

5 WHAT COLOR IS MY VOICE?

ACADEMIC WRITING AND THE MYTH OF STANDARD ENGLISH

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OVERVIEW

In this chapter, a community college writing professor and two of her first-year writing students collaboratively address the issue of Whiteness in academic writing.¹ Specifically, we challenge the notion that academic language is neutral as well as the expectation that all academic writers should strive for uniformity. We question notions of correctness and clarity, adopting Jacqueline Jones Royster’s definition of voice as “the power and authority to speak and make meaning” (31), and we challenge students to ask hard questions about language, identity, and power. We explain the inextricable bonds between language and community, examine the connections between language and racial identity, and explore the political nature of language, all of which affect a person’s voice as Royster has defined it. Then, the two of us who are students share our experiences with writing for school, reflecting on what we’ve learned both in and out of school about our language and our voice. Together, we invite students to reflect on their own voice in academic writing, asking themselves, “Whose voice do I hear in my writing, and why? What does this voice reveal about my identity as a writer, and how do I feel about what I uncover? What might I want to do more or differently?”

. . . survival is not an academic skill. It is learning how to stand alone, unpopular and sometimes reviled, and how to make common cause with those others identified as outside the

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structures in order to define and seek a world in which we can all flourish. It is learning how to take our differences and make them strengths. For the master's tools will never dismantle the master's house. They may allow us temporarily to beat him at his own game, but they will never enable us to bring about genuine change."

—Audre Lorde, *The Master's Tools Will Never Dismantle the Master's House*

INTRODUCTION

In school, we're often asked to write using strict formats and formal language. Writing isn't about personal expression or style; it's about mastering "standard English," "edited American English," "formal English"—whatever you call it. It's about communicating ideas and showing others (usually teachers, sometimes classmates, sometimes ourselves) what we know and understand about whatever it is we're studying. And for many of us (if we're being honest), it's about sounding smart—writing the right things in the right ways to show that we belong, that we're capable of doing the work. Because ultimately, we *need* people to know we're capable so we can pass our classes and get that diploma.

Our success, as we all know, is usually determined by how well we meet the standards that have been indoctrinated into us through feedback and grades for most of our lives. We accept those standards as the ideal because we see them played out in the texts we're assigned to read. We believe that good academic writing is complicated and abstract, that it uses words we don't know or hear very often, that it is objective and neutral and essentially personality-less. We believe that academic writing doesn't have a voice.

Oh, but it *does*.

Many people don't notice a voice in academic writing because the voice that *is* there has been normalized and disembodied. In other words, when people talk about "academic" writing, they don't talk about the *people* who are doing that writing, who set those standards. Those standards, we think, simply reflect "correct" language usage, which we think is just how things are. Consider this: How often do you think about what the speaking voice of the person writing the academic texts you're reading *sounds like*? How often do you think about what that person *looks like*?

Regardless of whether you *notice* a voice in academic writing, however, that voice is still there. And because this is college, where you'll learn to ask

questions and dig deep for understanding, we're asking you in this chapter to look closely at that normalized academic voice, to ask hard questions about what that voice reflects—and what it covers up.

These kinds of questions are what many researchers in the field of rhetoric and composition, especially Black, Indigenous, and People of Color (BIPOC), have been asking for decades. One leading scholar in the field, Jacqueline Jones Royster, argues that a voice is a “central manifestation of subjectivity” (30). In other words, our relationship to power, as well as the opportunities it affords and the constraints it places on us, is revealed through our voice. Royster defines a voice as something “that is constructed and expressed visually and orally, *and* [...] a *thing* heard, perceived, and reconstructed” (31). Why does this distinction matter for Royster? Because it points our attention not only to who is *doing* the speaking, but also who is being *heard*. To have a voice, Royster argues, is to have “the power and authority to speak and make meaning” (31). This is the definition of voice we're thinking of as we write this chapter.

In a sense, Royster is bringing us back to that old saying, “If a tree falls in the forest, and there's no one there to hear it, does it make a sound?” To have a voice means someone has to hear you. But what does it really mean to be heard? What kinds of sounds are meaningful, and to whom? What assumptions do we make about the listener (or reader) when we think about sounds that are meaningful?

As you'll learn in college if you haven't already, sometimes the best answer to a question is another question. In this chapter, our goal isn't to tell you what to think or how to write. Instead, we share with you what we know and leave you with challenging questions—questions about language, identity, and power that we ourselves don't have good answers for. But we join many scholars who believe that those who write and teach writing in school *need* to be asking them. You might feel uncomfortable at times, and that's okay—because discomfort can be productive. We hope that you'll leave this chapter inspired to explore those questions and to work through any discomfort that comes up along the way.

HOW WE ACQUIRE LANGUAGE: IT'S ALL ABOUT COMMUNITY

It's hard to talk about voice without talking about language, because language is one of the primary ways most people communicate. So in order to think critically about voice in academic writing, we first need to think critically about language. Luckily for us, there's an entire academic discipline called Linguistics where people study language. Linguistics scholars

study how sounds and words form patterns, how humans develop language, what features all languages have in common, how language varieties differ, and more.

One of the most fundamental things linguists have found that's relevant to our discussion is this: language really isn't something we *learn* through conscious effort; it's something we *acquire*. In other words, language is sort of something that happens as we interact with other human beings. Research has shown that one of the best ways to acquire language is simply by using it with others, out of necessity to communicate. Language acquisition is one reason why language immersion programs and dual-language programs have become so popular, and it's one benefit of study-abroad programs as well.

