge and rewrite them “through rhetorical action.” This definition positions Anthony as a change agent who can use rhetorical strategies to reflect, resist, revise, or engage in rhetorical practices that work towards change at the institutional level (Porter et al 611). Given the prevailing deficit approach that frames much of our scholarship on Black male academic achievement, Black males, when given the opportunity, can offer a counternarrative about the rhetorical choices they make in higher education. Through institutional critique they can help educators “rewrite” curricular structures and policies impacting their learning while arguing for critical literacy education as vital to student subject formation at predominantly White institutions. Black males participating in institutional critique also create spaces for rhetorical action when calling attention to teachers’ uncritical sanctioning of multiple language registers practiced in the composition course. Institutional critique creates a space for Black male writers to engage with policy makers and administrators in conversations about language difference.

Furthermore, advocating for language diversity as teachers must involve “showing that African American students

can use home languages with dexterity and that a pedagogy of linguistic diversity develops a self consciousness about language" that pushes students beyond the boundaries of academic writing (Perryman-Clark 2). For instance, Black males who develop a critical self-consciousness about language practice can perform institutional writing that works as a kind of rhetorical action that challenges institutional practices that impact their learning. After Anthony and I made visible the rhetorical choices and the consequences for working within or bending dominant institutional language codes, Anthony developed critical approaches for institutional writing that involved using language that "framed [his] experiences and view of the world" (Inoue 96). Infusing the vernacular voice in his institutional writing while simultaneously working within the constraints and rules of the discourse demonstrated a critical and subversive way of framing his own language and voice as tools for critique. This form of critical code meshing was a self-conscious way of speaking b(l)ack to institutional discourses. And it was risky, especially since it was these language practices that were preventing Anthony from passing his writing course. However, teaching critical code meshing as a form of consciousness-raising gave Anthony a way to be deliberate with his language use as he writes himself b(l)ack into his university. Teaching critical code meshing created dialogue for how subaltern languages function as tools for institutional critique for Black college men.

"Have You Ever Practiced Talkin' Like an Uppity White Man?": Speaking B(l)ack to Gatekeeping Discourses

I met Anthony at an after-school tutor program that I co-directed. He was taking a first year writing course, "The Racial and Ethnic Experience," one of the many themed writing seminars in our program. I remember him coming to me with a graded essay rolled up in his hand that his instructor gave him a chance to revise. Sitting down next to me without much introduction, he handed over his paper. Glossing over the first page, I initially notice a zero grade written in the top margin. "She says I write too much like I talk," Anthony interjected with a subtle consternation in his voice. I did not immediately respond, but continued to read through his draft. He then gave me the assignment sheet. The writing prompt asked him to write an autobiographical narrative about experiences that have shaped his racial identity. Anthony chose to write about family, education, and economic hardship. Anthony's autobiographical essay did have some issues with clarity. Some ideas ran together, and the essay wandered off topic at times. It needed work. But, while Anthony was mostly penalized for using African American English variations and bad organization, his central message seemed to meet some of the objectives of the assignment. For example, Anthony drew on the vernacular to articulate the stakes of making life choices that had both racial and gendered implications. While he told a story of a racial past, one colored with many "pathways" that a Black male can take, his narrative articulates how Black males like himself exist in a web of conflicting significations—ones where they find themselves grappling with narrow scripts of Black male pathology:

As a child and maybe forever I as a Black male will be first thought of as a drug dealer not a C.E.O, a thug and not a college student. In this paper I will give my trials and tribulations I overcame to become a college student not a thug, a future C.E.O and not a drug dealer. As a Black man I have many pathways to choose from, such as me being the next father to abandon his family or working hard to become a lawyer to protect the innocent. Like most children of my color I grew up in a fatherless household which made my siblings and I mature rather quickly. Having to look out for mom when things would put a burden on her was a regular routine. Having to look after my nephew when I was in elementary showed me what a man was supposed to be doing opposed to my father's decision not to take care of his.

