

5 Can You Be Black and Write and Right?

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Elaine B. Richardson recently received her Ph.D. from Michigan State University in the African American Language and Literacy program. Her dissertation project, "An African-Centered Approach to Composition" for AAVE speaking freshmen, focused on AAVE culture and language and the African American literary theme of "freedom through literacy" as the bases of acquiring critical literacy skills and academic discourse. She has recently joined the faculty of the University of Minnesota.

This essay and experiment is a contribution to the developing interest in the exploration and analysis of the use of African American Vernacular English (AAVE) discourse style and rhetorical patterns and how this type of language use is received in writing classes. I would like to define myself for you in conjunction with AAVE. Then, I would like to share some student texts that display use of AAVE rhetorical patterns. One of the main goals of this essay is to discuss alternative assessment of AAVE patterns in student texts and to offer suggestions about how we might break the cycle of the violence of standard literacy practices.

Who Am I?/What Is AAVE Rhetoric and Discourse Style?

I am a product of the AAVE oral tradition. I grew up in Cleveland, Ohio. I attended Cleveland Public Schools. My parents were working-class people. Some of my neighbors, in fact, most of them, were underworking class, meaning that they may have been on welfare or did what ever kind of hustle they could do to survive and keep their families together. I tell you this because I want you to know that I am representing these kinds of students in your classrooms. I don't want to front like I was better educated or of another class, and therefore did not speak and live the vernacular life. I did, and in many ways, I still do. I like to define myself in the tradition of the language and the black experience because, as I hope you will see, the two are one.

I think it is important for you to see me as a student of the vernacular culture, and I think it is important for people to know that the vernacular culture is more than systemic grammar, syntax, and a particular way of expressing ideas. It is a way of being in the world. People usually overlook this major aspect of language. Language and culture are inseparable. AAVE is a direct result of African-European contact on the shores of West Africa and in what became the United States of America. The result of African-European contact, an experience of subordination and dominance, has implanted double consciousness into the very core of African American being. Historically speaking, Africans had to become proficient in English just to survive. They had to prove that they had more use than just to be and to remain “ignorant niggers,” the creation of slavers. Smitherman (*Talkin’ and Testifyin’*) says that

The push-pull momentum is evidenced in the historical development of Black English in the push toward Americanization of Black English counterbalanced by the pull of retaining its Africanization. . . . White America has insisted upon White English as the price of admission into its economic and social mainstream. (11–12)

By the same token, whether or not AAVE students have had the same experiences as white middle-class students (the norming group for the American educational model), they must come to the institutions speaking or writing right (or writing white). So we can see then that the game still has not changed. In our nation’s beginning, cultural difference was used to justify inhumane treatment, and nowadays it is used to justify inequality; it is at the very core of the politics of education and literacy. The fact of the matter is that African Americans have retained much of their Africanness in spite of slavery. The African worldview, which is a part of African American culture, is opposite to the dominant European worldview in fundamental ways.

One of the major differences can be seen in the ways African peoples view ideas and phenomena holistically, while European and Euramerican peoples view ideas or phenomena analytically and hierarchically (Smitherman, in progress). This list of fundamentally different aspects of worldview encompasses other facets of reality, such as orientation to time, nature, family life, spirituality, and more. But I want to focus on the relationship between language use and reality. Marcyliena Morgan has described AAVE as a “counterlanguage.” She says that Black English began as a “conscious attempt on the part of [enslaved Africans] and their descendants to represent an alternative

reality through a communication system based on ambiguity, irony, and satire" (Morgan 424). Hence, Africanized English reflects the black experience. In its most sophisticated uses, Africanized English resists white ways of knowing and being and speaking about those ways of knowing and being. This language that I am referring to is spoken by at least 80 percent of African Americans (Dillard) in their homes and sometimes at school! It carries the beliefs, values, and ideology of its speakers.

Features under Consideration

Black language creates meaning differently because of the ideology embedded in the language and the way that the discourse may be structured. Smitherman (*Talkin' and Testifyin'*) has explained the ways in which much of African American verbal style is acquired from the folk traditions learned in the black church. There is a growing body of research which investigates the degree to which AAVE oral tradition features influence the black discursive and rhetorical patterns that may arise in AAVE-oriented students' texts (Noonan-Wagner; Ball; Redd; Balester; Richardson, "Paradigms and Pedagogy"; Campbell; Smitherman, "Blacker the Berry"). Most of these scholars find that features such as "narrative sequencing," "repetition," "topic association" (as opposed to the development of one point in speech or writing), "field dependency/lack of distance from events," and others are associated with the black church, black culture, and the traditional African worldview.

