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Teaching Writing after George Floyd

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TEACHING WRITING NOW: DIVERSITY, INCLUSION, AND SOCIAL JUSTICE IN THE WRITING CLASSROOM

A virtual symposium hosted by the Texas A&M Department of English throughout the spring of 2021 that featured a series of talks and workshops on the topic of how practitioners can better teach writing now by addressing diversity, inclusion, and social justice in the writing classroom. The event was aimed at bringing together scholars doing research in social justice pedagogies, cultural rhetorics, and composition/professional writing in our rapidly changing media landscapes. Events were free and open to the public.

Date: 1 March 2021

Balester: All right. Hello, good afternoon, everyone. This is “Teaching Writing After George Floyd,” an interview of Dr. Vershawn Ashanti Young with Valerie Balester and Florence Davies, part of the Teaching Writing Now symposium, sponsored by the Department of English, the University Writing Center and the Melburn G. Glasscock Center for Humanities Research, and I’m Valerie Balester, professor of English and executive director of the University Writing Center, and my co-host is Florence Davies, creative writer and program coordinator at the Writing Center. We’re also

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being assisted today by Sarah Coppedge and Jillian Mercer from the English Department.

I'd like to thank the organizing committee for their hard work in putting this symposium together, especially our chair, Dr. David McWhirter, professor of English, and our members Dr. Sarah DiCaglio, Dr. Michael Collins, Dr. Claire Carly-Miles, and Dr. Lori Arnold. And it's such a pleasure to say "Dr. Lori Arnold" because she just finished her dissertation and defended it.

I also want to thank the indigenous people who care for this land where Texas A&M University and College Station are situated. Multiple native nations past and present who are largely dispossessed and removed, Tonkawa, Tawakoni, Hueco, Sana, Wichita, and Coahuiltecan people, were traditional stewards of this land on which we are situated today.

Now, I'm going to have the honor of welcoming Dr. Vershawn Ashanti Young, who goes by dr. vay, from the University of Waterloo, Ontario. He is a solo performance artist as well as a Professor of Communication, Race, Gender, Literature, Writing, and Performance at the University of Waterloo, Ontario, Canada, and he is the author and co-editor of 10 books—10 books; it amazes me—including the recent *This Ain't Yesterday's Literacy: Culture and Education after George Floyd* (2020), which came out in January with Fountainhead Press, and also *Other People's English* (2019), Parlor Press, a great text, by the way, if you're working with grad students or teachers of writing, people who aren't professional linguists. Also the *Routledge Reader of African American Rhetoric* (2018) and *Neo-Passing: Performance Identity after Jim Crow* (2018), University of Illinois Press. dr. vay regularly tours his one man show, "Your Average Nigga," titled after his book-length autobiographical study of Black identity of the same name. He's an equity, diversity, and inclusion specialist providing consulting services to schools and organizations. He's the current chair of the College Conference on Composition and Communication, the largest educational organization dedicated to pedagogies of college communication and writing, and not only the largest but the premier organization.

So, in today's conversation, I think we should be remembering George Floyd, and pay particular attention to the ways in which literacy practices can invoke violence, especially against people of color. So, let us consider today how with some advice and help from dr. vay, we can resist this violence. Welcome dr. vay.

vay: Thank you. Thank you so much, Valerie, for that wonderful introduction.

Balester: Now, I am going to ask you the first question myself. So, how have you been since, like, March of 2020? What's going on?

vay: I've been probably just like everybody else, in a crazed state. I usually wear my hair short and since the barber shops are closed; it's growing out. Just getting used to the fro. I have not traveled outside of Canada where I am currently since last March, and anyone who knows me knows that I'm an avid traveler. I would go back home to the states, seeing my family, eating good soul food, which I cannot get anywhere here. So, I've been, you know, dealing with that. I also would like to say first, since that identifiable pandemic started to happen, Covid, you know, the media had been calling anti-Black sentiment around the globe after George Floyd's death, another pandemic, right? And on that front, I have been doing just as bad for two reasons: one, I have been having conversations with my colleagues, most of whom are white, who say that they didn't really have an idea, a fulsome idea about the problems that Black people face, because it isn't their experience. I have been troubled by that sentiment because it seems hard not to know. It's hard to believe that white people do not have some palpable recognition of the plight, the ongoing situation, and the discourse that has not discontinued but has continued in various periods since enslavement and reconstruction and segregation and post segregation, and it's just hard to believe. So, part of my work in those conversations has been not just trying to help my friends and colleagues understand better, but trying to prod them to do the work that they should be doing anyway on an everyday basis to align their minds and souls and hearts to the plight of other peoples.

Balester: Yeah, and maybe it might be difficult sometimes to keep a little patience with that attitude as well, I would imagine. So, I'm going to ask you now the white academic question, just to lay a bit of foundation, especially for our audience who may not have had a chance to read some of the foundational readings that you gave us. So, in sociolinguistics and in literacy studies we often hear of attitudes toward language varieties such as African American English characterized as being "eradicationist," "assimilationist," "accommodationist," and "multilingual." So, could you discuss a bit this concept, and the concepts of code switching as educationalists interpret it in relation to these concepts, and then, while you're at it, maybe briefly explain the way you have created a distinction between code-meshing and code-switching?

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vay: Thank you so much for that wonderful question. I am going to share my screen, because the question you asked, I've prepared a couple PowerPoint slides to help me answer the questions of: What is code-meshing? What is code-switching? What is the difference between how linguists use code-switching, and how educators have used code-switching in a slightly different way? And I also have a couple of examples that I want to show.

Okay. So, code-switching, according to linguists, is the alternation, the alternation or combination of languages. That is to say, it's two or more languages, operating in one speech or writing act. They are operating at the same time. That is from a linguistic perspective what code-switching is.

The educators have tended to use code-switching in this way: Use of alternating languages in different settings. So, they've taken the combination or alternation of languages and attached them to different settings. Linguists understand that language is never discrete in any one setting, unless, of course, it's probably a person's L1 or language one, as linguists refer to it, but any time you have another language or another variety there is always the presence of the first language. That's how we understand things like accent. When we can hear a person who perhaps is a native Spanish speaker but using English, and we hear the influence of the Spanish on the English, we'll say "Oh, you have a Spanish accent" or "You have an English accent" or something like that.

So, we hear the influence of that language present in the second setting. Educators, though, in the 1970s and in the 1980s sort of compromised with the more—I would say—radical linguists like William Labov, Geneva Smitherman, Mary Rhodes Hoover, and others who were calling for full acceptance of African American English as a rule-governed language. And so, educators said, "Okay, we'll accept that African American English is a rule-governed language, and we will not disparage African American English users for using it, but they just can't use it in school. So, they can keep their Black English at home and when they come to school, they have to adopt Standard English, which is modeled after white, middle-class Midwestern speech habits. That's how educators have appropriated, or misappropriated, I should say, code-switching. So, an example of code-switching from the linguistic perspective would be the alternation within a single sentence: "I'm not going to school porque no me siento bien [because I don't feel well]."