Because language is acquired by interacting with others, it's as diverse as the communities we're part of: communities organized by where we live, our religious traditions, our interest groups, and so on. In each of our communities, the language we use is specific to those groups; for example, we use certain words or expressions, we focus on particular things, and we share certain beliefs that form the basis for our interactions. The language we use is also what creates a sense of community; it separates people who are in that community from those who are outside it. For example, writer and cultural theorist Gloria Anzaldúa says that Chicano Spanish "sprang out of the Chicanos' need to identify ourselves as a distinct people" (33). This language is one "they can connect their identity to, one capable of communicating the realities and values true to themselves—a language with terms that are neither *español ni inglés*, but both" (33).

Language is also connected to racial identity but not for the reasons most people think. "[R]ace does not determine what language a child will speak, there is no such thing as a 'racial language,' and no race or ethnic group is born with a particular language," explains Geneva Smitherman, a groundbreaking and important Black linguist who has spent the last 50 years researching Black Language, also known as Black English, African American Language (AAL), and African American Vernacular English (AAVE), and formerly known as Ebonics. She continues:

Children acquire their language from the community of speakers they play, live, grow up, and socialize with. [...] Since communities in the U.S. have been separated and continue to exist along distinct racial lines, language follows suit. An African American child will more than likely play, live, grow up, and socialize in any one of the numerous African American communities of the U.S. and thus will acquire the African American Language of her com-

munity. [...] Even though race does not determine what language a child will speak, race does determine what community a child grows up in, and it is that community which provides the child with language. (5)

In short, what Smitherman is arguing is that language tends to differ among differently raced people, but that isn't because language and race are inextricable from one another. That is, being Black doesn't determine which language and dialect you'll know and use most any more than being Mexican American means you'll know and use Chicano/a Spanish or being white means you'll speak middle-class English.

WHY LANGUAGE IS POLITICAL: THE SILENCING POWER OF STIGMA

The discussion of communities and language gets tricky when we start to talk about *value*, specifically how different communities and languages are valued differently. At its most basic, value is attached to resources: land, money, time, materials, people, and other assets that we need in order to live. The more resources we have access to or possess, the more value we possess. The more value we possess, the more power we have, because we live in a world where resources are finite. More power means more authority, including authority to set standards and make the rules that govern society.

Authority is inextricably connected to language because people are inextricably connected to language. In other words, language is political because politics is all about how humans living in groups make decisions. They make those decisions by *using* language, and in many settings, they make decisions *about* language: what is and isn't valued, appropriate, correct, and so on. The issue, of course, is *who* is making those decisions—or historically has made those decisions—and whose values are accounted for in the decisions that they make, in the standards that they set.

One of the most difficult concepts for non-linguists to grasp about language is that there really is no such thing as an objective “standard” version of a language. The idea that there *is* one is a myth. To the contrary, language doesn't exist on its own; it's created through interaction and changes over time, two truths that linguists have discovered through careful observation and deduction. In other words, there simply is no “pure” form of a language, no standard. The belief that standard English exists is called *standard language ideology*.

Nevertheless, people try to *standardize* language—to create and uphold some notion of the “pure” form of a language—out of perceived necessity. Sociolinguist Rosina Lippi-Green explains that because we write to remember things and help others to remember them, and to preserve ideas we find valuable, we place a lot of demands on written language: “we want it to span time and space, and we want it to do that in a social vacuum, without the aid of paralinguistic features and often without shared context of any kind” (18). As a result, she says, people think that “written language needs to be free of variation: it must be consistent in every way, from spelling to sentence structure” (18).

The problem, though, is that language *doesn't* happen in a vacuum; it happens among people of diverse cultures, nationalities, religious traditions, and socioeconomic classes who have different orientations toward gender, sexuality, physical ability, neurotypicality, and so on. The demand for language consistency necessarily results in standards that reflect a particular worldview: the worldview of the people in positions of power. In the United States, these were the people who historically had access to education (until roughly the 1970s, most were wealthy white men). Smitherman raises a good point: “If Black people were in power in this country,” she says, “Black English would be the prestige idiom” (63).

Language diversity in educational and professional spaces isn't itself a *problem*, however. People in countries outside the U.S. have found ways to value such diversity; the American system of education is unique in its insistence on standardizing one language variety, says late writer and teacher June Jordan:

In contrast to India, where at least fourteen languages co-exist as legitimate Indian languages, in contrast to Nicaragua, where all citizens are legally entitled to formal school instruction in their regional or tribal languages, compulsory education in America compels accommodation to exclusively White forms of “English.” White English, in America, is “Standard English.” (364)

In other words, kids in the U.S. from ages 5-ish to 18-ish are required to learn and demonstrate proficiency in what Jordan calls “White English,” the language variety that has been standardized by people in power. In effect, the notion that written language must adhere to these standardized rules is a power play that inevitably reproduces white supremacist systems. It is the *systems* that are problematic, not the language differences within them.

These systems are even more problematic because of how they influence our thoughts about one another. In judging language, we judge the *people* who use that language. Judgements¹ are made through comparison, usually to some standard or ideal. So when someone who accepts standard language ideology judges our language, assessing it in terms of “correctness” and/or “appropriateness,” they’re effectively judging our own proximity to that ideal. In effect, they “devalue the intelligence and character of students, employees, and colleagues, who [...] don’t speak or write [standard’ English] by labeling their language improper, inappropriate, or incorrect,” explains writing scholar Anjali Pattanayak (84).

