

# Chapter 2. Speaking Truth to Power (Or Not): A Black Teacher and Her Students on Assessing Writing

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If this is about speaking truth to power, and White people are the power, then you gotta know that one, that White people don't listen—not when it comes to nothin like race. And two, White people won't even attempt to listen if you don't talk to them like they be talking to you.<sup>1</sup>

## Ecological Position

Readers should know that as a Black, lesbian, working-class professor working in a Historically Black College or University (HBCU), I don't feel the need to state my positionality. In fact, to some degree I think it is harmful to ask BIPOC to show they are “credible” or state their “right” to enter a certain community. However, not wanting to state my positionality in one area does not deter me from stating my positionality in another area: the professorship. As a professor, BIPOC or not, I have authority/power over the students I teach. As Asao Inoue posits, “The first and perhaps most important element of any antiracist writing assessment ecology that might be considered and developed consciously is power” (2015, p. 121).

It is within this context that I recognize that at various times in my teaching I have been complicit in the reproduction of racist pedagogical practices, especially when I had to assess student writing, specifically African American students in freshman composition classes. Much like Alison Moore (2024), many—though not all—of the authors I read in my first-year composition training course (Angela Lunsford, Peter Elbow, James Berlin, etc.) “had one thing in common: they were White writing scholars” (p. 151). While I recognize this training contributed to my unethical (at times) assessment of student writing, I also recognize that once I knew a better way to assess, I did not always use that better way to assess.

However, as a Black, working-class lesbian teaching Black working-class students, I could no longer continue to assess them using tools meant to assess one type of student—White—while disenfranchising those who do not conform: People of Color (POC). That just seemed unfair. But if “[c]lassrooms are also places in which power is constructed to discipline students and teachers” (Inoue,

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1. All student quotations in this chapter are not verbatim quotes, but are remembered by me and so are approximations of their words.

2015, p. 122), then I could use my power as an instructor to discipline students into creating and receiving antiracist writing assessment and to discipline myself into providing it.

## Assessment is Judgement: A Black Professor Professin all the Wrong Things

It is my firm belief that teaching writing is about teaching power relationships. Conversely, assessing writing is about navigating and making those power relationships visible through assessment tools. As an African American writing pedagogue and scholar working at an HBCU, I am as conflicted about teaching and assessing English, or academic writing, or college writing, or composition and rhetoric—however named—as my students are about producing it. I find myself frustrated at what I perceive as my students’ inability to communicate effectively across multiple genres of writing. However, at the same time, I intellectually berate myself for insisting they be disciplined—broken—in this way. It’s a double consciousness affect:

I judge my students by White standards of written discourse, and I judge myself (every day) for wanting my students to mimic these White standards of written discourse.

This breaking, this disciplining, demands they engage “idiosyncratically with structured language systems that confine and pressure” (Inoue, 2022, p. 21) them into “uneven power relations, relations that are mediated by our varied racialized, gendered, and linguistic embodiments” (2022, p. 21). Language does not function outside of context, culture, history, and politics. I know this now and have known this for several years. Yet, I was not making my students aware of this “known.” My former students at the time of this writing, most of whom are Black, stated that college writing is formal, without slang or creativity. College writing was, to them, a White discourse practice, one outside of their normal written language and rhetorical practices.

I did not dissuade them.

And so—

The linguistic and language disciplining that I practiced in the classroom was what “sociolinguists and language scholars have for decades described” as “the harm an uncritical language education has on Black students’ racial and linguistic identities” (Baker-Bell, 2019, pp. 1-2). College (formal) writing is not without context, culture, history, or politics. But if my students saw it as such, then what they saw were the ways in which formal writing continued to exclude not only their linguistic and rhetorical meaning-making practices, but also the linguistic and rhetorical “meaning-making” practices of Black people. I was perpetuating this harm, excluding Black English, even though I had the knowledge to provide Black students with a critical language education.