This insightful signature statement demonstrates how specific markers Anthony embodies (Black and male) function within a larger social and political context that situates Black maleness as the Other. It also speaks to a larger historical context of challenging hegemonic narratives that semiotically connect Black corporeality to sociopathic behavior. What is equally intriguing is that this passage complicates discourses of power that have regulated how young Black male identities can signify in places Anthony feels are not traditionally marked as spaces occupied by them, such as colleges or corporations. Thus, part of his rhetorical purpose is performing identity formation through choice making that resituates Black male corporeality outside of the conundrum of extreme binaries (drug dealer/C.E.O., thug/college student). He then frames the trend of absent fathers in Black communities within a narrative of his own growing pains, yet positions himself as not being bound by this trend. His articulation of "many pathways to choose from" rearticulates his Black male life narrative as not inherently pathological. Rather, Anthony demonstrates a kind of self-efficacy through his rendering of Black maleness as contingent on the life choices that he decides to make.

Here, identity invention works as a rhetorical strategy of using language to navigate multiple worlds. His text interrogates hegemonic racial and gender scripts while simultaneously managing the realities that those scripts beget. This is evident when Anthony further establishes in the narrative his identity as a writer whose race, gender,

and language shapes not only how he is perceived but how he is distinguished from others around him: "I am in many eyes not just a man but an unordinary man. The color of my skin makes me different, the way I walk the way I talk is special." Through his own logic of difference he defines his Black embodied identity as nonconventional, which, I argue plays a critical role in how Anthony understands and thinks about the social significance and function of native linguistic codes in his own life. If we further read Anthony's demonstrated awareness of self in relationship to how he is constructed by his composition teacher, his narrative also becomes an assessment of how linguistic, class, and racial differences work as markers of resistance to hegemonic teaching (and institutionally represented) practices.

However, Anthony's choice to use his vernacular voice as a rhetorical move did not align with assignment expectations. There were teacher remarks written in the margins with hot pink ink: "You talk too much in this paper. You didn't write enough," "I see what you are trying to say but the wording is off," "this might not make sense to a non Black audience," "Reword, Reword, Reword." As a tutor reading Anthony's essay, the succession of comments took attention away from the writing purpose and shifted focus to the teacher's purpose in commenting -- which appeared at initial glance to be to catch mistakes and highlight errors (Sommers 149). But what was clear was how Anthony's orientation to knowledge making was framed by how race, gender, turmoil (and I argue literacy) interconnect for him.

As I read over his instructor's notes scribbled between sentences and angled diagonally in the margins, she did not explicitly identify African American Vernacular English (AAVE) in his writing, save to indicate that a "non Black audience" might not understand the language. In giving her the benefit of the doubt, I wondered if she had not found an appropriate way to tell Anthony that African American language would not work in meeting the assignment's objectives. I asked Anthony if he had spoken to his instructor about revisionary steps to take:

Me: Well, did you talk to her after getting your essay back to see how to best revise it before you came to me? What did she suggest?

Anthony: Yeah I did. She asked, "Do you know how a White man talks?" and suggested that I pretend to talk like an uppity White man so that I would not write how I talk.

As anyone would be, I was struck by this response. I almost did not believe him. And that Anthony was taking a first year writing course on "The Racial and Ethnic Experience" made the teacher's response ironic. It was a moment that I was all too familiar with in my own tenure in White academia: learning how to negotiate one's sense of power and powerlessness while coming to terms with the epidermal contingencies of being Black and male. "Well, did you try to write like an uppity White man?" I asked him. "No!" he retorted, "I just took my time and concentrated on what I was writing." Anthony's experience demonstrates an ongoing reality of how Black students "train themselves to deal with the inequality of the educational experience" and how they endure the system in order to achieve school success (Richardson 16).