Three aspects of the AAVE oral tradition that I want to look at are "signification," "narrative sequencing," and "testifying" in some students' texts. These texts were gleaned from a freshman composition course at Cleveland State University which I taught as part of my training as a teacher of composition. I obtained my idea for the "diagnostic" assignment in a course in which I was enrolled for composition teaching assistants. Below is the "diagnostic" essay assignment I used for the freshman English course. It was common practice that students be required to take the writing lab in conjunction with the freshman course if their performance on the "diagnostic" assignment did not signal their familiarity with received rhetorical approaches. (All of the students dreaded such a fate because they—correctly—perceived that they were stigmatized by writing lab placement.)

Reading/Evaluation

Following is a “diagnostic” essay assignment for a freshman English course:

Diagnostic Essay—Freshman English

For this essay, the knowledge of essay writing you have acquired in previous writing classes or high school will be of most help to you. Please feel free to freewrite, use outlines, or use any other prewriting or organizational technique which will help you achieve a well-thought-out, conscientiously devised piece of writing.

Construct an essay of at least two pages using the following quote:

“Where there is much desire to learn, there of necessity will be much arguing, much writing, many opinions; for opinion in good men is but knowledge in the making.”

—John Milton

The papers were to be evaluated following criteria like that of the evaluation sheet in Figure 1. The evaluation sheet is a variation of the rubric used by the National Assessment of Educational Progress (NAEP) called the primary-trait scale (see Smitherman, “Blacker the Berry” 88). Although the evaluation sheet in Figure 1 is not the exact one that I used in the Cleveland State course, I use it here because it is the same one I used in a study of instructor evaluation of AAVE discourse patterns, entitled “Paradigms and Pedagogy.” The findings of that study are reported here to inform my estimation of conventional rating practices. I invite the reader to evaluate the papers and ponder your reasons for assigning the score that you give.

Paper I

The quote by John Milton reminds me of a theory of cognitive development. In cognitive development, before a person can learn something, interest must be developed and an idea must be recognized as something that is either similar or different. In other words, a person analyzes an idea to find out what it is made of. Uniformed opinions are not knowledge. After a person makes sense of an idea or has had a chance to look at it from all possible angles, then it becomes a part of the person’s knowledge base. Usually a person has an opinion about something before exploring an idea or a topic. After arguing and writing or analyzing, a person usually has a better opinion because it is more well thought out.

Evaluation Sheet	
Score	
4	Elaborated. Students providing elaborated responses went beyond the essential, reflecting a higher level of coherence and providing more detail to support the points made.
3	Adequate. Students providing adequate responses included the information and ideas necessary to accomplish the underlying task and were considered likely to be effective in achieving the desired purpose.
2	Minimal. Students writing at the minimal level recognized some or all of the elements needed to complete the task but did not manage these elements well enough to ensure that the purpose of the task would be achieved.
1	Unsatisfactory. Students who wrote papers judged as unsatisfactory provided very abbreviated, circular, or disjointed responses that did not even begin to address the writing task.

Figure 1. Evaluation criteria.

In order to understand an idea a person must analyze it. This corresponds to Milton’s arguing. Arguing means looking at all the parts that make up an idea. When arguing, it is good to write down all of the parts of an idea. In this way, a person can visualize an idea more clearly and see how it fits in with what is already known. It is like all of the parts of an idea are sitting there in view in order to figure out how they fit together or do not fit together. But if a person only looks at one part of an idea or topic, the information is limited.

If we have interest and an opinion we must argue and write or analyze to see what the idea is made of. Therefore, like Milton said: “opinion in good men, is but knowledge in the making.”

A Conventional Evaluation and Assessment of Paper I

The introduction sets up the audience for an analogy between the student’s interpretation of the Milton quote and cognitive development. We can understand why the writer moves to an explanation of “analysis” and “arguing” in the first body paragraph. We get the feeling that the student author is going to move through each aspect of cognitive development and compare it with the author’s interpretation of the ideas in Milton’s quote; however, although the writer’s discourse evidences an interesting condensed version of the analogy between cognitive development and the writer’s interpretation of the Milton

quote, the writer seems to have abandoned the analogy, leaving the audience to fend for itself. The author, rather, moves to a summarizing concluding paragraph. The paper is reminiscent of Labov's example of standard loquaciousness, in which a speaker (or writer) substitutes verbosity for depth and content.