*How, then, should I begin to engage my students in critical language awareness? Once developing critical language awareness, what, if any, changes to writing assessment might students make?*

## Black “Errors and Expectations”

My ideas of disciplining students into “good writing” or at least “good writing practices” are born from Michel Foucault’s theoretical connections between discipline, punishment, and crime. And in an analysis of the essay rubrics that I constructed myself, the highest “crime” was often students’ *poor* grammar and mechanics. And due to this “crime,” the penalty had “. . . to conform as closely as possible to the nature of the offence [sic], so that the fear of punishment diverts the mind” (Baccaria, n.d., as cited in Foucault, 1995, p. 104) from desiring to commit the offense.

The offense is linguistic and rhetorical variance. Should that variance deviate too far from the norm—what Inoue (2021) calls Habits of White Language (HOWL)—then the punishment could be severe, ranging from failing an essay to failing a course. Even though I knew what I knew about linguistic violence and the intersectionality of language, I treated student “errors” as crimes because in some sense, even now with all my knowledge of the racism inherent in academic writing, I acted in ways that showed my students that error or linguistic variance was a crime, and they needed to be punished for it. I was reading students’ papers “with a lawyer’s eyes, searching for flaws” (Shaughnessey, 1977, p. 391), aghast at the horror show unfolding in front of my eyes. Error was at the forefront of my mind.

Williams (1981) would say I saw error as “a flawed verbal transaction between a writer and a reader” (p. 153). And that when one begins seeing that, “the matter of error turns less on a handbook definition than on the reader’s response, because it is that response—‘detestable,’ ‘horrible’—that defines the seriousness of the error and its expected amendment” (p. 153). Clearly, language variance was the error that I noticed needed amending. Anson (2000) posits the following in “Response and the social construction of error”:

What we notice when we notice error, therefore, is a product of temporal, internalized sets of rules, rules that are both “out there” in the complex and shifting norms of the language and “in here,” in an individual’s knowledge of those rules, level of tolerance for their violation, and idiosyncrasies as a reader. Even more complex are the ways in which all these personally and socially contingent rule systems shift and change depending on the rhetorical situation of the text and its reading, including its genre and level of formality, the writer’s persona, and the intention of the interaction between writer and reader. (p. 7)

However, what Williams and Anson do not address are the ways that the race and class of the instructor also impact how instructors see error. The multiple jeopardies<sup>2</sup> I have in being Black, female, somewhere between working- and middle-class impact not only how I see a perceived error in student writing, but also how I respond to that “error” in Black students<sup>3</sup> writing. And since ideas of “error in writing” are based on HOWL, Williams provides little answer for how I (or other instructors) should respond to that error in pedagogical approach.

Additionally, Williams (1981) argues, “to fully account for the contempt that some errors of usage arouse, we will have to understand better than we do the relationship between language, order, and those deep psychic forces that perceived linguistic violations seem to arouse in otherwise amiable people” (p. 153). What Williams leaves unsaid is that the contempt that some errors of usage arouse in teachers and students has to do with the relationship between the language of the powerless, the oppressive order under which those who practice that language must live, and the fear of retaliation an oppressed person may face for being linguistically different from *otherwise amiable people*.

This fear of being linguistically different from “otherwise amiable people” has a very real impact on Black writers. Mina Shaughnessy (1977) argues that “so absolute is the importance of error in the mind of many writers that ‘good’ writing to them meant ‘correct’ writing” (p. 392). I argue that so absolute was the importance of error in my mind as a writing teacher, so justified was I in my belief that I was protecting Black students from White malevolence *that I felt I was liberating them and showing them how to speak truth to power* by producing “good, correct” writing, and “correct” writing meant showing them how to write *White*. Writing *White* is direct, to the point, without emotion, overly detailed, bereft of personal opinion, highly dependent on someone else’s data or someone else’s opinion, and a reduction of metaphorical language that leads to a boring word choice and a matter-of-fact writing style, which connects back to Inoue’s principles of HOWL.