Young, Balester and Davies

So, you see that there's no period here. It's the combination of two languages within one sentence, "Porque no me siento bien" is "because I don't feel well." Even inter-sentential code switching is still in the same speech act. It's the alternation between two sentences. "I'm not going to school today" English switching to "no me siento bien" in the same speech act. Here's an example:

"Codeswitching"
[\[video audio clip link\]](#)

"People think that just because you are Latina, you have to have a big butt. Pero...a mi me echaron una bruñeria and...I have no butt. It used to be que a self-respecting Latina could get some play pero entonces vino esa J-Lo al mainstream, y lo dano todo. Now, you just expected to be a culona, and that's bad because a lot of buttless mamitas, they are suffering. Neto. I used to have the same complejo también. But, I started this club is the Culaless Latinas of America, and the men they love them. So, all you culaless Latinas: get with it! Porque si tu fundillo es corto, la vida es mas corta! And I say, if every Latina woman has to have a big butt then every Latino man has to have a big pinga."

Davies: I love that so much.

vay: I'm so glad that you laugh because it shows the point, right?

Davies: It's super funny.

vay: It shows the point that there are two languages operating there. And even if you're not a proficient Spanish speaker, you still understand the context and the point. So, to wrap this—my answer to this question—up, my term *code-meshing* reflects that of the linguistic understanding of it. It is the term for metaphorical code-switching used in literacy research for two languages operating as one speech act just like we just saw in that video. And lastly, my idea of code-meshing always views language as a resource and never as a barrier. No language is ever understood to be something that impedes communication or impedes rhetoricity or impedes literacy. It can only enhance it when it's used as a resource. So, all language habits that a person or student has are used as a resource.

Balester: Okay, I want to follow up just a teeny bit on that, before we go to our next question. *Students' Right to Their Own Language* is a position statement put out by the NCTE, the National Council of Teachers of English, way, way back in the 70s. Is that

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an example of teachers' kind of renegeing on that commitment to code-meshing, or does that acknowledge code-meshing?

vay: Both. I think that what happened with *Students' Rights to Their Own Language* is that that was a starting place for teachers to try to accommodate, to use one of the terms that you use in your question, to accommodate African American English in particular. The spirit of *Students' Right to Their Own Language* was to be fully accepting of other varieties of English in the classroom. But obviously, teachers were not ready for it, and a white supremacist dominant language ideology still prevails. And so, it was the attitude and ideologies that allow, on one hand, teachers to accept students' rights to their own language and say okay, but then it was the same ideology that said, but we really can't do that in school. And so, I think now, even though *Students Right to Their Own Language* is just as powerful as it was in 1974, when it was first published, we have now developed different discourses of talking about this. So, CCCCs put out a statement last summer on Black linguistic justice and on Black professional and technical communication, and although those fully appeal to students' rights to their own language, they're using a more contemporary discourse in order to advance those gains.

Balester: Thank you. Flo, I'm going to turn it over to you to ask a question now.

Davies: Sure! I guess, since you brought it up in your introduction about how you've been doing, I kind of want to jump to this question, and I'll get back to the question about all the various publications you got going on because I definitely want to hear about that. But you told us that you wanted to title this talk, "Teaching Writing after George Floyd" and I'll admit, I agreed to do this talk with Valerie before I saw the title because Neisha-Anne Green of American University, whose work on code-meshing, you know, was very influential to me, especially as a child of African immigrants, and Neisha-Anne would have yelled at me if I didn't do this talk. But, I guess once you know the topic settled with me, what I struggled with particularly as a Black woman, and you a Black man, is—why anchor it to this moment? I know that you've made it the center of one of your most recent publications that Valerie mentioned, *This Ain't Yesterday's Literacy: Culture and Education after George Floyd*. So, I guess my question is: how do you do it? How do you manage to talk about the pandemic of Black Death and anchor it to composition, literacy, and education, and then find the strength to talk about it with, as we say, mixed company in the midst of the current Covid-19 pandemic we're experiencing, because, personally, I'm not there yet. I'm just like, teach me your ways. I don't know.

vay: So, Flo let me ask you a question. Are you saying that, when you say that you paused for a moment, was the pause out of, sort of like exhaustion, or not readiness to have the conversation is too much trauma? Or was it, or is there a question when you ask about George Floyd. Is there a gender question there? I'm just trying to get at it exactly.

Davies: I guess it comes from a point of exhaustion, and I guess, in a follow-up question that's going to be burned in my brain, I do have a question about gender, but yes, from a point of exhaustion. Just like how you get the stamina, the gas, if you will, to have to talk about these things regularly, not only throughout your work but particularly in this specifically tenuous time that we're all experiencing.

vay: Right. So, look, it has not been easy. But doing this type of work talking about race as it pertains to literacy and education hasn't ever been easy. And I've always sort of been a little bit on the fringe. Let me just go back a little bit so you'll have a historical perspective of why I do this and why I have continued to do this. So, when I was in graduate school at the University of Illinois at Chicago, my friends, my Black colleagues at the time and my cohort wasn't very many. And also my professors were not down with what I wanted to do. I mean they were like, "You know, this is very edgy." Yes, they're like, "This is extremely edgy. You're going to make a lot of people uncomfortable." But look, sometimes we're called to do certain things. I couldn't imagine having done anything else. And I can't imagine spending my academic life doing anything else. I feel like it's one of the privileges to be able to work at predominantly white institutions, at R1 institutions, and to have my research funded to do this work. I think that these institutions need to invest in these kinds of conversations. So that's, that's why I continue to do it. I also have developed by doing these kinds of conversations over the past—well, I finished my PhD in 2004—so almost 20 years. Over the past almost 20 years, I've developed, I think, a way of talking about it and responding to the similar questions that I get that help move the conversation along.