Over time, humans internalize beliefs about ourselves and others based on judgements of language. Elaine Richardson, an influential Black professor of Literacy Studies at The Ohio State University, writes about these judgements in her memoir, entitled *PHD (Po H# on Dope) to Ph.D.: How Education Saved My Life*: “I had entered this class, this university and been told in so many words that I was illiterate because the words I used were *awkward*, not recognized as college format, because I didn’t know how to punctuate sentences” (202). She later recaps feedback from a writing professor:

Miss Richardson, when your prose breaks down it’s because your logic has broken down ... syntax problems come up not just when someone doesn’t have a command of the language or grammar, but because he or she hasn’t thought the argument through carefully enough. The language from your home and neighborhood is fine in that context, but it doesn’t work for the kind of careful analysis and expression expected in academic writing. (207)

In other words, according to this professor, Black English doesn’t make possible the logical and analytical thinking expected of college students. Her white mentor’s suggestion? “Write more like I talk,” which meant code-switching like she did when “trying to project a positive self-image, especially when speaking to White folks” (207).

Never mind that White linguist William Labov’s analyses of Black speech, published in 1970, clearly “dispel the racist myth that African American Language is illogical or ungrammatical [...] reveal[ing] the language to be rule-governed and systematic, not a collection of haphazard errors” (Smitherman 11). Never mind that they correct “false impressions about language, race and intelligence” (11). Never mind that Black English “comes out of the experience of U.S. slave descendants” and was developed through communal resistance to slavery, that it “meld[ed] diverse African

ethnic groups into one community [and] was created as a communication system unintelligible to speakers of the dominant master class” (3). Standard language ideology is a powerful thing. “Black English don’t make it own-self oppressed,” argues Vershawn Ashanti Young, a prominent Black scholar of African American Studies. “It be negative views about other people usin they own language [...] that make it so” (110).

This stigmatization can have serious consequences for people who speak and/or write anything other than what sociolinguists H. Samy Alim and Geneva Smitherman call *White Mainstream English*, a term literacy scholar April Baker-Bell uses “to emphasize how white ways of speaking become the invisible—or better, inaudible—norm” (3). Consider, for example, George Zimmerman’s 2013 trial for the murder of Trayvon Martin. The star witness for the prosecution on whose testimony Zimmerman’s verdict hinged was a 19-year-old Black woman named Rachel Jeantel, a speaker of Black Language. An extensive (and dense) analysis of the trial by Stanford linguists John R. Rickford and Sharese King reveals that Jeantel’s “AAVE, though systematic, was misheard and maligned. Her testimony, which provided crucial evidence, was disregarded because of its unfamiliarity to most jurors and social biases against AAVE speakers” (980).

Prejudices about language inferiority and intellectual ability are so deeply engrained through standard language ideology that peoples’ bodies themselves are stigmatized even when they haven’t uttered a word. This, of course, is an inevitable consequence of what writing and rhetoric scholar Asao Inoue calls “white language supremacy” and what Baker-Bell calls “anti-Black linguistic racism.” “When we read the words that come from [others’] bodies [...], we read those bodies as well,” argues Inoue, “and by reading those bodies we also read the words they present to us; some may bear/bare stigmas, some may not” (“Friday Plenary Address” 144).

It is because of this shared concern that we urge you to ask, “What color is my voice?”

As you’ll see in the narratives that follow, which were written by the two of us coauthors who were community college students in Kristin’s first-year writing courses, we believe this reflective work is an important first step in resisting white language supremacy. It’s especially important to do this work in educational settings, because education influences society, and because a collective voice (such as many voices of students in a class or a school) are more powerful than a single voice. We have three hopes for sharing our stories. We hope that those who’ve been forced to surrender their voice to an impossible standard will find solidarity. We hope that all readers will begin or continue to ask hard questions about voice and power.

And we hope that all readers will do something in response, writing our way into finding our voice even in academic writing.

WRITING PRIVILEGES FROM THE “GOOD WRITER”: AN’S STORY

I was lucky enough to grow up in a house that loved reading. My mom was a bookworm who read to me while I was still in the womb. Childhood was full of fairy tales and endless books using all kinds of language. The thee’s and the thou’s and the damsels in distress, I gobbled those stories up like Cheerios. Often, I would get busted for reading under the covers with my Hello Kitty flashlight. I’d say I was sorry, but it wasn’t my fault that stories got so much better after dark. Over the years my books and personal libraries were replaced by an iPhone, late-night reads became late-night texts, and “fancy language” went from being words of kings and queens to MLA format. As far away as childhood was, I can still say that my background affects the verbiage I use today.

Speaking of background, let’s take it back, way back to 1991, the year my parents arrived.