## Residue: Jim Crow & HBCUs

What makes my students’ situation unique is that they attend an HBCU (Historically Black Colleges and Universities). Scholars such as Carmen Kynard and Sonya Eddy (2009) highlight this situation, noting that “HBCUs’ calculated and conscious charge for ameliorating the education debt by committing to black students represents a unique literacy politics” (p. 25). This uniqueness affords

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2. This ideology has “competing demands (each requiring its own set of resistances to multiple forms of oppression) are a primary influence on the black woman’s definition of her womanhood, and her relationships to the people around her” (Kind, 1988, p. 298).

3. Apparently this possessive case (the missing apostrophe) is a linguistic “issue” in Black language speakers (Rickford & Rickford, 2000, p. 112). I intentionally left it this way. It’s an apostrophe. Don’t trip.

HBCUs the ability to create “a critical space in which the cultural identities of black college students have pedagogical consequence inside of the arenas of racial inequality in the United States” (Kynard & Eddy, 2009, p. 24). Despite the critical space of an HBCU representing a unique set of literacy politics with pedagogical consequences, HBCUs existence are also fraught with tension. HBCUs exist because Black people fought to be educated, but they also exist because of educational segregation: White people 1) did not want us to be educated and 2) did not want us to be educated alongside them. And while HBCUs exist to create Black intellectuals, they also exist as a tool to help Whiteness maintain its status—by setting the Jim Crow separate-but-equal policies and rules by which Black students must be educated.

The resistance to Black language<sup>4</sup> and African American rhetoric in academic writing is political, racist, and classist and is meant to maintain the social order. Keith Gilyard and Elaine Richardson (2001) show that to maintain the order/status quo, conservatives often:

discourage vernacular usage in schools, usually with an argument that they are preparing so-called minorities for success in the marketplace, all while many of the most successful people in the market place [sic] are running odd with fresh stacks of pretty little green ones accumulated to the advertising beat of hip hop. (p. 38)

Black language and/or African and African American rhetoric can be commodified for monetary gain by those in power. Accordingly, those same people limit the power minority speakers can wield in using their language and rhetorical practices in an educational setting, specifically the composition classroom.

Therefore, the residue of Jim Crow separate-but-equal policies still affects and inhibits not only the HBCU, but also the full actualization of Black intellectualism through systemic educational government defunding, failed educational initiatives, and a linguistic ghettoization of public schools. Essentially, when the dominant culture sets the standards and policies by which HBCUs must adhere, and the overall standard of academic writing is White language supremacist (WLS) or HOWL, then HBCUs, normally a buffer from systemic racism, are forced to engage in systemically racist assessment practices.

Policies aside, I was at an institution that believed that producing well-educated Black writers meant removing all markings or remnants of linguistic diversity from students’ writing. Administrators told us that our students have low literacy skills, are underprepared for college, are poor, and lack the educational foundation to be successful. Administrators demanded that we “help” them.

At most HBCUs, this “help” has translated into grammar-based English courses, common exams, and a push for directive-grammar-based tutoring,

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4. See Smitherman (1997).

none of which I am convinced help Black students as much as they help the institution validate itself to Whately accrediting bodies. These “practices” serve to uphold the institution as a colonized, and colonizing, space. The classroom in turn criminalizes the Black languages present in order to uphold the established colonizing practices.

For the institution, writing assessment functions to show to what degree students meet or do not meet preconceived marks. For me, conventional assessment is, and has always been, an inadequate tool for measuring learning, and to a lesser degree, writing proficiency. David Green (2016) posits:

[t]he evaluation of student writing, thus, is a complex negotiation driven by institutional context and teacher knowledge, both of which are reinforced by the curricula and evaluative materials developed and implemented by writing programs. (p. 152)

Black students negotiate the differences between their languaging and the language expected of them in the curriculum daily. Moreso, Black students branded as developmental, largely due to their linguistic voracity, are keenly aware that formal language excludes linguistic diversity, and in turn, excludes them.