I have been excited to see my writing that's in African American English be published in various journals and using African American rhetorical styles, even as such journals like the *PMLA*, which some people will say you can't write in Black English and get published in the top journal in English Language and Literature. Well, I did. So, it gives me some hope to have these conversations. The other thing is, you know when people

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started to pay attention after the murder of George Floyd, I felt personally implicated. George Floyd and I were born in the same year, in 1973. He was born in October; I was born in February. We have a daughter, born in the same year, where he has a daughter born in 2013, and I have a daughter, and my daughter was born in 2013. There are a lot of similarities. I went to law school in Minnesota, and George Floyd spent time in Minneapolis in Minnesota. I felt like this was an opportunity to be able to help people to begin or continue understanding what Black people think about on a daily basis. And what we fear and feel to see those police officers around George Floyd, not coming to his aid after several, after eight minutes, and after several times where he cried out, where one officer callously had his knee on his neck with his hands in his pocket. Those are things that Black people think about when we wake up, when we go to bed, and the things that we, you know, feel, and the things that we fear about engagement with whiteness. Now here's another example. If I just imagine if George Floyd had flailed, while he was on the floor, if he had tried to defend himself rightfully, what would have been the discourse? The discourse would immediately have changed. Even though this man was being killed, murdered. Even if he had tried to wiggle just a little bit. If he had tried to scream, just a little bit, it would have been reframed through his Blackness that he was too angry, too big, too bold, and deserved what he got. So, the fact that people were paying attention and the fact that that eight-minute video captured by a young 17-year-old African American woman by the name of Darniela Frazier went viral, was so important for me to continue to have this conversation and point to an exemplary instance of what's beneath all the things that I have been talking about.

Davies: No, no, I totally hear that from you. For me, you know, like, you know, I was thinking about this since you brought up gender, what if this talk would be “Writing after Sandra Bland,” you know, as most of my protagonists are young, Black women, dealing with mental health struggles. You know, there was just something in particular about the indignity and the aura of mystery surrounding her death, and we are similar and the same age, about six months apart. It's the sense of seeing oneself that's definitely a part of that. But it's also how, like, sis was just having a regular old bad day. And we're not allowed the indignity of having that bad day or being annoyed by wasted time, it seems like, or even with Breonna Taylor, not even being afforded the dignity of putting her head to a pillow. It seems like it was like that for you with George Floyd. You know, it's something that I definitely have had to kind of wrap my head around, having grown up in Waller, Texas, which was where Sandra Bland was murdered. So,

yeah, no, I definitely see that sense of seeing oneself, that kind of pushes you to continue to have the conversation.

vay: Right, and let me say one other thing. Most educators, I want to say, unfortunately don't see the connection between what happened to Sandra Bland and George Floyd and what kind of ideology that they deploy in their classrooms and with their pedagogical strategies. But there is a real connection. So, for example, I had already said that if George Floyd had said, had screamed out or flailed or whatever that his murder would have been seen as justified, right? That is a code-switching phenomenon. There's no difference in saying that a Black person can't behave or talk or use their expressive culture in this environment. What would be the outcome if they did use it? What would be the consequences for their doing so? And people see those harmful consequences as justified. And they are not!

Right? So, that is the connection, the same thing as you pointed out with Sandra Bland. She did not even have the opportunity or was not afforded the right to just have a regular old bad day. Be honest. Her day was not as bad as other people's days, but she just, she couldn't have a bad day because in our, in our society—here's a real problem—in our society, we accept and accede to the fact that we're not living in segregation, so Black people are everywhere, but we have not yet accepted that Black people can be Black in those places. In other words, that they can talk like themselves, wear their hair, their clothes, express their emotions—same emotions that other people will experience and express. We're disallowed from doing it because—and this is a problem—Black people as well have acceded to a code-switching idea, that is, just switch off our Blackness when we're around predominantly white people.

When at work or at school, we play this game. It's called a "racial contract." Charles Mills writes about it in the book of that same name. That contract says, "Okay, I may be of a different race, in this case, Black, but I'm not going to act the race. I'm not going to express the race." That's the social contract, but it is a problem because then we're disallowed from enacting our own humanity.

Balester: I've got to follow up on that, and, so, as a white woman, a lifelong educator, I so much see the blinders that educators put on. And you just pointed to exactly what I wanted to talk about, the way that they might now suddenly be waking up to certain types of injustice, but they are blind to the injustice in their own classes, and I want to especially focus on the violence in literacy education. But, you're making me also

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remember how rhetorical expression goes far beyond language, far beyond the classroom. I mean, can you just elaborate a little bit more on the idea that you just brought up, but focus, especially, on literacy education?

vay: Well, what I would like to do if it's okay, Valerie, is I want to show another video, if it's going to work, but this video is going to show you how violence against Black bodies and Black language happens in classrooms, regularly.

Balester: Thank you.

vay: Let me set this video up. This video that I'm about to show is from *Study.com*. *Study.com* is a huge educational organization that creates lesson plans in all disciplines, and any teacher K through 12 and any university can purchase these lessons that are pre-scripted and recorded and use them in their classrooms. This is one on literacy, focusing on pronunciation, dialect, and so forth, that is used by *Study.com*. And I want to have a brief conversation with you and Flo at certain points in this video.

“Considering Pronunciation, Articulation, and Dialect in Public Speaking”

[\[video audio clip link\]](#)

“So, you and your friends are sitting around the dining hall talking about your Poly-Psych class. Each of you has a different instructor, but the subject is the same. Your friend, Smithster says, ‘I really liked Professor Bigelow. He tells us all kinds of interesting stuff, and his accent is so cool, British, you know.’ Meanwhile you were like, ‘What, really dude? My professor is so boring. I can hardly understand her. She has an accent thicker than mud and a personality to match.”

vay: I want to just stop here for a minute, Valerie and Flo, and ask if you'll just converse with me. Do you see a problem in this video? Between how the two professors are described?

Balester: Oh, of course, I mean, first of all there's that the English accent in this is sort of privileged in amazing ways. And second, there's that kind of claim that you can't understand someone with an accent. Flo, what about you?

Flo: Also, it's the “thicker than mud” for me. That is old timey, and it's offensive.

vay: And did you notice, I want to point out two other things. These are things that are what I will call the “absent presence.” There’s an absent presence of race here. The British male professor isn’t identified as white, right, explicitly, but absent presence of whiteness functions there. Here’s why I say that. Because when we talk about non-white British or non-white American identities, we always use an identifier before American: African American, Hispanic American, whatever kind of American you are, but when it’s white we don’t use that, or British. That’s why there’s the absolute presence of race here. The fact that the female professor is unmarked is a stand in for race, right? This professor, with an accent that’s “thicker than mud.” This is a very gendered and racially biased, as well as linguistically biased, lesson so far. Now we see that that’s bad. Let me keep going. So, you can see the violence that we teach students to enact. We actually encourage violence against Black people in classrooms. Watch this.

[video audio] *“Well, it really all comes down to vocal traits. These are characteristics that make up the way a speaker speaks, including the way he pronounces his words, the way he articulates, and even the dialect he uses. It doesn’t seem like any big deal, but how the message comes across is just as important as the message itself. Katie Bobbins, a motivational speaker, should have practiced her pronunciation, when she told the audience, ‘If you want to see the secrets to success, you will have to aks for it.’ Ah, pronunciation makes all the difference. This is how consonants and vowels are formed, and even where syllables are accentuated. Imagine the horror when the speaker mispronounced one very small word. Had the speaker practiced, she would have avoided a terrifying situation.”¹*

vay: Okay, what's the problem there?