The question of how we are to respond to multilingual users reflects complicated pedagogical issues around teacher knowledge and practice. In Anthony's case, his teacher's suggestion that he develop the linguistic fluency of an "uppity White man" makes a powerful statement about privilege in academia and, perhaps, the world, in general. While it is unfair to assume that this teacher willfully chose to ignore published scholarship on how to respond to African American language users, such a response reflects those who simply ignore translingual approaches to writing "and invent their own programs as they go along" (Rouse 4). Conversely, some instructors can be unaware of existing scholarship or do not have the time to read up on current discussions about language diversity in the field. Nevertheless, her approach raises questions as to how we are negotiating a space in the writing classroom for multiple voices. To what degree do "students' rights" to their own languages factor into our pedagogical missions, especially when we frame the composition course as a gateway course into the institution? On the other hand, Anthony's teacher's response represents how some composition teachers might not see code meshing practices and pedagogies as a good strategy for learning academic language codes. Many teachers, while supportive of multilingualism, still see code meshing as a disciplinary agenda and not necessarily consistent with university missions to teach codes of communication that help students move up the socioeconomic ladder. Unfortunately, these perspectives in their most candid form can and do remain silent in our larger disciplinary conversations and national conferences. Instead, it is when we are alone grading stacks of papers well into the night that we grapple with our pedagogical principles. Our convictions become apparent as we negotiate and wrestle with our liberal pedagogies that create utopias of learning but do not change the standards that our students will encounter (Stanford 129).

Circumstances of Literacy: Leveraging Gatekeepers for Rhetorical Action

We devised a plan for revision for his first essay. After a few tutor sessions, we also established a way to talk candidly about language politics and practice. While I affirmed Anthony's vernacular English by discussing its own system and rules, we also discussed the importance of writing from a variety of subject positions and voices. We invented ways to build bridges between them. We experimented with Black stylistic expressions of language use, such as call and response and repetition of phrases (Piestrup 48). This prompted Anthony to participate in two ways: 1) through listening how I differentiated language styles as I read his essay out loud and 2) by observing his own verbal articulation to passages read from his essay that he read to me. While reading out loud certain essay passages with Black linguistic features and then verbally rearticulating them in academic linguistic codes, we listened for their "sound distinctions" (131) and then developed a "contrastive" verbal approach for illuminating difference markers between Anthony's Black English Vernacular (BEV) expressions and Language of Wider Communication (LWC) (Taylor 27). This was useful for framing how the vernacular has intellectual value in academic discussions about language. Anthony was building his metalinguistic awareness as he was coming to understand cultural and rhetorical affordances of both code meshing and code switching in academia. As we demonstrated through our own dialogue exchanges across place, space, and embodied subject positions, meshing different codes was not only appropriate but also felt normal for how we communicated. However, this did not mean that when asked to use language codes with less flexibility that we divested in or betrayed our other voices. Rather, our multivocality produced multiple ways of seeing, speaking, reading and listening to the world (Horner et al 303). Developing the cognitive awareness for making linguistic shifts would give Anthony skills to empirically observe his language practices as a writer. Anthony's ability to build upon and achieve multiple languages and voices, and speak from multiple subject positions, could build self-efficacy to achieve academic goals. Thus, while code meshing aligns more with how we communicate in the everyday world, teachers should still practice a pedagogy that is sensitive to the realities that students face when being asked to negotiate or forfeit subject positions. For Black males from historically marginalized communities, teaching them how to navigate, negotiate, and respond when institutions fail them gives them efficacy to find the best available means to create their own stakes as writers.

I encouraged Anthony to continue meeting with me to work on his writing. But I would lose touch with him after mid semester. He stopped attending our usual meetings, and our text messaging and email correspondence became more sporadic. It was not until the end of the semester that I saw him again to talk about his progress in his writing course. By then, a combination of issues had culminated: misinterpreted assignment expectations, a teacher/student relationship turned volatile, another zero grade on a writing assignment, and Anthony was still being penalized for African American language patterns found in his writing. He was going to fail the course and decided to go through the university Ombudsman's office to dispute his grade. Anthony was on academic probation that semester, and failing this course guaranteed his suspension from the university.