The policies of my former HBCU do not dissuade students from this belief. As chair of the English department, I was directed by the dean to focus on improving the co-requisite and general education programs. The co-requisite program gave developmental writers the ability to take credit-bearing English Composition I courses while receiving some form of additional support. In response, our department began restructuring all its Composition I and Composition II courses to an embedded tutor model. These writing tutors attended class once a week and helped students complete designated writing assignments.

However, the administration believed that the role of a writing tutor was to improve the poor grammar and language skills of Black students. This belief changed my perception of my role not only as the department chair, but also as a teacher. It seemed that my role as both chair and professor was clear: ensure that English faculty upheld WLS, and thereby colonialism, through its general education English courses. Once I realized the linguistic violence of this approach, I was no longer conflicted. I was enraged. I wanted to find another way to resist language assessment. I wanted my students to use rubrics as tools for growth. I wanted to stop perpetuating linguistic violence, and in fact, actively encourage them to resist it. This work started with me.

## Self-Deprogramming through Self-Reflection

To become a better assessor of Black language and rhetorical styles in essay writing, I reflected on what I believed writing should do and how that belief led to the way I assess. At its most basic, writing is a form of communication. When I write or read, I do these acts as a Black, cis-gendered, working-class lesbian. I engage in

communication acts that happen in and are shaped by historical contexts, cultural shifts, and political dynamics, all of which not only limit and produce meaning through the interaction, but also limit the production of *different* meanings through that same interaction. Breakdowns in written communication can be a disconnect between context and culture. However, when considering the rubrics I designed and (sometimes) had students help me design, this written communication disconnect was not presented in these rubrics. There was little in the rubrics to affirm (or rather legitimize) their cultural, linguistic, and language practices. Instead, the rubrics focused on three distinct language products: (1) content, (2) organization, as well as (3) style, grammar, and mechanics (language usage). I understood my own perception of writing and writing assessment; I needed to understand how my students perceived writing and writing assessment.

Writing assessment at my previous HBCU was fraught with tension. The majority of students, faculty, and administration are African American or BIPOC. Black language flows on the campus as the waters of the river Nile. However, students are still being told (implicitly, if not explicitly so) by teachers, advisors, and administrators (all well-meaning middle-class BIPOC like me) that an HBCU is the only place and space for Ebonics—their position on Black language is as antiquated as the term they use to name it. Yet, the want of faculty, administrators, and advisors to remove Black language from these students' tongues remains.

The reason this need remains is rooted in the raced and classed nature of writing. Black people were historically restricted from writing, extensive reading, and any formalized schooling for over 200 years. During this time, their language practices (amongst other things) were bastardized, ridiculed, deemed undesirable, and considered inferior by White people (the ruling racial class). It stands to reason that to feel or perceive oneself as equal, one would attempt to root out and remove that which marks one as “inferior”: language.

The vast majority of my past students were educated in the Oklahoma public school system, which is 43<sup>rd</sup> in national education for “K-12 school quality” (Elkins, 2021). Many of these students are poor, working, and taking care of other family responsibilities. They have witnessed significant violence, i.e., gang violence, gun violence, etc. Education is a priority for them, but not a number one priority for them.

Their number one priority is usually family. If they had to babysit while a parent was at work and babysitting overlapped with school, they chose to babysit. If they had to work and work overlapped with class, students chose work. They wanted professors to accommodate, but if professors did not, students still chose work, family, friends, or community loyalty over school. The time these students choose to devote to school can never equal the time they devote to what mattered more. And shouldn't family, friends, and community matter more than education. Moreover, since my Black and Brown students were quite used to conforming and not having their language practices valued in any academic space, “it's no wonder that it is difficult or impossible for Black, Latinx, Indigenous students and



other students of color to trust faculty who ask for their input and participation” (McIntyre, 2024, p. 81) in designing assessments for their coursework.

Many times I perceived that their experience with literacy—or rather the educational systems’ accepted literate practices—was much like mine: I was a Black “. . . teacher who loved school and excelled at reading and writing, I presumed my students shared my experiences and my view of the classroom as a productive, supportive space” (McIntyre, 2024, p. 80). I could not see my own raced and classed assumptions: I was a part of the Black middle class which, for good or not, linguistically conformed publicly, even if we did not linguistically conform privately.