Given an "Evaluation Sheet" like the one above and those that many of us have to work with, our training as writing instructors, and the fact that the writer did employ a fresh approach to the topic, conventional standards bind most instructors to score Paper I somewhere between 4 and 3, especially because the writer adheres to the language of wider communication (LWC) grammar and academic prose style, and there are no glaring departures from academic style. Seven out of nine college writing instructors scored the paper 3 or 4 in the AAVE discourse-patterns study (Richardson, "Where Did That Come From?").

Paper II

Milton's quote reminds me of the writing process. In the writing process, a person writes every possible issue on a topic down in order to learn about it. In the writing process this is called arguing or exploring an issue. In the beginning of the process, the writer has an opinion. After finding out all of the information on a topic, the writer has a better opinion because it contains truth not just a personal belief.

It takes lots of practice to become an efficient writer. Through practicing writing and thinking about issues one can effectively communicate one's ideas. Good writing persuades someone to believe what you are saying is true. The writing process involves changing opinions and looking at an argument from another point of view.

A writer does this so that readers will believe that the writing is well thought out. Opinions are like birthdays everybody's got one. As Milton said, "opinion in good men is but knowledge in the making."

A Conventional Evaluation and Assessment of Paper II

The introduction sets up the reader for a discussion of the similarities between the writing process and the elements of the Milton quote. The writer discusses methods that efficient/good writers use—practicing writing and thinking and looking at ideas from alternate viewpoints. The concluding paragraph tells the reader why writers must use these methods. The paper moves to closure with a colloquial aphorism—"Opinions are like birthdays everybody's got one." Finally, the paper

ends with a quote from Milton which approximates to: Good men don't view opinions as fact, but as a step toward discovery of fact. Upon first reading Paper II, an instructor may be inclined to suggest that the writer should have referred to Milton more throughout the discussion to reinforce the similarity between the writing process and the Milton quote. Further, there is one run-on sentence located within the colloquial aphorism.

What score does the "Evaluation Sheet" allow you to assign to Paper II? Conventional standards dictate somewhere between a 3 and a 2, especially because of the colloquialism, which signals a shift in tone from formal objective prose to informal conversational tone. In the AAVE discourse-patterns study, nine instructors were split evenly between 3's and 2's, with one instructor giving the paper a 1.

Even though Paper II receives lower evaluation, the lower evaluation may be due to unfamiliarity with integral AAVE rhetorical features. Paper II evinces *signifying*. Let me explain. Gates's definition of signifying helps us to understand how the student is using language. Gates says that African Americans distinguish themselves from other speakers of the English language by *signifying*. In the AAVE oral tradition of signifying,

The very meaning of meaning is being questioned by a literal critique of white meaning. (Gates 46)

When words are used in this way, they can have at least two levels of meaning. This AAVE way of using language is not just restricted to the term or the speech act of "signifying." The speech act of signifying, as described by Smitherman (*Talkin' and Testifyin'*) refers to speakers putting each other down (or up) for fun, or making indirect points as behavior correctives. What I am calling signifying here is the use of indirection to make a point in which a familiar AAVE maxim is invoked by a writer (speaker) to express a commonly held belief (mother wit/experiential knowledge), although the maxim applies only metaphorically to the situation at hand. The writer applies the maxim to a rhetorical situation in which the readers do not share the same background of the writer and thus miss the connection that the writer is trying to make. As we can see, the student author is striving for objective academic prose: the use of "one's," the hypercorrect use of an apostrophe where none is needed, etc. However, the student shifts to a personal point of view in the statement: "opinions are like birthdays everybody's got one." This usage is not usually readily comprehensible to non-AAVE-oriented speakers. In the AAVE communi-

ties, phrases similar to this are used when a speaker is talking about a subject about which she does not have straight all of the information or facts. As the writer has pointed out, "writing is supposed to hold one's interest, entertain, or persuade someone to believe what you are saying is true." In AAVE contexts, a speaker may be questioned by a listener for talking about a subject without having all the facts; he may be told to keep his opinions to himself. Hence, "opinions are like _____ holes, everybody's got one." We see, in the text, the student shifting between AAVE and academic styles. The student is hoping that the audience will infer the connection between this contextual formula in the AAVE community and the present writing situation. The student knows that the absence of fact and uninteresting use of language or ideas in writing results in uniformed opinions or uninteresting writing, but demonstrates this indirectly. She applies an AAVE form of *signifying* to a rhetorical context in which it is not expected, giving her AAVE-oriented perspective.