Balester: There’s so many. There’s just so many. Ok, I’ll go with a few of them and then I’ll let Flo in. So, the word “articulates,” of course, is really loaded; there’s sort of a sense that there’s a particular kind of articulation there. The characters turned Black in the slides, and suddenly we have a Black speaker, and we have a Black young man saying “So?” And, gosh, there’s just so much—that aks is such a stereotypical example

¹ Vay writes about this scene, “That one would go from an image of this Black female pronouncing a word in her dialect to an image of a white man hitting her—supposedly justifiably—in the head, that’s violence. That’s murder. That’s wrong. But the thing that I’m trying to underscore, and it’s a very serious point, is that we don’t realize that our ideologies about language—ideologies that believe that Blacks should not use Black English—immediately lead to violence—immediately” (Young 2020).

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of Black English, but notice she only switches to Black English in one word because it's a pronunciation problem; it's not a code-switching problem.

vay: Exactly, it's only one word. Flo, what do you got to say?

Davies: I mean I'm still struck by Luigi about to murk this lady with this axe. But definitely, you know, it's that one slippage, that becomes, if you will, that becomes an issue, but it allows them to think that hitting somebody with an axe, even as a visual metaphor, is okay?

vay: Exactly, even as a visual metaphor. It's unnervingly violent.

Balester: And that it's so catastrophic.

vay: And it's so catastrophic for one disagreement on the usage of one word. Valerie, the thing I want to point out here is that this is not dissimilar. In fact, let me put it another way. It is actually similar to the way in which we engage in discourses in our classroom about other people's English. This is a foundational attitude when we ask students to shift from African American English to standard English, although I must say something else about that in a moment. We ask them to do that, and we use threat as a means to get them to do it. "You're not going to be able to get a job," or "The teacher down the hall is not going to understand you the way that I am," or other sorts of things that are just violent. This horrible and disturbing visual used in an educational video tells others that it is an okay or expected outcome for African American English users to receive fatal blows to the head if they use their language in public, even in a single instance of using a single word. That's why it's a problem.

Balester: Yeah, thank you.

Davies: vay, can you speak to your writing process? I'm going to pivot into what you do so well, obviously. I look at work like "Should Writers Use Their Own English?" and I think, "Man, that person's writing process and revision process to balance both of those languages like that, it's very masterful." So, what's that about? Who reads your work; like, how do you get started on the pieces that you write, and how do you, in particular, bring that sense of process to your students? It's something that we talk a lot about at the writing center, constantly, but it's something that we're constantly talking about, always.

vay: So, my writing process is very personal. I don't write anything that I don't feel. I write, I used to jokingly say to my good friends, who are also writers, that I write in my body. And it's true. I don't take a lot of notes, like people who keep pads under their bed or on their desk and things like that. I don't do that, and I've never done that. I do do that when I'm in the midst of actual writing, because I grew up in the era of paper and pen. And so that's so big, helps me to think. It helps me to organize. So even though the computer is right there with Word open, I don't type. As I'm writing, I feel it, it's like a fire in the belly. You know, it's something that I just feel deeply. And then, when I start to type sometimes, I actually close my eyes as I type so that the feeling can come through the words onto the page. I would say, you know, when I'm sitting and writing at some point I'm closing my eyes, so that the feeling comes through. There's a huge pathos in what I write. I think my writing process has a lot to do with the fact that I am a person who loves words, I mean I just love words. I love the way they form in the mouth. I love the effect that they have on others.

I love to hear other people talking and speaking, and I just love the way their words wash over me. So, when I go back to my writing after I've drafted, I always am thinking simultaneously about the organization, how am I going to move from one idea and thought to the next. But in moving, it's not just a logical appeal. I want to appeal to that emotion. I try to include a poetic element when I write. You'll probably notice if you read carefully that there's like rhyming schemes in the midst of my sentences. You'll notice I do like to spice up clichés—I say “funk up,” f-u-n-k up your cliché, as is the Black English usage of funk. I'm like a creative writer too, because, you know, I studied creative nonfiction in graduate school and so that kind of lyricism, I always want it in all of my academic writing. And I also think that it's a part of my African American cultural influence. I want that present. I want African American cultural influence always present in anything I write. Well, let me give you one specific example, in “Should Writers Use They Own English?” I did no revision. I wrote that in four hours and sent it to the publisher, and they didn't require any revision.

I wrote that essay during a fit of anger. I read Stanley Fish's three articles on a Saturday. I remember this like it was yesterday. I was in my office at the University of Iowa campus. And I read *The Washington Post* and *The New York Times* every day. And I was reading Stanley Fish's *NYT* online blog, and I was so infuriated at the argument that he was making: he was disregarding people's languages and putting down the good egalitarian work coming from progressive writing classrooms, and he was taking over, you know, a discussion that people in writing studies and composition of rhetoric have

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been having forever. Then, here he comes, this famous literary critic and moving over into this domain and offering his unwanted opinion on something that we had kicked out the door a long time ago. And I think I was afraid that his white male famous literary critic privilege was going to have a deleterious effect on the teaching of writing to minority students. And so, in my infuriation, I sat down at my computer, closed my eyes and wrote what you read in “Should Writers Use They Own English?” When I read it afterward, I was like, oh, this Black English so good right here.

Davies: Stanley Fish does not have that smoke. He does not have that smoke after that.

vay: I was like there’s no way that this argument, like Black people will say, “He got smoked. Stanley Fish got smoked, he got slammed, he got rode all the way out of town” when I wrote that piece. And here’s the first thing, though, because my writing performance itself disagrees with Stanley Fish and shows that what he was saying is false. He said we can’t use these kinds of Englishes in an academic environment. And yet here’s an entire essay written and phonetically rendered in Black English published in an academic journal and widely anthologized.

Balester: Do you know the work of Kermit Campbell, too? He did a book on hip hop that was academic. Now, it wasn’t a published article, but Stanley Fish missed that one.

vay: Exactly, so, that’s my writing process, Flo, and thank you for asking about it. I do consider myself a writer. I think when you look at my academic articles you definitely see the creative element. I’ve always felt that asking people to displace and disregard their subject positions was a problem. I always use personal, illustrative material and examples, and the reason why is because I’m a critic. I’m more than an ethnographer. First and foremost, I’m a critic. And so, I always try to use interactional strategies that bring my reader into the point of reading my writing with me. So, I take them along as if we’re in a room. I’m having a conversation. And when my writing comes out turgid, not very conversational with long sentences and about three commas, I always hear my writing teacher from college who would say to me, “Vershawn, these two sentences want to be adults. Let that long sentence grow up and be a separate sentence.” So, I think about the writing strategies that I’ve learned in academic settings as well.