Yet, I understood this clash between what I can only call a public performance of literacy and a private practice of languaging. This clash I had between literacy and languaging at home, but having to change that in educational spaces to ascend—to be accepted as the “good Black”—is why I also was in concert with my students and bemoaned the academy’s focus on reading, reading, reading. I have watched T.V. all my life, especially as a child. Falcon Crest, Knots Landing, Unsolved Mysteries, this was my literacy, and these were my educators. I too hated the books they made us read in school.

Excerpt.

I loved the box of books my mother dropped in my room as a child. I read them all. When coming out, I watched my fair share of movies, but it was Kate Delafield mysteries and Dean Koontz that I voraciously read on the subways to school. I, having sold myself as the African American working-class lesbian, was attempting to reject all that I had become—highly literate, well-educated, and with some social mobility to climb the class ladder. I rejected my becoming to remember what and who I once was: the daughter of a farmer and industry man with a mom who never graduated high school. There is still no place for this part of me in the academy, and so I understand the landmines of academic discourse these students shudder or outright refuse to engage. This is the effect of the clash.

## A Conversation with Students: What Makes for “Good” Academic Writing?

When I asked students what constitutes good academic writing, most associated academic writing with educated writing, and educated writing with reading, as in reading books, which they did not like to do, not from a lack of desire (though for some this is certainly true) but from a lack of *time*. Reading, at least reading literature to any great extent, takes time, something these students have so little of with taking care of multiple siblings, helping pay bills, taking care of their own children. Reading is for people who can afford for someone else to take care of the everydayness of life. Reading takes time.

Writing also takes time. Therefore, reading and writing are middle-class practices. Due to the lengthy and systemic exclusion of African Americans from writing and some forms of reading, reading and writing have been, and seem still to be



thought of as, inherently White and middle-class practices for my Black students. *Time* is a White, middle-class resource that the oppressed usually do not have.

## What African American Students Want

My frustrations with “disciplining” predominantly poor, Black students into these uneven power relations led me to research ways to give them agency not only in their writing, but also in the ways their writing was assessed. If, as Inoue (2019) argues, “making slaves is making people do what you want them to do for your purposes” (p. 25), then making pathways to freedom is providing people with the opportunity to do what they need to do to meet their individual and community goals, which may not be the same as the institution’s or the instructor’s. It is with this understanding I began to question how I could make the teaching and learning of writing a less exploitative practice for underserved, poor, Black students.

In the spring semester of 2020, I worked with my freshman composition students to create rubrics for each essay in the course. It was also my hope that this practice with students would foster their writing and eliminate language/linguistic violence, consequently decriminalizing linguistic variance. Through this work with students, I learned that they just wanted to find ways (sometimes the easiest ways) to meet my standards. They did not, necessarily, want to set those standards.

To some degree, this flattening of hierarchies—making students participants in their own assessment—was uncomfortable and unnerving to them. Teachers are experts. They are taught to assess. Students are not experts. How could they know how to assess? If a teacher needs students to help them create assessment tools, is the instructor competent to teach the class? Or so their reasoning went. This is not flawed logic, as much as it is the logic of the enslaved mind. How one reasons, justifies, and rationalizes the uneven power relations that keep them linguistically enslaved.

How students value assessment is critical to understand. Assessment is a means to an end for most students, regardless of whether they question its means or are suspicious of its end. When I asked students in the first two weeks of class to help me create a rubric for their first major project, the annotated bibliography, how grammar should be assessed weighed heavy on their minds.

Students were not thrilled to have Black language recognized as academic, as much as they wanted someone who was from the same/similar linguistic background to teach them the White language code (or rather, to be able to write in whiteface<sup>5</sup>)—a Black person giving a White performance of written discourse. It is mimicry, not mockery.