Paper III

Like John Milton said, "much arguing and much writing" lead to learning. But opinion is not good unless it is held by a good man.

I agree with Milton because if a man is not willing to argue and write about something he believes in, then he obviously does not know enough about it. Or, if he does know about it, his argument is so weak or evil that no one will be persuaded to his beliefs.

A good man will take the time to explain his beliefs; but a bad man will try to rush through explanations so he can trick someone. It's just like one time a Jehovah's Witness came to our house. This lady was trying to gather her following by putting other religions down. My mother told her what our family believed in and was trying to show her in the Bible the reasons for our beliefs. Instead of the Jehovah's Witness lady doing the same as my mother, she was talking fast like a travelling sales man. She never took the time to write down or explain their beliefs carefully. As far as I'm concerned, if you can't show me something in black and white, you can keep it!

A Conventional Evaluation and Assessment of Paper III

The introductory statement gives us an idea of the writer's stance: good men hold good opinions. In the second paragraph, the student is still in the objective/academic mode, even though there is the use of "I." The final paragraph concretizes the writer's abstraction, "a good man will take time to explain..."; "a bad man will try to rush..." with

the story. This final paragraph tells the story about the family's encounter with the Jehovah's Witness and ends with an aphorism. The last sentence serves as commentary on the story about the Jehovah's Witness and on the writer's understanding of the Milton quote.

If one follows typical composition text criteria, this paper would be generally graded somewhere between 3 and 1, especially because the writer's tone is informal, although the writing adheres to grammatical conventions of LWC. In my AAVE discourse study, this paper received two 3's, three 2's, and four 1's.

The AAVE discourse paradigm shows that Paper III employs *narrative sequencing* and *testifying*. Smitherman's definition of narrative sequencing appears helpful here:

The story element is so strong in black communicative dynamics that it pervades general everyday conversation. An ordinary inquiry is likely to elicit an extended narrative response where the abstract point or general message will be couched in concrete story form. . . . The Black English speaker thus simultaneously conveys the facts and his or her personal sociopsychological perspective on the facts. (*Talkin' and Testifyin'* 161)

In this particular student's interpretation of the Milton quote, there is a shift to narrative to carry the main point. The narrative occurs in the student author's discursive reenactment of the family's encounter with the Jehovah's Witness. Also, the student's interpretation is filtered through values of black culture. So, we can see this narrative as a form of *testifying*. Again, we must turn to Smitherman:

To testify is to tell the truth through "story." In the sacred context, the subject of testifying includes such matters as visions, prophetic experiences, the experience of being saved, and testimony to the power and goodness of God. (*Talkin' and Testifyin'* 150)

In this case, the testifying is sacred because the writer refers to religious training. In other words, the writer anticipates that the reader has a reverence for pious writers. As readers, we should (from the writer's perspective) respect the fact that the writer uses a religious story which demonstrates the writer's Biblical literacy and reliance on *The Word*.

According to traditional standards, Paper I earns the highest grade because it adheres more to standard rhetorical paradigms. The paper begins with the idea of relating the quote to cognitive development and then pursues that idea (although in a shallow way) through-

out the text. After all, isn't that what an essay is supposed to do? One meaning of the term "essay" as defined in the compact *OED* is

A composition of moderate length on any particular subject; originally implying want of finish, "an irregular undigested piece" (J), but now said of a composition more or less elaborate in style, though limited in range. (Burchfield 896)

The earlier part of this definition was adapted from Samuel Johnson's dictionary. It appears that Johnson was ahead of his time in that his definition more aptly describes the writing of students whose language use conflicts with the form now known as the academic essay. As the latter part of the definition notes, the academic essay is more "limited in range," as is Paper I. Jean Sanborn's definition of the academic essay describes that range:

The academic essay is not a vehicle for exploring ideas and making knowledge; it is a vehicle for presenting formed ideas, a didactic, authoritative model rather than an interactive form. (143)

Recent studies in sociolinguistics and composition point to the constraints that the academic essay places on AAVE-speaking students (Troutman-Robinson; Redd; Richardson, "Where Did That Come From?"; Ball).