My parents are Vietnamese immigrants who came to this country riding on the promise of a better future for their not-yet-born kids (me and my sister). America was their ticket to success, and they made sure not to squander a second of it. Both of my parents graduated with Bachelor’s degrees in New York and made it a point to value education above all else. My mom was a Special Ed teacher before she had me, and my dad was a math substitute all throughout my adolescence. As for me, I started preschool ASAP and although I only remember how fun it was to play with giant bins of sand, I’m sure that going there benefitted me linguistically. Going on to elementary school, I recall reading absolutely anything and everything from cereal boxes to captions on the TV. In middle school the reading tests we did were my best tests (sorry, math teachers). I loved the thrill of reading faster and faster, zooming through the paragraphs and climbing the ladder of success. Sooner rather than later, it was clear to me that I was equipped with an arsenal of vocabulary. Reading felt like a train steadily chugging along with no reason to stop. But this was not the case for everyone. While I counted down the minutes left in class so I could race to the library, others around me avoided reading like the plague. Some simply had better things to do, like talk to their crushes at their lockers or gossip in the bathrooms. However, for some of my peers, the thought of picking up a book for leisure caused more stress than comfort. They only read books assigned for class, and even then those stories felt boring or

overwhelming—the farthest thing from enjoyable. While reading for me felt like my greatest escape, my friends saw it as the greatest chore. I did not fully understand why this may have been until entering college. This was when I started learning more about how reading and writing experiences in childhood can affect people for the rest of their lives.

As an Early Childhood Education major, I am taking courses about childhood development, and some of the things I've learned have been truly eye opening. For example, one of my classes focuses on how to use Art Integration in all subjects in order to give students creative outlets. Something we recently discussed was the concept of “art scars.” Art scars refer to past traumas that students have around art. Often, in childhood, students will experience shame or harsh criticism of their creativity from their peers or their teachers. This trauma can cause people to lose their sense of creativity entirely and can affect them well into adulthood. An example we spoke about in class was a story of a student applying to college. He flew through his application with full confidence, but when he was asked to draw an image of what represented him as a person, he broke down in tears, and ended up throwing his application away.

In the same way, I believe that people have “writing scars.” Throughout school, I had various friends tell me that they were bad at writing. I took that statement as a call to action and stepped in as human Grammarly—reading through numerous essays, tweaking them here and there so that they sounded “more academic.” What I ended up noticing is that the essays that they gave me ended up sounding nothing like the final product that I produced. In making their writing “better,” what I actually did was censor their voices, stripping their colorful essays of what made them profound and thought provoking. Without knowing it, I was reinforcing what their past writing scars had told them, that they were no good at writing and that their language was not deemed academic. Perhaps, and I hate to admit this, *I* was the one giving them the writing scars and making them feel inadequate about their writing ability. This realization especially sucks because at the time, I genuinely felt that I was being a good friend by helping. I now understand how critical it is to believe that everyone's stories are important, not just those who use “suburban” vocab or have perfected their citations. Looking back, I wish that I had just encouraged them to use more of the language that made them feel comfortable and heard. Instead, I took their narratives and shoved them into a box when I should have been the friend to set them free.

To me, writing is freedom.

I am a woman who feels with ferocity, and I love to express those feelings and be loud and pissed off and powerful. Writing should be used to empower people, not make them doubt their abilities. Often, writing can be cathartic or an emotional release. I know that that is what it feels like to me. The problem is that the academic writing standards that we currently have in place are way too rigid and, quite frankly, boring. Which is not how it's supposed to be. When it comes to my own assignments, I find that in order to do well, my deep connection to my writing is something that I have to erase completely. But that SUCKS! I want to write the way I speak and to be able to share my story. I want to use expressions and italics and exclamation points. I want my bold points to be **bold** and for my essays to make people laugh or cry. Ultimately, I want my writing to sound like *me*. I recognize that it is much easier for me to excel in writing than it is for others who do not share my background. All my life I have had every chance to do well in English class, and this in itself is a blessing. My language doesn't get nearly as much scrutiny as others do, and that's not fair. I am not "better" at writing, I am not smarter or superior or even the best at writing this. The only thing that separates me from someone who is deemed a "bad writer" is access to opportunities. *Everyone* is a good writer. Because everyone who writes tells a story.

I have so much love for writing, and I wish that everyone else had the opportunity to feel the same. But truly, all it comes down to is the fact that I was lucky enough to grow up in a house that loved reading.

WRITING WHILE BLACK: AJ'S STORY

Growing up as a young Black man in the white suburbs of Chicago, I have experienced so much judgement and backlash when writing and how I'm viewed as uneducated due to my writing. *Even after completing my associate's degree.* I still feel stuck in writer's block every time I am tasked with a writing project or assignment. Recently I was involved in a motorcycle accident that temporarily made me unable to type. Both writer's block and this accident have made it really hard to write this chapter. So what I decided to do is get creative and try from a different angle. Kristin and I decided to have a conversation, transcribe it, and share pieces of our conversation with you.² Sometimes, life circumstances limit what we can do, so we gotta be flexible, and this is one of those situations.

Kristin: Can you talk to me about some experiences you've had that stand out to you about your writing for school?