Davies: Well, you said so much that I like, gravitating towards that sense of feeling in your body, and, you know, arguably I would say you are a creative writer, 100%. I often talk to the students that I, you know, work with on creative writing and there's a sense of reading my writing for rhythm and how that rhythm kind of enacts the things that I swap in the sentences that I change where I'll add a little flavor here as opposed to there and whatnot. But all that I definitely gravitate towards and I think, I guess, I'll ask this question in particular because I see so many students, particularly in composition classes, struggling to find a sense of like, voice, in the writing, particularly in a class that doesn't seem to bring out that voice at all. And I was wondering if you have any advice for students, or even instructors, who are trying to get students to kind of develop not only a sense of voice but a sense of comfort in their own voice, you know? Does that make any sense?

vay: It makes perfect sense. And I was going to be talking about this on Wednesday, too, as well. So, let me give a preview by giving you some examples of things that I'll repeat on Wednesday. One is, first and foremost, what teachers have to stop doing is teaching writing from their own heads and ideologies. They have got to stop doing that. They go in a classroom, and they don't use real world contemporary examples, even in their disciplines, of what the writing looks like and feels like. They just have an idea in their mind, and they're like, "Oh, this isn't going to fly in my discipline" or "Oh, this isn't going to fly the way that you're writing." So, first off, stop with the barriers. No Barriers. Only a tool kit. Let me give you a quick example before I continue. If you start with barriers, it's almost like saying to a person who's coming to build a house and the only thing that's there is the foundation, but you are telling them, "You can't use the T square, you can't use the drill, you can't use the screwdriver, because this house isn't going to require that" or "The way we build this house is without those tools." You've already cut off means which that builder could use. You don't know what that builder's going to do, or how they're going to build it, or what tools they're going to need. Have you ever thought that you weren't going to need a screwdriver when you were doing a home project and that's the very thing you needed? Or maybe you didn't have a flathead screwdriver when you needed one, but there's a butter knife, and you use that—the job gets done just as well with that butter knife as it would with the flathead.

So, stop with the barriers. Here's the second thing. Give your students a task, have a conversation about code meshing, right, two languages, or dialects operating in one speech act, and then ask them to go out and read journals, read journal articles in

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various disciplines and find examples of code meshing. I do that all the time with my students, and they always bring back examples in those academic disciplines that are outside of English, in health, in business, in biology. They show me how voice is operating in those disciplines and I'm like, "That's beautiful." Then I ask them to find examples in those academic disciplines of writing that you really like, that looks like it could be yours. It doesn't all have to be that way. But are there some examples there that speak to you? And guess what? They find it. They're doing two things here. They're reading a lot in the disciplines, they're getting (they don't even know it right?) but they're motivated on the code meshing front, but they're still reading in their disciplines. It's not my discipline so I don't really, you know, I can't really acknowledge all of the things that they're learning, but they are definitely learning. And they also are not being trapped by the teacher's perception or ideology. They are actually following the disciplines' examples of writing, right? That really does accept their voice.

Now, I'm going to slow down because there was one thing that I said earlier, and I don't want this point to go away when it comes to African American English. African American English is so compatible with standard English in all ways that linguists, Black linguists, at least Lisa Green, who studies African American English, will say that when African American English is in its high register, when it's in a standard register that it's very difficult to tell where African American English ends and standard English begins. What the linguists are trying to get us to see is that this distinction that we make is really arbitrary and artificial and that Black people's language habits already are compatible with standard English. It's not going to look like all the rules because there's going to be Black English rules followed in standard English writing. That's why Mary Rhodes Hoover calls this Black Standard English, a concept that we have failed to recognize fully, but there is a Black Standard English, which I would say is what most of my writing operates within.

Balester: Yeah, that's a really crucial point, and I think you're right that language prejudice, of course, is huge here, too. The *aks* example, I mean, that just brings up this huge prejudice immediately, and they're not paying attention to all the ways that they fit together and influence each other. Not to mention, you know, there are people who've studied how white students have picked up African American English and adopted it. Of course, there's a long history of that. But, yeah, so the whole idea of the prejudice against the dialect. I'm going to let Flo continue, though. Flo has a lot of questions.

Davies: No, that actually meets my next question. It goes back to the article version of *Your Average Nigga* in 2014. You state there that “race is just as important now as it ever was—even if both Blacks and whites agree in public that it isn't.” You also add that “part of the race problem today, perhaps the biggest part, is due to our complicity with this pretense” (Young, 2004, p. 695). Now in 2021 or specifically in 2020 after George Floyd, and other very public, very visceral Black deaths, where do you think that sense of pretense is now? Like, how can instructors avoid carrying that pretense in their classes?

vay: Well, I am hopeful that that pretense that race doesn't matter is significantly lessened now after 2021. As a matter of fact, I think that it is. One example is, this has not happened before. So, after the protests from last summer, educational organizations delivered statements. They were putting their money where their mouth is on the race issue. Not just 4 C's and not just the National Council of Teachers of English and other humanities-based, but even the National Organization of Math Teachers put out a statement, saying “Race matters. This is how we're going to change our disciplinary perspectives and more in order to account for the history of race and the present status of race relations.” So, I believe that we're not going back to that colorblind ideology. At least not to the same degree as we were before. I just don't think that we can, that that belief before that whites and Blacks agreed to, that race doesn't really matter in public, wasn't part of that racial contract that I mentioned earlier, but I think we've seen that that racial contract has been breached, that it has failed. And so, we really need to stop trying to see people of darker hues as, quote unquote “white people with Black bodies” and acknowledge that people have different cultural views, ways of expressing themselves, that are attached to their racial identity related to their cultural identities.

Balester: Flo, I'm going to interrupt with a question here from the audience because it is relevant to what we were just speaking about. So, this is pertaining to voice. “Is there a way that I as a future educator can encourage the development of my students' voice in their writing, or rather, how could I do so? I've always struggled with this in my own writing.”

vay: I would ask the teacher what does it mean for her to struggle with voice for her own writing? Because I think we've been talking about that, the way in which schools have tried to disembodify everybody's voice from writing that's done in school. And I think the first way that we've done this are the arbitrary rules that we think third

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graders need to learn, lies really, like, “Don’t use *I*.” Well, I mean, come on. *I* is just the pronoun. Why is it that we’re not using *I*, because they’re afraid that students are going to slip into solipsism, that it’s just going to be about themselves, but that’s a rhetorical move. That has nothing to do with the grammar thing that you’re asking them not to use *I*. The other thing is, when we tell them don’t begin a sentence with a conjunction. Yeah, that’s ridiculous because we have something called subordinating and independent clauses.