For these students, good grammar is intrinsically tied to good academic writing. For some of my former students this notion was reinforced in the

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5. See Fanon (1967).

classroom, where skill-and-drill grammar activities and tests were a common pedagogical practice for some of their professors. These students, so conditioned to testing, were also conditioned to punish themselves for being linguistically different from the White standards of language expected of them in school. This conditioning is what I hoped to begin changing by including students in the assessment creation process.

## Setting Student Assessment Goals in Class

After a bad Spring 2020 semester where multiple students failed and it seemed like I couldn't do nothing to motivate them or get them engaged, I decided to start talking with students the fall 2020 semester about grades. Specifically, how I graded their papers. I spoke with them about their experiences with writing and writing assessment (what teachers noticed about their writing). Students who had positive memories of writing in/for school also had positive memories of writing assessment. Conversely, students who had negative memories of writing in/for school also had negative memories of writing assessment.

Sometimes students internalized the negative writing assessment they received and believed they were poor writers. Yet, many others compartmentalized the negative feedback, finding a way to maintain a love for the writing they do at home, in their diary, and on their personal time, while differentiating it from the formalized writing they are required to do for school. After we discussed their experiences with writing, and once we were ready to begin creating rubrics for their essays, we started with the guiding questions I asked myself:

- *What are some of the reasons you write?*

Students stated that they write because they have something to say, they have an assignment to complete, or they want to express themselves. We then were able to connect their reasons for writing within the essay genre of *Content* (what the essay is about).

- *What are some of the reasons that you read?*

Students reported that they read for entertainment, for an assignment, and to learn about a topic. I asked students if it was possible to also write for entertainment, as well as to learn or teach? Most of the students said yes. I was hoping to show students that the reasons we read are also the reasons we write. After talking with them about the reasons we read and write, they believed their ideas aligned within the essay genre of *Context*.

- *What should you learn about essay writing from an introductory college composition course?*

Students said they should learn to add detail and “not be all over the place,” to use an expanded vocabulary, and to research/incorporate

research in their writing with citations. These ideas were placed in the Organization category.

- *How important is the intent of the chosen grammar and language usage in essay writing?*

I asked students, if they used Black language and its rhetorical practices to make a point in their essay, how would they like that assessment to occur? This question caused students significant angst. As one student said, “our language isn’t formal, so I don’t think it belongs there.” Others said if it was there, it was ok as long as it wasn’t too much. We placed these ideas in the style, grammar, and language use category.

It appeared that students wanted me to punish them if they used incorrect grammar or linguistic variants. This kind of internalized oppression over the validity of Black language and rhetorical practices in academic writing manifested itself in the ways students wanted it to be assessed. I did not know if I could participate in this practice that was perpetuating linguistic racism.

But honestly

I failed.

I failed when I did not take up my reservations with them. Maybe we were doing this wrong. What students envisioned and what we created was not an anti-racist rubric, but a rubric that found ways to reproduce linguistic racism and reset HOWL and the standard that all students must mimic and adhere to.

This result concerned me because “critical language scholars in English Education have consistently argued that ELA teachers must shift their pedagogies and practices to better support the rich linguistic resources that Black students, and other linguistically and racially diverse students, bring with them to classrooms” (Baker-Bell, 2019, p. 3). How could I make this shift if students were so willing to participate in their continued oppression?

These rubrics showed that students still maintained “negative attitudes about their linguistic, racial, cultural, and intellectual identities” (p. 3). There was still some underlying belief that Black language “is deficient, wrong, and unintelligent” (p. 3). My focus had been on collaboratively designing expectations and assessments with students. I thought that this collaboration was inherently freeing/liberatory for students, when in reality it only freed me of some control and responsibility. Expectations and standards are only as “freeing” as the minds of the people who create them.

If, as Baker-Bell says, students, faculty, and administrators are indoctrinated by “anti-black, deficit theories, and monolingual ideologies that view [Black language] as a barrier to Black students’ literacy education” (2019, p. 3), then their comfort with being punished for using it in academic writing made sense. Additionally, many of these students, even the honors students, were used to being labeled deficient, having failed to meet some arbitrary ACT or SAT score, thus

marking them as remedial. What these rubrics showed was trauma. Damage. An altered psyche. Rubrics were, or at least for my students, the means to an end: the brutal whip upon which academic writing(ers) is made.