AJ: So you know how when you're a kid, you're taught—what is it called, the—the correct *“English,”* or the correct way how you should write or say things. But then once you're—as you grow up, especially when—growing up Black [...] it's like learning two languages because you go to school and they teach you, “Oh, this word, you know, means this. And this is how you should use this word, this is how you should use it in a sentence, and you use this many words in a sentence and you use a comma, and this is how you properly do something.” And then you go home and then you pick up on vocabulary words, you pick up on how your [...] culture speaks and you're [...] going in two different worlds because you tryna learn about your culture and how *they* speak, and then you grasp onto *that*. But then you going back to school and you tryna grasp onto *that*. But then let's say a teacher writes you an assignment about “what do you think?” Oh, like a perfect question I just had recently asked: “What do you think, why is police recruiting down nationwide?” And then “what do you see as the problem, and do you see a remedy?” Now, you could choose two different options on how you can respond. [...] You can respond to the white version and use what you think that the audience would like, which is the white audience, or you could respond [...] how you truly feel about it, but when you try to respond how you truly feel about it, [...] you have to worry about who's gonna be reading it and [...] what the type of audience is going to be reading it and how people will judge you on writing that. Does that make sense?

Kristin: Yeah. So are you talking about the *response* that you give, or are you talking about the way that you—your voice in your writing?

AJ: Yeah—it's kind of both [...], because if you give the response that you believe in [...] I might get graded poorly on it, and I can't voice how I really feel or speak how I really feel about the [thing I'm supposed to be writing about]. [...] In your mind you thinkin, am I writing for a white audience? When I get the assignment, I gotta think, “OK, who's gonna be reading it?” If you know your teacher is white, then you'd be like, “OK, my teacher is white. So let me sound *this* way because I think this'll impress my teacher, but I really don't *like* how I'm putting this.” I'm not gonna really add *flavor* to it, or add how I really *feel* about it. But I wanna respond how I think that the teacher would like. Does that make sense?

Kristin: Yeah. So would you say that race is the first, or one of the first, considerations that you think about when you're writing for someone else?

AJ: Oh absolutely. That's the *first* thing that comes to my mind.

Kristin: So what about a topic that's not about police, like anything having to do with law enforcement, for example? Like for your meteorology class, or—

AJ: Doesn't matter. Because the first thing comes to my mind is that—I'm writing something, right? I'm gonna get judged automatically about what I'm writing about. Regardless. And there's always gonna be somebody that don't like what I say, but [...] I'm gonna to try to sound *proper* [...] regardless of if I don't know if the teacher is white or black, whatever. I'm gonna try to sound proper because if I try to speak [...] using African-American Ebonics language, if I speak with slang and talk using slang words, then I'm gonna be viewed as *uneducated* or poor—poor choice of words, you know. People are not gonna try to validate my argument because the type of words that I'm using. Now, if I were to sound very *proper*, I'm still gonna get judged, but I may have a slim chance than if I were to use slang words to explain where I'm coming from.

Kristin: Have you ever felt like you could write in ways that felt really authentic to you?

AJ: No, I don't think so. Not at all. I feel like it's all sugar-coated and watered down. It's like you're beating around the bush. You're at the *top* of the surface, but you're not going *underneath* the surface. Because why even try if [...] Black people incapable of, aren't capable of writing in a efficient and proper way.

Kristin: Where do you get that message from?

AJ: I just think it's the *experiences* like, you know—I think it has to probably tie back to going to middle school and high school, being shamed in front of the whole class. I just feel like those experiences shape our way of thinking—when you go through an experience like that, it makes you think, like, damn, maybe I *am* not good enough to do this.

Kristin: Would you be comfortable telling me about those experiences?

AJ: Yeah. I had to write this essay for high school; it was called the Pettus Bridge Essay. Of course, it was about violence against Black people, and I fucking hated it. It was traumatizing learning about that in a white setting when you're one of the only Black

people in the class. And this teacher—it's not the shit that he would *say* that would be racist, it was the *antagonizing* shit that he would *do* that made me believe he was racist. We would turn in our essays on Friday, and during class on Monday, he would call groups of people up, have them stand in a line, give them back their essays, and talk to each person for 30 to 45 seconds on what they can do to improve. And he got to the last three people—and what a coincidence that we're all Black—and everybody was up and down in their seats, and no problems. And then like, the three Black people, it was like—I feel like I was standing in the courtroom in front of a fuckin judge, because we're *all* standing in front of him, he's all telling us how, "Oh, this isn't good. Look how all the Black students didn't do well on their assignments." We all got like Cs and Ds, and we still talk about it to this day, [the teacher said,] "Oh, if you want a good grade, you'll have to rewrite it over again in a different way—if you do it this way, improve here and there. And that shapes the way of you writing in the future, because now you thinking like, "Damn, I can't really explain how I feel or what I think about this situation, because now I'm second-guessing every goddamn thing, thinking like, 'I don't know where to start. Does this sound good?'" And you know, *that's* what makes writing so difficult. That shit right there. Experiences like that. Where you have someone that kinda shames you growing up, or someone shames you for your writing like that, it shapes you into a way of thinking that you're not capable of being a good writer or not being a good, efficient, and proper writer, because everything you do, you feel like it's not good enough.

Kristin: Are there situations in school where you've been having to write and you felt like you *were* able to move past that writer's block?

AJ: It's not something that you could just move past. I'm *still* not past it, cuz it's like even with different teachers, I still have that in the back of my mind when it comes to writing. That's not the first experience of me dealing with something like that one teacher, but just that one experience could impact you writing in your whole life because it's just like—that was just too much for me, you know? That was *sophomore year in high school*. And to this day, I *still* have that same problem of second-guessing everything, and that's [...] why I hate writing assignments so much. I mean,

I'll rather do a essay than do math. But it's just like it takes so much longer to write because you're second guessing everything. You write two pages? "Oh, that don't sound— that don't—I don't think that's right." You know? You're thinking you're not good enough to write. [. . .] All it takes is one experience, is a white person to say—or, put you, like, make you feel like you're *beneath* them, and then it just impacts your writing, and then it'll fuck you up writing moving forward.