He discovered the university Ombudsman webpage and protocols, and learned about grade/appeal policies, his student rights and responsibilities. This led Anthony to inquire about the university code of teaching responsibilities, which we found in my faculty handbook. I encouraged Anthony to read this document on his own and determine if his teacher's practices were aligning with university policy. Within this policy document under "Student Assessment and Final Grades," Anthony found language that stated how assessing a student's performance needed to be "based on announced criteria and on standards of academic achievement." Based on Anthony's instructor's comments, race and gender were clearly variables also used to assess academic achievement. The policy also states, "Instructors shall be responsible for being accessible to students outside of class time and therefore shall schedule and keep office hours for student conferences." Anthony's instructor had decided to cancel her office hours mid semester because none of her students were showing up. After assessing his course experiences, Anthony and I believed that he had a solid case to file a complaint and dispute his grade. As a consequence, I had to prepare for social risks as Anthony's ally. I knew Anthony's instructor and had participated in weekly TA mentoring meetings with her. I also had worked with teaching assistants to build curriculum for our program. As both teacher and recent assistant writing program administrator, mentoring Anthony through reinstatement could undermine my relationships with colleagues. I worried that my advocacy would read as a racialized agenda to change the rules for a Black student who could not pass his writing course.

Nevertheless, I encouraged Anthony to learn about his student rights and responsibilities. If nothing else, it would be a good exercise in framing his institution as a subject of inquiry. Anthony learned how institutional language worked and used university policy statements as rubrics for assessing his teacher/student experiences. He used these documents as tools to discover the kinds of rhetorical strategies that would give him the kind of institutional agency that he needed. He learned the protocol for reinstatement and decided which institutional documents to write. Since he first needed to write a letter to the chair of the writing department that articulated his grievances, I suggested that he begin with a list of issues to put in a narrative timeline before he produced a letter. His first draft was raw and uncensored, and read more like a frustrated rant:

"I do not take anything away from this being Ms. Jone's first year teaching at all, I just feel like if you

are going to work as a role model/educator you should be a people's person. She would act as if she did not want to be bothered with us coming in late with a bitchy attitude 24/7"

"Every day when class ended it was like getting a free pass to heaven that's how excited we were to leave...Along with that elated feeling when 9:50 came we always had to talk about how much of a bitch she was that day, I am happy because I never let her ruin my day that early in the morning"

"...she admitted to me that she was only being stern because she felt the pressure of being a Graduate Instructor. Instead of being more relaxed because she now has the comfort of a student who understands her. She chose to remain a prick."

While acknowledging that Anthony had a right to be angry I advised him against misogyny and name-calling. While his frustrations were valid, he needed more critical distance from his experience to address his audience. We talked about how "callin' folks out they name" could jeopardize his credibility. I suggested that he freewrite about his feelings and think through how they could impact his letter writing. This allowed him to ascertain the most productive way to articulate the palpability of his experience to his audience. His rhetorical situation for writing called for a more rational approach to making an argument for disputing grades. The letter Anthony wrote needed to be placed in relationship to the institutional documents that we had read because their function was to protect both teachers and students. He revised his letter to make more objective assessments that framed his learning experiences and teacher practices in relationship to university policy documents. Developing and maintaining institutional awareness enabled him to keep his instructor's negligence at the center of his writing.

Anthony knew what he wanted to say, but knowing how to say it more powerfully in this context would give his words more thrust. I used my gatekeeper status as a teacher in the writing program to help bring focus to his rhetorical purpose by framing it in relationship to his target audience and reminded Anthony to do so as well. As Morrell argues, helping him situate his critical literacies strategically while negotiating the pathos underlining his experience "is where developing rhetorical awareness comes in as a tool for developing a strategy for delivery...that if I say it in one way, it is much more effective than if I say it in another way" (*Critical Literacy, Academic Achievement, and Youth Empowerment in Urban Schools* n.p.). In his revised essay, Anthony adjusts his tone and frames a more descriptive and less pejorative telling of his experiences. Although he still evaluates his teacher's pedagogical choices, he affirms his critique by what he interprets as unethical teaching practices that place him in a position of learned helplessness as a student writer:

After I received a zero on my first paper I visited her office hours and she said I did not follow the guidelines of writing about myself, and how others helped shape me as the African American male you see today. I found it challenging at first because I did not write a paper like that before just centering with those who shaped me, but as I gathered my thoughts I was able to do it.

As she would say on all my future papers "I write how I talk", and then she would not explain directions well for us to understand...When I addressed her about the issue of me writing how I talked she said "have you ever practiced talking like a uppity White man?" I said no, and she said I should start practicing it." This is a race and ethnicity course, and you are being told by the instructor to talk like a uppity White male; that is prejudice/racist to me. I feel she could have said just talk proper English...