What you’re really trying to do is prevent students from using fragments, but don’t create a rule that is not really a rule that goes against the standard English rules, because you can begin a sentence with *but* and *if*, or prepositions and conjunctions, as long as you’re teaching a full sentence with a subject and a predicate, that you’re asking them to have both of those. It doesn’t need to say, “Don’t use *but* to begin your sentence.” So, the reason why I’m saying that to the teacher’s question is because these are some of the rules that we learned that make us lose our voices. Because the ways in which we speak and write at home, the cultural influence really uses the full scope of language like *buts* and *ands* in sentences and so forth. So, yeah, but so she says that she’s been told that you can’t write like that. Here’s one thing. Don’t repeat those lies to your students. Just don’t. And you have examples of professional writing that show that you don’t have to repeat those lies to your students and try to work yourself out of them in your writing, which is one of the things that I like to do.

Davies: That actually meets my next question quite nicely. Often, we tell, you know, writers, about the importance of audience, and, yes, it is important. I do not want to underrate the importance at all, particularly for developing writers, but I was also struck by what Neisha-Anne said when she was visiting one of our tutor training classes last semester. She said that “Audience is cool and all, but sometimes it’s about purpose.” And I’m struck by what you said about, you know, feeling it in your body, maybe being part of that purpose. That purpose is what gets you through the “ish.” Where does purpose find itself in your work, and how could more instructors shape purpose in their assignments?

vay: So, I do think about audience. But I think about audience in a completely different way. Let me just break this down, because we live, we operate, in a culture and society in which we are always using euphemistic terms to describe things that are just, that can be described in plain terms. When teachers are asking students to imagine audience, they’re asking them to imagine a white male businessperson. And in first

year writing and composition that is really the idea behind audience—a white male administrator or someone who’s operating in a white supremacist patriarchal environment. That is the audience. But that isn’t the audience. That’s the idealized audience that school has created, unfortunately. For me, an audience is what we really should be thinking about when we write. An audience is mostly, most of the times, composed of different people, and even if they look the same, they probably still have different identities—they may have some shared values, they may have different values, come from different approaches. Certainly, you and I have talked about gender here from different perspectives; we’re both Black, but we have different ideas. I’m geared toward George Floyd; you’re geared toward Breonna Taylor and Sandra Bland. So, let me wrap this up and say audiences are diverse. There is never one static audience that thinks exactly the same or that believes exactly the same. And so, when I think about audience, I think about audience in its multiplicity.

What is the likely inclusive range of readers I’m going to reach? In “Should Writers Use They Own English?”, I was writing it against the white person, white Stanley Fish. I knew that African Americans were going to read it and other people of different backgrounds. So, I was writing, thinking about all of them, but at certain points in my writing I would attend to a particular kind of audience, but that audience wouldn’t dominate the writing. So, for example, when I’m thinking of when I made a comment in that essay about attitudes that are destructive to students’ writing, I obviously wasn’t talking about Neisha-Anne Green. You know what I’m saying, although she’s going to read that essay. I wasn’t talking about my white friend, you know, Doug Kern, although he’s going to read that essay. I’m writing to them in ways that they could teach the essay. I’m writing to the other readers in ways in which they need to get with, you know, and get down with the things I’m saying in the essay. I think it’s a problem to think about audience as though it’s static.

Let me give you another example. So, I’m critiquing Stanley Fish, but I’m writing in Black English, which he obviously doesn’t like, but that was part of the reason why I wrote in it. So, to have a standard that says you can’t use that when, in fact, to me, that was the most effective means to attack his argument, is a problem. My purpose was to straight put him on the spot. I used words and phrases in a way that I know that he’s probably not accustomed to in order to challenge him to do work as a reader. When we endow students with agency, we tell them that this is your writing. What kind of work do you want the different kinds of readers to do? Readers do have to do work; they have to look up unfamiliar terms; they have to underline the main ideas; they have

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to write summaries in the margin. The same way that we teach students to do when we teach them how to read and dissect complex arguments. That's the kind of thing that I want my audience to be able to do, not just to be able to sit down on a lounge chair, read my paper with ease, and no discomfort, and no work that they have to do. Well, that's not how writers write. Most writers, even creative writers, want readers to do work. They want you to think about things. They want you to linger on sentences. They want it to have an effect. So, yes, we have to start thinking about purpose as well as diversifying the real audience.

Davies: I'm struck by what you said, [. . .] that "new ideas don't always come out clear and understandable the first few times they are expressed." That is so true. It definitely beats that moment right there. Let's see, it's about 3:34, and I know we were hoping to get some questions for the audience. I know I have some more here, but I definitely want to hear from some folks over there. So, if folks have questions in the Q&A, we can.

Balester: Yeah, they do have some.

Davies: Let's see. We have a question here. Someone's asking, "What would be a good anti-racist standard of excellent communication, and how can we inspire our students to try to aspire to achieve that standard, particularly in a way that makes them feel like they're growing and improving? This is a question about maintaining a sense of progress when we're really on board with throwing out a standard white English model of quality language use."

vay: So, the thing that I'm interested in throwing out in the standard white English language model is the "white." I just want to be unequivocally clear—I'm not disparaging white identity. What I am saying is that our standards have tended to accede to ways in which white people most often participate in these kinds of discourses. I had already said earlier that there is a Black standard. So, I am not against developing standards, or even a teaching standard. What I am against is disallowing people from contributing to that standard, disallowing students from writing that incorporates what their culture identifies and what's developed as standard. There is no point in coming to school and sitting in an English class if your writing is not going to grow, if you're not going to become more effective. It is a problem for teachers to think that the distinction between teaching and a progressive way is either teaching us the standards as they have always been or not teaching at all. That is a problem. That

is a false dichotomy. We are still teaching. But what we are shifting to is a model that says, “Okay, here are some sets of standards” and I like to, instead of dealing with grammatical standards, which we'll talk about in just a second, I like to deal with conventional standards, right? Organization, or if you want to use the canon of rhetoric, invention.

Right. Delivery, memory, we can use those different canons or use like, in terms of a thesis statement—talk about thesis, antithesis or whatever, and instead of forcing students to put theses at the top, let them experiment with where the thesis best serves the point of the paper. So, it's opening up what those models look like, not throwing all the models out, and we need more models. We need models and writing like Aja Martinez's model of counterstory, which is so powerful. We need models like code-meshing. We need models that come from Native American rhetorics, and we need them to all be present and available as resources for students as they develop their writing and for us to build on and draw from as well. So, to me, that's how it would look. If I were teaching writing tomorrow, a writing class, I would be teaching African American rhetoric. I would be teaching, first of all, the first chapter or the introduction to my Routledge reader of rhetoric, which talks about the five principles, sorry, six principles of African rhetoric language: style, delivery, suasion, community. And I would be talking about the story. I would talk about Native American rhetoric. And I would say look at these examples, borrow from them, be influenced by them. But, own it, make sure that you have a solid thesis, that you are doing things for your audience. You want your audience to understand what you say and also want to challenge them. So, think about all those. That's a very high order way of approaching writing, but it is the only way that I think does justice in a classroom for growing writers.