Kristin: And you can't—

AJ: And you can't get past it because that one experience is in your mind.

WHERE WE GO FROM HERE

The goal of empowering writers by preparing them to write in contexts where they *will* be judged for deviations from the “standard” might seem like a good one—people trying to help others to succeed in life. But with code-switching, the fact that the “standard” was set by the people who have historically had the most resources remains unchallenged—and that, we believe, is a huge oversight. “For the master’s tools will never dismantle the master’s house,” wrote Audre Lorde in a book titled for that quote. “They may allow us to temporarily beat him at his own game, but they will never enable us to bring about genuine change.” In other words, if we continue to follow the status quo with our academic writing and the teaching of it, we’ll never change white language supremacy. Black women like Rachel Jeantel still won’t be believed or taken seriously because she talks (or writes) in a stigmatized dialect (or language, depending on how you categorize AAVE). So even though students in higher education have become more diverse, the standards and expectations have not changed to reflect that diversity—and white supremacy lives on.

Looking back on all the reading we’ve done for college, the books and articles that have stayed with us most are written by Black, Indigenous, and People of Color who’ve written about brilliant, complex ideas—*with a voice*. The language they use reflects the *person* behind those words and ideas. Their radical academic writing pushes us to ask hard questions about language and power, questions that unsettle the paralyzing fear of failure that so many students *always* carry because they’ve been socialized to believe their language and thus their intelligence is inferior, as AJ’s story exemplifies. It is for these students and *all* students who believe their voice doesn’t belong in higher education or professional workplaces—a belief

rooted in white supremacy—that we urge us all to ponder how our own voices show up in our academic writing—or how they’re silenced, and what we want to do with that knowledge.

NOTES

1. Throughout this chapter, we’ve adopted Asao Inoue’s (2021) intentional spelling of “judgement” with an “e” to emphasize that there is always a *person* doing the judging, acting as judge.

2. Whenever you see [...] (an ellipsis), we’ve cut out a word or words to keep focused on the parts we feel are most important to share.

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TEACHER RESOURCES FOR “WHAT COLOR IS MY VOICE? ACADEMIC WRITING AND THE MYTH OF STANDARD ENGLISH”

OVERVIEW AND TEACHING STRATEGIES

One thing I (Kristin) have learned through experience with doing anti-racist work in writing classes—such as engaging students in discussions about white language supremacy—is the importance of working through the material and hard questions that come up before I ever introduce the concepts to students. I’ve also learned the importance of developing my own racial literacy beyond a basic understanding of white privilege and structural racism as a precursor to doing this work, because antiracism is personal and powerful, white fragility (DiAngelo) is real, and whiteness (Frye) doesn’t depend on a person’s racial identity (though of course white people are more likely to be whitely). And I’ve learned both firsthand and through collaborating with colleagues how difficult this internal work is and how easy it is to unconsciously slip into Habits of White Language (HOWL; Inoue, *Above the Well*) even while we’re consciously trying to confront them.

For these reasons, our teaching strategies begin with the recommendation that teachers do some difficult introspective work first. Write out your responses to the questions for writing and discussion below. Think about your own voice in academic writing, what you like about your voice and what you dislike about it, what your thoughts are on language diversity in academic writing, what unresolved questions linger for you and how you’re working through those questions, who some of your favorite academic writers and/or texts are, and so on. Reflect on the identities you bring to the classroom, how those identities impact your stance on language diversity and antiracism, and in what ways you will need to pay careful attention to those identities (i.e., worldviews and habits) as you engage students in these conversations. Also think about how your grading policy and assessment practices function in your class alongside these discussions about voice. We strongly urge you to read Asao Inoue’s *Antiracist Writing Assessment Ecologies*, ensuring that your policies and other elements of the assessment ecology that is your writing class will support the critical work this chapter invites students to do. Once you’ve laid that groundwork you can think about how this chapter will fit into your overall plans for the course.

We envision this chapter as being most useful early in a course, because it introduces students to concepts that we hope will impact their writing throughout that course. The longer students have to engage with these ideas and think critically about their own voice and the value of language diversity in academic writing, and the more practice students get writing with these ideas in mind, the better equipped they will be to continue and defend this revolutionary work in future classes. In turn, the antiracist work you begin here will be more likely to extend beyond your class.

Because race and voice are deeply connected, and because the nature of race as a social and political construct (and not a biological one) is often unfamiliar and/or controversial, you will likely need to teach students about racial literacy. You will also need to make explicit connections between racial literacy and writing classes, especially when those classes are gen-ed requirements meant to teach writing for academic purposes. We intend for this chapter to help make that connection, drawing students' attention to normalized values and perspectives that inform the standards we're taught are objective and innocuous. We recommend that you and students read this chapter alongside a few other open-access texts that we describe below. These texts will help contextualize and deepen readers' understanding of the inescapably political nature of writing. They will also stimulate critical thought about how students might use their writing for social change.