## Lowered Expectations

My expectation was that these collaborative rubrics and expectations would get me closer to the goal of assessing writing as a less exploitative practice. Yet, my collaborative rubrics and expectations do not do that. If anything, they were more exploitative than before. These rubrics exposed not only how much students desired to conform to White racial habitus (Inoue, 2015) and were willing to be punished for non-conforming, but also how much I was willing to comply with their punishments.

I had to make some kind of change because one thing became clear: I could no longer justify this pedagogy of compliance to students with tired platitudes of structure, and how there is no world without order, or by attempting to connect it with some intrinsic skill they would learn about the importance of meeting deadlines because one day they would all have bosses. If they learned any of these intrinsic skills from this rubric, great. However, in truth, the compliance categories come down to curriculum restrictions and when all instructors must submit their final grades to the registrar, all issues that students have no control over. Essentially, their compliance is about me and my need to meet the demands of my bosses at a Black university.

Thus, I began to see that the process of forming/developing rubrics with my Black students did not work for me and did not work for my students—not if the goal was to give students agency by creating a less exploitative rubric. Rubrics are, after all, the main way we enforce “common standards” (Balester, 2012, p. 63) and become a “means of defining a standard in the service of inter-rater reliability” (p. 63). And I intended to make a rubric that showed not only the “instruction in the dominant forms of academic discourse” (Balester, 2012, p. 71), but also that the power of rhetoric happens by navigating and incorporating “different texts, genres, languages, audiences or dialects.” (Balester, 2012, p. 71).

However, the agency I saw was not in the development of the rubric because I was still stuck. Instead, agency came in the conversations we had about language and power. Students were able to articulate some of the class biases around “slang” and “Ebonics.” Through the collaborative process of creating rubrics with my students, I uncovered what students think about the place of Black language and rhetoric in college writing. Students believed that assimilationist language and rhetoric (using HOWL) gave them the better chance to speak truth to power. This perceived better chance cannot be dismissed because of Black people’s continued struggle for equal rights from an imperialist machine.

This need for these Black students to speak truth to power in an attempt to be seen as equal or gain rights is assimilationist thinking and rhetoric. But the

struggle to break free from this thinking is complex. In the struggle for equality, Black people have gained rights by appealing and speaking truth to power using the tools that those in power understand. The administrators, faculty, and advisors reinforce this belief in students. This reinforcement shows how my prior HBCU can and does work as an imperialist mechanism that promotes White language supremacy.

The two questions which I continued to ask were how do I affirm Black language in writing, and how do I as a Black woman teacher of Black students grapple with the (presumed) competing responsibilities of assessment and supporting Black students' agency in academic writing? From this experience I learned that the responsibilities are not competing.

Scholars mentioned previously in this chapter have published academic articles, chapters, and books using Black language and its rhetorical practices. I have used Black language and its rhetorical practices in this chapter. What (or rather who) legitimizes it there and here, but not in a composition classroom? Could it be about trust or experience? Or maybe how we (or rather I) saw students: inexperienced, lacking intent, lacking the knowledge to know their intent, and lacking discipline.

What we must do is continue to find various ways to affirm linguistic diversity. Be it through rubrics, though they sometimes fail, or pedagogical changes, the charge is to affirm language, linguistic diversity, and rhetoric/rhetorical practices as they present in academic writing. This affirmation can come through having discussions with students about the power dynamics within language and collaborating with students on articulating the types of linguistic diversity they want affirmed when instructors assess their writing. Additionally, we can create rubrics that affirm the language and linguistic diversity of our students' writing. We can no longer fear having conversations with our students about the power dynamics in language and how those power dynamics present in rubrics. We can no longer fear what our students have to say when they write and when they talk about writing.

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