Balester: I want to throw in something here, a question about how we train teachers of writing. And it seems to me that the easy way out is to say, here's the rules, let's follow these rules. Can I get any comment about that and about how we should be training them?

vay: Yeah, you know, it's difficult for me to comment on that, and I'll tell you why. Because I went to school to be a teacher. I went through a teacher training program that was so robust, right, we had to take a whole minor in education. We learned long-range lesson planning, short-range lesson planning, how to attach goals and objectives to the daily lesson plan, how to deliver that lesson plan and to meet those goals and

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objectives. I don't think that the university writing program structure allows for that kind of in-depth learning how to teach. That's why it's been difficult for me to think about how teachers at the university level can really go in a classroom with only one semester of training. And I find that to be troubling, but I understand that it's what we have. So, I would tend to think that the way in which, and I do like the Iowa model of having smaller cohorts, so there was no writing program administrator. We were all quote unquote "administrators and trainers," and we had a small group of 10 teaching fellows, and they were teaching their classes, and they had a semester long workshop with us, but they stayed with us for two years, and we always had ongoing pedagogical conversations with them about their teaching, as well as in larger groups. And I think that that model was really good, because you can't cram best practices of teaching in one term.

Davies: No, I hear that 100%. That actually led to a lot of my anxiety about being a teacher. We only had, I guess, a semester-long practicum in my MFA program. No shade. You know, some people get less, but I did not feel prepared after that experience to do anything except for make a lesson plan or even like maybe a syllabus, sort of? So yeah, no, I think we do, we struggle there a little bit, and we can kind of beef up our experiences there.

vay: But I will say, though, that if I had to, if I were forced to identify a model that I think should work, it would be the writer workshop model. The writer's workshop model puts a student's draft, you know, their good draft, in the midst of conversation with all their peers. The writers workshop model was not just over to the side. Everybody is talking about this student's writing. And the way of what you go through iterations of the writing and writing workshop. And the creative writing workshop and the attention given to language and its effect and its impact, not just the idea but also the beauty and how that advances the idea, I would fall on that model.

Davies: Certainly, the model I prefer. And in my experiences that model works best when the writer is actually included in those conversations. Their voice is not removed from that conversation, which was my experience in my MFA program. Again, no shade. I have not, but, you know, particularly as, you know, one of the women of color at that time that didn't feel right. But, no, I agree with you. There's a lot to admire from that workshop model, how it's centered in a kind of shared... I don't want to say shared struggle, but I'm going to say shared struggle.

Let's see we have a question from one of our colleagues in the English department who asked, "Why did you choose to conduct most of this dialogue in standard English rather than in the AVE of 'Should Writers Use They Own English?' How do you decide on the proportions of the codes as you mesh them in particular settings? Finally, when you switch, are there limits to how far you invite whites who use your work to follow you, in your use of words or your use of words, I'm guessing, like *nigga*?"

vay: So, I'm not going to put that person on the spot.

Davies: He could take it; he is a poet, and he has his PhD.

vay: But, no, no, no. I'm being facetious because this gives me the opportunity to repeat something that I've already said but to go a little deeper. I am a Black person that grew up in the ghetto. I have no qualms about that. The west side of Chicago in the housing projects. The only white people that were middle class white English speakers that I interacted with were teachers at school. I grew up—I'm making this point so I can answer the question—I grew up in a Black-English-speaking environment, period. Yet I have a bachelor's degree in English education. I have a master's degree in educational administration and performance. I have a PhD in English. All of those things are going to affect my language habits. Right? So that it is a mistake to believe that I'm going to switch, be able to really switch off my PhD in English and my education and speak from the Henry Higgins Pygmalion project. It's not happening. There's been too much influence on my language for me to doff it all off at once and put it all back in another setting. Forget it. But the point that I said earlier was this: linguists like Lisa Green have already identified that when Black speakers are speaking in the high register, it is very difficult to ascertain where Standard English begins and the Black English ends.

In other words, it's a mistake to believe that even though it sounds like I'm talking in standard English I am really operating primarily in a blended version of English, that is culturally influenced from African American English and my education as an English professor. So, there is no dichotomy. Now, I can choose in my writing to go hood, in a way, like "Should Writers Use They Own English?" in a way that I can't really do verbally anymore, right? Like I probably could, but it's going to be, you're still going to hear that influence of school. But my writing allows me to be able to do that in more distinct ways, right, than, I think, my speech habits would allow me to do at this point. But even my writing is influenced by both ways. So, there is no dichotomy, and

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that's, it's probably here, fair to say that my code-meshing arguments allowing these to coexist simultaneously is because it's so personal to me. It's what I actually do.

Davies: He does follow up and say that he asked the question because he was educated in an environment dominated by the Stanley Fishes of the world, and his first language was not standard English.

Another question that I have is, "How have your teaching practices shifted in our new online world. A concern higher education social advocates have made, or concern themselves with, is what the effect of the pandemic has been on underrepresented students and other vulnerable populations, a kind of a sense of extending that sense of otherness, if you will. What would you suggest instructors do to mitigate these concerns in their classrooms, especially for instructors who had been feeling the tax of last year?" And I have to say that tax is probably going to continue because I think hybrid learning is pretty much here to stay.

vay: So, let me, I'm going to ask this question: I want to go back to the moment, Flo. Was the last question asked about the use of the "N-word"?

Davies: Yes.

vay: Okay, let me say a word about that because I have actually written several articles about this recently. And I'm doing a webinar on it this Sunday through my webinar group Aptly Outspoken. This is my thoughtful belief, and I say thoughtful because my first book, as Valerie shared, is called *Your Average Nigga*. Within that book there's three chapters devoted to the use of the N-word in various kinds of ways. There's a chapter called "Nigga Gender," there is a revision of my CCC journal article, "Your Average Nigga," in that book. And at the University of Waterloo, where I taught this past summer, right after the George Floyd protests or during them, my university issued a ban on the N-word on campus. Because a white professor had used the word in a classroom, and this was their response. I felt utterly dismissed and discounted because, you know, my research and book deals with the N-word, so if the university has no place for the N-word on campus, then where do I fit? I also come from a cultural background that in various communities use the N-word in six or seven different ways from the racial epithet. We don't use the racial epithet that white people think, but we do use the N-word in six or seven culturally distinct and rich ways. I believe that, like some of my colleagues, like Ta-Nehisi Coates, for example, who has talked about this,

the N-word can be used by Black people, but the N-word is off limits to white people. Period.