Three chapters in *Writing Spaces*, Vol. 4 complement this chapter. Mary Lee Grayson's "Writing toward Racial Literacy" explains the relevance of race and racism to writing classes and guides readers in thinking through how race and racism impact their lives no matter their racial identity. We recommend that students read Grayson's chapter before ours to develop a foundational understanding of the systemic issues underlying voice as we discuss it here. Students might also find Cristina Sánchez-Martín's chapter, "Beyond Language Difference in Writing: Investigating Complex and Equitable Language Practices," helpful for thinking about how multilingual writers commonly engage in "'translingual' practices by which writers move across traditional understandings of separate languages" (270). Sánchez-Martín shares multiple examples of translingualism in both popular *and* academic texts, arguing that translingual approaches to writing can address issues of diversity, equity, and inclusion. Translingualism and its contributions to academic writing are also core concepts in "Workin' Languages: Who We Are Matters in Our Writing," by Sara P. Alvarez, Amy J. Wan, and Eunjeong Lee. In this chapter, Alvarez, Wan, and Lee offer strategies for and approaches to integrating diverse language practices in academic writing that they have gleaned through personal experience.

This chapter might be especially useful as a follow-up to our discussion of voice because it provides a theoretical lens that students can adopt as they write: that of the “language architect.” Significantly, these authors account for the constraints a writer’s subjectivity places on her rhetorical situation, clarifying that “many of us whose languages are racialized in various ways may have to work their academic writing contexts more so, or differently” (6). This point alone yields opportunities for discussing how voice and subjectivity function in tandem, which we discuss in our chapter, and how that reality impacts the choices available to individual writers.

In addition to these *Writing Spaces* chapters, we recommend that teachers (and possibly students) familiarize themselves with the concept of *whiteness*, which Marilyn Frye distinguishes from whiteness and defines as “a deeply ingrained way of being in the world” (qtd. in Kim and Olson 87) and Dae-Joong Kim and Bobbi Olson add is an “epistemological worldview, a lens of judgment” (124). This distinction might help to mitigate eruptions of students’ (and teachers’) white fragility by conveying that just as race isn’t a biological reality, so too the whitely worldview that sustains white language supremacy (Inoue, *Antiracist Writing*) isn’t intrinsic or limited to white people. In other words, some Black, Indigenous, and People of Color adopt whitely perspectives about language, and some white people actively challenge those perspectives. This clarification can help to abate tension that might otherwise stall important and productive conversations about linguistic racism.

Following are some questions to stimulate critical thought and activity suggestions to help students identify standard language ideology in their everyday worlds and reflect on its impact on their own and others’ lives.

QUESTIONS FOR WRITING AND DISCUSSION

The following questions would work well for writing in class or out of class and then discussing. They could also be seeds for projects investigating language difference and ideology, perhaps resulting in presentations or a gallery of multimodal or written texts about students’ findings.

1. Often, we don’t notice something’s existence until we feel its absence, so you might not realize how important language is to your identity or your communities. It might help to think of a time when you felt you couldn’t write or speak in ways that felt natural to you, authentic. Or a time when you felt like you had to translate a concept from one of your communities (for example, a religious community, a scientific community, or a cultural/heritage com-

- munity) to someone outside that community. It could be a minor moment or a more involved conversation about a concept. What was that experience like? How did you feel during it? What made you realize that you were a part of that community to begin with?
2. Make a list or draw a mind map of four or five communities you're part of, like a church community, a neighborhood, an online interest group, etc. Then, for each community listed, answer the following questions: What does it mean to be part of this community? In other words, what values do you share? What interests do you share? What specific beliefs about people, things, reality, etc. do you share? What are some common terms or phrases that you use—terms or phrases that someone outside your community might not understand but that anyone in your community would most likely understand? What do those terms or phrases mean to you, and why are they significant to your community? How do they reflect what is important to you?
 3. In a speech addressing college writing teachers, Asao Inoue asked, "Which bodies historically have had the privilege to speak and write the most in civic life and in the academy? Whose words have been validated as history, truth, knowledge, story, the most throughout history? Who sits in the teacher's chair [...]" ("How Do We Language" 136). Based on your experiences in K-12 and even college so far, how would you answer Inoue's questions? How might sharing identity characteristics (like race, gender, socioeconomic class, etc.) with these teachers, writers, speakers, politicians, and so on affect students who share them both in school and outside school? Think broadly about potential effects on students' thoughts and/or emotions as well as situations they might (or might not) encounter. Make your ideas here as specific as you can. Then consider the alternative. What is at stake for the people who do *not* share these identity characteristics? How might their experiences in school be impacted? How might their thoughts and emotions be impacted, and how might those impacts affect their experiences?
 4. "The idea that there is one correct way of writing devalues the writing, thoughts, intelligence, and identities of people from lower-class backgrounds," argues Anjali Pattanayak (85). What are some examples of interactions you've either experienced or observed where a strongly held belief in standard English led someone's intelligence

or identity to be stigmatized? Have *you* had these thoughts yourself? What do you make of them given what you've read in this chapter?

5. Spend a few minutes reflecting, in writing, on these questions: Whose voice do I hear in my writing, and why? What does this voice reveal about my identity as a writer, and how do I feel about what I uncover? What might I want to do more of, or differently? What might happen if I make these changes, and how do I feel about those potential outcomes? What kinds of support do I need for finding my voice in academic writing, and where can I find that support at this school?