In conclusion, I would like to state that as an Instructor Ms. Jones was not the best, and that in the letter above through a bad attitude, her efforts, and a bad grading scale I need a change in grade. I know if I had another Instructor this would not even be a problem because justice would have been done...I done everything you can ask of as a student, and my grade was not the reflection of it. I need this grade change for more reasons besides Ms. Jones giving me the wrong one. I know this grade change can help me in the situation I am in right now because of my academics. I just want this matter to go accordingly.

In this draft, Anthony's prose reflects an awareness of how language values are political and asymmetrically positioned by different codes of power. His framing of "correct" English is rooted in a Black communal perspective on "network grammar." This perspective implicates an "awareness of a stratified society" that aligns language practices with social and economic mobility (Hoover 74, 81, 83). Hoover argues that these community attitudes also designate the vernacular as appropriate for speaking channels but not in reading and writing channels. Anthony's suggestion that his teacher just tell him to "talk proper English" instead of talking like a White man attempts to fragment the connections made between his race, gender, and language. He interrogates achieving academic linguistic codes with achieving classed White maleness, but accepts "proper English" as a marker that differentiates (and invalidates) his native language practices. As Anthony attempts to work through what he sees as a contradiction between his

course theme and the conditions for good student writing (and Black maleness), he reifies a language hierarchy that is emblematic in many African American language speaking communities.

However, this rhetorical stance shifts the gaze from race and class as debilitating signifiers that mark his gender and language and recenters it on his teacher's pedagogical choices. Deracializing the issue is akin to Vershawn Young's suggestion that we not ascribe racialized value differentials to linguistic practices. In Young's autoethnographic work *Your Average Nigga: Performing Race, Literacy, and Masculinity*, he suggests that we undo "the erroneous assumption that the codes that compose BEV and the codes of WEV are so incompatible and unmixable because they're so radically different" (97). He interrogates the "racialization on students" language practices, especially when we designate these practices as "incompatible with what's considered standard" (106). Young suggests that we can position different language practices as having "equal prestige" by advocating code meshing—mixing vernacular and academic codes to cultivate a more realistic form of communication that we perform in the real world. Young offers a needed perspective on how language pedagogy needs to be more in line with our real world language practices and, as Anthony's letter suggests, should be more ethically sound in how it frames language and gender as intersecting concepts. Like Young, I agree that if we continue to postulate Standard English as completely separated from our home languages then we perpetuate false realities that our various linguistic identities are mutually exclusive. We also run the risk of practicing unsound pedagogy that dismisses the multiple voices our students embody. As Anthony's experience demonstrates, these pedagogies are often in the name of acquiescing (sometimes uncritically) to ivory tower politics, which is why I internally wrestled with my own pedagogical practices as Anthony's tutor. While I advocated for language rights in our process thinking, discussion, and writing towards a final draft letter, I wondered when and where this conversation about language rights might enter his letter for reinstatement. Would there be consequences for Anthony if I endorsed him to code mesh in an institutional document he would write for reinstatement? I was aware of the "schizophrenic" implications of teaching code switching and its potential signaling to "surrendering to prejudice" (Gilyard 63; Young 108). I was also apprehensive about putting Anthony in another similar position to choose between a White racial identity and his own. But as a recent assistant to our writing program administrator who had read and revised many institutional documents and written funding proposal documents of my own, I knew that the constraints of institutional discourse were very real.

And as much as we theorized about the politics and place of our language rights in our writing program, I was also clear that our progressive ideologies were still working to transcend disciplinary (and institutional) thresholds. To assume that code meshing would be legitimized in Anthony's letter would imply that university administrators would be amenable to students' rights to code mesh and that the Ombudsman director would treat this linguistic practice as transferrable in a bureaucratic deliberation over students' rights and responsibilities. To sign off on code meshing while Anthony was trying to get reinstated so that he could keep his campus job and graduate on time would have been irresponsible. Wallace and Ewald argue that "pedagogy that pretends that students can write in any voice and any style without regard to others' perceptions and expectations is naïve at best" (137). I agree. Would learning traditional academic language codes afford Anthony the best opportunity to create a document that modeled institutional writing? Would it give him better access to institutional gatekeepers who might be less democratic in their language politics? These questions are hard for me to answer. They provoke the "intra and interpersonal conflict" Young acknowledges that teachers advocating for students' language rights experience as they push for democratic language policies at our institutions (122). They also make unsteady how we as teachers negotiate and align our pedagogical visions and aspirations with the immediate issues and needs of our students.