Now let me tell you why I say that. When it comes up in a text in writing in a literature class or some other texts, it's fair to say because it gives honor to the author's authorial intent, as well as it is actually reading what's there on the page. Right. So, I think that it can be quoted, and it can be shared, but in discussion. I believe that we should not use the N-word, unless we're from a culture that uses it culturally and respectfully differently than the racial epithet. The reason why I don't say we should skip it in writing or use something else is because it puts the African American or Black—not just African American, but Black—experience under further erasure. Instead of dealing with it, we want to erase it and skip over it and dance merrily forward, whereas actually to deal with it means that we have to do some hard work. I think that when teachers teach literature that has to do with the N-word, they really need to not do that without considering the work by Geneva Smitherman, *Talkin and Testifyin*, where not just her article but the talking and testifying linguistic discussion of the four or five different ways that Black people use the N-word. They also need to read Gloria Naylor's essay that she published in 1986 in *The New York Times*—these can be found online—where she talks about that and then John, I'm sorry, Randall Kennedy's article. Randall Kennedy wrote the book *Nigger* in 2004, or around that time, and he has a very good article that can be found online about the history of the N-word (Kennedy, 2003; Kennedy 1999–2000). These need to be taught.

And then we need to have conversations about the N-word, and then we need to proceed with our pedagogy, with teaching the literature and so forth. With that in mind, and we also need to recognize that there are various sensitivities. There are Black people who don't like to hear the word. There are whites who are uncomfortable with the word. As a teacher, even though I come from a background that uses the word, when in discussion I don't use it because of the sensitivities. But in the literature when we read it, I do use it and I do give students permission to also say it, but we have this conversation, right, a larger one than what I'm saying here, but in discussion, we honor and respect the different sensitivities, right, that exist. So, creating a safe space. I think that's crucially important when we're talking about the N-word. There are some balances that need to happen. Don't put Black people under erasure. Don't put the history of enslavement and the negative racial epithet under erasure. Deal with that, and don't put Black culture under erasure, either, right, by trying to just skip over it.

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Balance with those sensitivities and balance with the need to teach those works of literature.

Davies: Excellent. Follow up answer to that question. I think the questioner definitely appreciated it, and I appreciated it as well. Just because it is something I find that in our new kind of awakening, folks are getting, I guess, reactionary about the things that need to be eliminated, removed, and whatnot, you know. Everybody's kind of trying to be as sensitive as possible right now, to a fault.

vay: And I'm going to briefly answer the question about online teaching because I think I am not the best person to answer that question. I'm not the expert in online pedagogy. I'm struggling just like everybody else, and I am a performance, I teach performance, right, and performance has to be live in my field, and the field of performance studies. It's a live thing, not recorded, right, so we have, my university, we have to do that if we offer something synchronous, we have to provide the opportunity for asynchronous as well but that doesn't work with live performance.

So, Gloria Naylor, Gloria Naylor. And you just put Gloria Naylor, just someone's from the, from the question from the chat box, Gloria Naylor's essay "Mama, What Does Nigga Mean?" or you can put that in there or you can put Gloria Naylor "Meanings of a Word."

But anyway, just to underscore on the online teaching, I think that we have to be, we have to borrow from the feminists' doctrine of love, which is to try to end domination in all its forms. And so, I try to be kind to my students, and I try to understand that even if no one has died from Covid in their families, even if they live in a comfortable environment, even if they haven't had any problems, we're all still struggling with the effects of a pandemic on all of us in different ways. And so, I try to extend kindness to them in ways that go over and beyond what I would, exceptions that I would normally make in an in-person, face-to-face classroom, because we're all dealing with this. And so that's the only answer. I have to tread carefully and be kind.

Davies: I think that's the best answer, honestly. That's what our entire experience has been, is just kind of being sensitive to the fact that everyone is going through a bad time. Um, we're almost actually out of time, but I do want to give space to what you're working on currently, and, you know, I read that you were doing two monographs and a teaching guide, I believe, the *Straight Black Queer Gender Anxiety* and *The American*

Young, Balester and Davies

Dream and When Teachers Hurt: Narratives of Failure and Success in Teaching and Learning. And also, I cannot stress how hyped I am about this, but *The Pocket Guide to Code Meshing: Raise Your Authentic Voice in Academic and Public Speaking and Writing*, a book that I needed when I, you know, joined this environment in 2013. Could you speak more on that and what you've been working on?

vay: Yeah. Thank you for asking about those. So, *The Pocket Guide to Code Meshing* is a book that is like the self-help books from the late 70s.

Davies: I love it. I love it already.

vay: So, it's a book. Do you know *The Writer's Way*? I mean, not *The Writer's Way*, *The Artist's Way*?

Davies: Yeah, yeah, I know *Artist's Way*.

vay: It's sort of like a journal book for artists. Well, this book for me is a book for teachers. It's not a book for students, although teachers can use it in a classroom. It's asking teachers to go through their journey of writing and reflect on their voice and how they use it in order to think about the pedagogy they're going to teach to students. So, it starts with the literacy narrative. I'm asking them to think about their experiences with school and literacy and to write, and that literacy narrative carries us through the book, where I'm guiding them through certain exercises to experiment with.

I had given you an example earlier. I didn't say that it was from the book, but it is how to funk up your clichés, right? So, you say "the proof is in the pudding." And I throw out these clichés in the book, and I ask you, how do you funk that up as opposed to having a rule that says don't use clichés? How do you make that so that the cliché actually serves the purpose of your writing, right, because that's really what the writing teacher wants to get us to do. So, that's one of the examples in there. I'm asking them to sort of think about the ways in which they use punctuation.

Also, I ask teachers to think about their own home linguistic backgrounds, where they came from, the influence of languages and their current influence of languages and look at their writing on how they can add that into the development of that literacy narrative, because the literacy narrative also is a hybrid form. It's not just a story, but it's an academic exercise. It asks us to reflect on it and then enlarge from there. So

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that's the *Pocket Guide to Code Meshing*. It's sort of like the Vershawn Young's, what is that, those two people, Strunk & White?

Davies: Strunk & White. Yes! You can call it "Funk & White."

vay: I know we are running out of time. That other book, *Straight Black Queer*, um, is looking at the ways in which professional upper middle-class Black men have to negotiate their gender and their gender in relation to their race in the mainstream. So, I look at Barack Obama. I look at a judge by the name of Olu Stevens out of Louisville, Dave Chappelle, who has spoken quite vocally about this, and then I do a little bit of looking in the introduction at James Baldwin and in the conclusion at Tyler Perry.

Davies: Ooh, Tyler Perry.

vay: He's very complex, which is why I leave him for the conclusion.

Davies: Oh yes, he is very complex. I would have lots of things to say. But I won't say them on this Zoom.

Balester: I hate to do it, but we are out of time. So, Flo, you hear that applause? Because I can hear it, I think it's definitely applause. Thank you very much.

Davies: Yes, thank you so much.

vay: I really appreciate having this conversation with you wonderful interlocutors. Thank you so much.

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