6. In their introduction to *Code-Meshing as World English*, Vershawn Ashanti Young, Aja Y. Martinez, and Julie Naviaux pose an incisive question: "What if, during formal language instruction, native English speakers and English language learners were exposed to a variety of Englishes, both from regions of their countries and from around the globe? [...] What if all English users were not only encouraged to understand varieties of English but also allowed to fluently use them in both formal and informal contexts?" (xx). What do you think of this proposal to resist standard language ideology in classes where writing is taught? How might this change affect teachers? How might it affect students? Do you think it might affect life outside of school? If so, what possibilities do you imagine?

SAMPLE ACTIVITIES

Following are a couple of activities or activity ideas that I (Kristin) have used to raise students' awareness of standard language ideology and its implications for diversity, equity, and inclusion and of the central role of language to being human.

STANDARD LANGUAGE IDEOLOGY IN MEMES AND TIKTOKS

Have students find memes or short videos (like TikToks) about language that demonstrate standard language ideology. One I often bring to class is a meme with a white man in a three-piece suit holding a top hat and saying, "When you say 'I seen,' I assume you won't finish that sentence with 'the inside of a book.' I see. I saw. I have seen." We discuss whose languaging the meme critiques (speakers of Black English) and what it communicates about the people associated with that languaging (Black Americans). We also discuss the significance of the image and what it communicates, and

we discuss the sociocultural significance of memes in general, connecting back to the roles that educational institutions play in reproducing and/or resisting harmful stereotypes.

After students find their own memes or short videos, ask students to write about each one, describing it and answering the following questions: 1) What does this meme/video communicate or imply about “correctness” in language use?, 2) How does this meme/video affect, reinforce, or challenge your own perceptions of people?, 3) What assumptions is the creator of this text making about communication, and how do those assumptions connect to your own?, 4) How might these assumptions and perceptions reinforce inequality? You can also have students analyze the rhetorical situation of the text and where they found it and reflect on the significance of various parts of this rhetorical situation (like when and where it’s published and how it circulates).

LANGUAGING AS “THE MEASURE OF OUR LIVES”

Assign students to watch, listen to, and/or read Toni Morrison’s Nobel Lecture for the Nobel Prize in Literature in 1993, available as an audio file and transcript at NobelPrize.org. In this lecture, Toni Morrison speaks of language as a living being—a bird—held in the hands of some young people who visit a wise, old, blind Black woman to mock her for her blindness. The old woman considers this bird they bring—language—to be “partly [. . .] a system, partly [. . .] a living thing over which one has control, but mostly [. . .] agency—as an act with consequences.” In the story Morrison tells, the woman draws the young people’s attention away from the hands holding the bird, those with power over it, and to the bird itself—language—“the instrument through which that power is exercised.” Near the end of the lecture, Morrison says, “We die. That may be the meaning of life. But we do language. That may be the measure of our lives.” That agency, the verb-y-ness of language, and the extent to which we use it is our legacy.

Morrison’s lecture is especially relevant to this chapter because in it, she identifies several threats to language-as-agency, or voice as we have used it in this chapter. For example, she directly critiques “the proud but calcified language of the academy” and “the commodity driven language of science” as “oppressive language,” which she says “does more than represent violence; it is violence; does more than represent the limits of knowledge; it limits knowledge.” And she explicitly connects “the policing languages of mastery” to discrimination, to “sexist language, racist language, theistic language.” Just as the story Morrison tells ends by calling attention to the

young people's agency—"[W]hat I do know is that [the bird] is in your hands. It is in your hands," says the old blind woman—so Morrison concludes the lecture by imagining the woman's response as a reflection on the agentive power of languaging together. Having read Morrison's text and this chapter side-by-side, students could then develop a written or multimodal project where they create their own metaphor for their own voice and explain that metaphor along with its significance to them, especially in light of this chapter. I (Kristin) am purposefully leaving assignment possibilities vague here to encourage creative teacher responses that 1) make use of the wide-ranging analog and digital technologies available to students and 2) honor individual teachers' knowledge of/comfort with assigning and responding to multimodal projects.

LANGUAGE STRUCTURE AND STYLE IN STUDENTS' OWN COMMUNITIES

If you're using this chapter with advanced undergraduates and beyond, you might want to invite students to think even more deeply and critically about the relationships between language and identity (specifically, worldview). You could, for example, ask students to find texts in their communities and analyze the language in those texts, looking carefully at sentence structure, style, and so on. Two texts that work well to set up such more advanced assignments are Lera Boroditsky's 2018 TED Talk, "How Language Shapes the Way We Think," and June Jordan's "Nobody Mean More to Me than You and the Future Life of Willie Jordan."

Language isn't just something we create, Boroditsky, a cognitive scientist, argues; it creates *us*, how we think and view the world: "research shows us that the languages we speak not only reflect or express our thoughts, but also shape the very thoughts we wish to express. The structures that exist in our languages profoundly shape how we construct reality" ("Lost" 145). For example, languages shape how we think about space and time as well as cause-and-effect relationships. They also reflect and shape our value system. Black English, for example, reveals a person-first value system, "a distinctive Black value system" embodied through "the presence of life, voice, and clarity" in words and sentence structures, explained the late writer and professor June Jordan (367). "You cannot 'translate' instances of Standard English preoccupied with abstraction or with nothing/nobody evidently alive, into Black English," she continued. "That would warp the language into uses antithetical to the guiding perspective of its community of users. Rather you must first change those Standard English sentences, themselves, into ideas consistent with the person-centered assumptions of Black English" (368).