I agree with Geneva Smitherman that we still need a language policy that governs language teaching and language use throughout the United States and protects the interests of the Black community (92); but we also need spaces within our bureaucratic discourse for making language rights more of an institutional agenda, not just a programmatic one. Until our public discourse is fully amenable to students' rights to their own language (and code meshing practices), raising Anthony's metalinguistic awareness in order to empirically assess and have greater command over his language practices is the appropriate pedagogical choice. Aligning this pedagogy with a commitment to helping him develop critical tools to interrogate dominant language ideologies gives him the cognitive resources to forward his own critiques and responses and to position himself in the ongoing struggle for language rights in his own way. With that stated, I did not condone that Anthony engage in uncritical code meshing in any of his writing for reinstatement. The bottom line is that it would not have been the appropriate strategy for achieving his goals. As teachers work to create learning environments in the composition classroom that are democratic and equitable, they must also be realistic about the expectations that students will have to reproduce the language of the academy in other courses. But this does not mean that we cannot create alternative teaching practices that help students make visible and utilize their different subject positions as language users. We can still create a space of mutuality within our classrooms that situates student agency in a middle space between their own experiences and the expectations of the discourse communities (Wallace and Ewald 5). We should teach students that language practices exist on a continuum and that it is important to build upon all of the Englishes that they bring to the composition course (Horner et al). But we must also teach them how different language practices give certain

meanings to texts and have conversations about what those meanings say and do for their intended audiences.

“Changing the Joke and Slipping the Yoke”: Imagining Possible Selves

After going through the Ombudsman office, and performing the necessary protocol of giving his letter to the writing department, Anthony would have to wait for a formal meeting between the chair, his teacher, and himself. But he was also networking with administrators and counselors for insight on how to navigate institutional channels and identify potential allies. Anthony cultivated his efficacy by finding and connecting with administrators of color who could empathize with the racial element of his situation and mentor him through his process of inquiry. He shared his letter with the department of multicultural affairs, which eventually landed him in the office of the director of the university undergraduate division. She had the authority to skip the Ombudsman process, and take action on his student status. He told her about his grade appeal process and the connections he was making at the university. After their meeting she decided to reinstate him as a student with certain conditions. “The director reinstated me on the promise that I would not fail another class, and I haven’t since then,” he says with a sense of redemption as he sits across from me at the local eatery we frequented many times across from campus. Anthony had taken two summer courses and pulled a B in first-year composition this time around. The fall semester was just beginning. But while sitting across from him I still had a feeling of unsettlement in our laboring efforts. While Anthony was most concerned about his student status, I was interested in the pedagogical choices this teacher was making. There would be another Anthony, another code meshing or code switching student writer whose outcome would be different.

Anthony’s grade appeal teaches us how Black males can use inquiry-based approaches for demystifying the boundaries between student agency and university bureaucracies. He performs institutional literacy to forge connections that positioned his writing course as a microcosm of a larger bureaucratic structure. He uses critical literacies to frame the university as “a rhetorical system of decision making” that can be interrogated and changed once “points for discursive agency and change-making” are identified (Porter et al 621; Devoss et al 19). Anthony teaches us how merging multiple literacies—institutional, personal, and critical—can be used to frame bureaucratic discourse as a site of meaning making. He offers a model of how collegiate Black males can use critical literacies as a place making institutional practice. This has critical implications for how we frame the composition course. When teachers designate literacy as a practice of consciousness raising and illuminating asymmetrical power relationships, students can learn how to create meaningful institutional relationships and challenge oppressive power structures. Teaching critical literacies allows Black males like Anthony to frame multilingualism, institutional critique, and student writing as a practice of negotiating tensions and forging alignments between and across multiple embodied identities. Institutional critique can empower Black college males to use critical literacy as a rhetorical practice of navigating power dynamics informing their learning.

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