This is not meant to say that AAVE students are not capable of constructing a piece of writing that contains introduction, identifiable thesis, body paragraphs, and conclusion; rather, AAVE students may use language in ways that are not acknowledged by writing instructors as valid ways of demonstrating knowledge. More often than not, both the students and the teachers are unaware of AAVE rhetorical patterns in the writing. Usually, when such devices are used, essays are referred to as unconventional at best, or worse. The rhetorical patterns and ideological stances these patterns express in terms of their employment in AAVE-oriented students' texts deserve fuller exploration.

Throughout kindergarten through college schooling, students are increasingly evaluated by their adherence to academic discourse. They are expected to know the conventions, and if they don't, they are treated as remedial students, as though something is wrong with them (Rose). That just simply is not a good place to start. In fact, Smitherman says, in her retrospective on "Students' Right to Their Own Language," that

In spite of recently reported gains in Black student writing, chronicled by the NAEP and higher scores on the SAT, the rate of functional illiteracy and drop-outs among America's underclass is moving faster than the Concorde. A genuine recognition of [AAVE] students' culture and language is desperately needed if we as a profession are to play some part in stemming this national trend. (25)

Writing teachers, of African American or any other descent, may not realize that students are operating within the realm of the AAVE oral tradition. Elsewhere, following Bakhtin, I have argued for the need to recognize form and content as one, because discourse is a living social phenomenon that is shaped by the context from which it occurs (Richardson, "Where Did That Come From?"). Unfamiliarity with the social aspect of language perpetuates narrowly informed interpretation and assessment of AAVE-oriented writing that comes off as flat.

We must develop ways of incorporating the students' cultural literacy experiences with those needed to enhance their futures and to succeed in a society where only one kind of literacy is valued. Composition experts are beginning to work out transcultural (Gilyard), multicultural (Miller), and Afrocentric/multicultural (Evans) writing classrooms.

Grading should not be used punitively against AAVE writers. Clearly, the papers presented here which reveal the AAVE perspective evince substance and ideas that the students related to their interpretation of Milton. Yet, when the ideas and the experience that those ideas represent are unfamiliar or not within the instructors' experiential base, they are not well received.

One way in which to bridge this cultural gap may be to describe the ways in which students are using language in their texts. What I believe we should do is to allow students to explore and experiment with the AAVE oral tradition to expand the student's repertoire of available styles. I am now experimenting with AAVE discourse and rhetoric in my course. One example of what we are doing is analyzing writings published in magazines written for the African American hip hop audience. We talk about the shared assumptions and backgrounds that these writers expect of their hip hop-age audience. Students are writing letters to these magazines and then rewriting the letters to the local newspapers and other publishing outlets. The course is based in theories of bidialectalism. We talk about the power of expressing ideas in black language, and we experiment with ways of trying to retain the

black voice and make our prose accessible to non-AAVE members. Instructors must come to recognize and acknowledge the AAVE styles as extensions of students' cultural orientation, if in fact such is the case. Exploration of diverse linguistic orientations and how these influence textual creation provides an additional method of scaffolding students to academic styles in a way that does not lock us into evaluating (AAVE) students' cultures. Curricula must be conceived in such a way that students are trained to discern, appreciate, and master diverse styles. Students can be black and write, and black and right. Thinking along these lines may enable us to halt the perpetuation of the violence of standard literacy practices.

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Interlude

It will take decades to break the back of our eighteenth-century method of "marking papers." I was an English chair for quite a while and was not very successful convincing anyone to stop using the terms "grading and correcting and marking"—words loaded with anything but positive connotations. Administrators were suspicious, but frequently acquiesced and said to use anything I wished, provided it could somehow be wonderfully translated into the conventional rubric of the moment for report cards. I simply tried to use the phrase "reading essays," but students yearned for traditional numbers or letters since getting into the college of their choice used them and those colleges of choice seemed to dictate what was done in high school. It seemed we were always marking and grading for someone else: parents, administration, final GPA, college admission. I tried in vain to convince even the best students that the reward for writing was being read and being taken seriously. They still wanted to know, "Yeah, but what did I get?" I relied heavily on revision and rewriting. Once a piece of writing reaches the point where nothing else can be changed, there is no point to a grade or a mark.

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