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# English teacher, why you be doing the thangs you don't do?

Geneva Smitherman

Afro-American Studies Department  
Harvard University  
Cambridge, Massachusetts

& then it was hip—it was hip  
to walk, talk & act a certain neighborhood-  
way,  
we wore 24 hr sunglasses & called our wom-  
an *baby*, our woman,  
we wished her something else,  
& she became that wish.  
she developed into what we wanted,  
she not only reflected *her*, but reflected us,  
was a mirror of our death-desires.  
we failed to protect or respect her  
& no one else would,  
& we didn't understand, we didn't under-  
stand.  
why,  
she be doing the things she don't do.<sup>1</sup>

LET me say right from the bell, this piece is not to be taken as an indictment of ALL English teachers in inner-city Black schools, for there are, to be sure, a few brave, enlightened souls who are doing an excellent job in the ghetto. To them, I say: just keep on keepin' on. But to those others, that whole heap of English teachers who be castigating Black students for using a "nonstandard" dia-

<sup>1</sup>"Blackman/an unfinished history" by Don L. Lee in *We Walk the Way of the New World*. Copyright © 1970 by Don L. Lee. Reprinted by permission of Broadside Press.

lect—I got to say: the question in the title is directed to you, and if the shoe fit, put it on.

In all fairness, I suppose, one must credit many such correctionist English teachers for the misguided notion that they are readying Black students for the world (read: white America). The rationale is that this world is one in which Black kids must master the prestige dialect if they are to partake of that socio-economic mobility for which America is world renowned—an argument which linguist James Sledd, for one, has completely devastated.<sup>2</sup> And so the student who submits a paper with frequent "I be's" and multiple negatives is forced to "correct," write and rewrite towards the end of achieving a grammatically flawless piece. In this painstaking and almost always useless and insignificant process, little else is stressed. (Besides, as the overworked, underpaid English teacher knows only too well, it's a lot simpler and easier to correct the Black English

<sup>2</sup>James Sledd, "Bi-Dialectalism: The Linguistics of White Supremacy," *English Journal*, 58 (December 1969).

of a theme than to read and really analyze that theme.) As a daughter of the Black ghetto myself, don't seem like it's no reason the teacher be doing none of that correctin' mess. (After all, what do you want—good grammar or good sense?) I contend that the size of the above-mentioned shoe fully exceeds the magnitude of the problem, for language power is a function not of one's dialect but of larger linguistic structures skillfully and effectively employed. In

the following dialog,<sup>3</sup> Langston Hughes' character, Jesse B. Semple, that swingin' Black folk hero, combines Black English with linguistic wit and forceful repartee both to win his woman and to demonstrate to us how trivial the "dialect problem" actually is.

<sup>3</sup>Reprinted by permission of Harold Ober Associates Incorporated. Based on *Simple Takes a Wife*, Copyright 1953, by Langston Hughes. *Simply Heavenly*, Copyright © 1956, 1958, 1959 by Langston Hughes and David Martin.

SIMPLE What're you doing with all those timetables and travel books, baby?

JOYCE Just in case we ever should get married, maybe I'm picking out a place to spend our honeymoon—Niagara Falls, the Grand Canyon, Plymouth Rock . . .

SIMPLE I don't want to spend no honeymoon on no rock. These books is pretty, but, baby, we ain't ready to travel yet.

JOYCE We can dream, can't we?

SIMPLE Niagara Falls makes a mighty lot of noise falling down. I likes to sleep on holidays.

JOYCE Oh, Jess! Then how about the far West? Were you ever at the Grand Canyon?

SIMPLE I were. Fact is, I was also at Niagara Falls, after I were at Grand Canyon.

JOYCE I do not wish to criticize your grammar, Mr. Semple, but as long as you have been around New York, I wonder why you continue to say, I were, and at other times, I was?

SIMPLE Because sometimes I were, and sometimes I was, baby. I was at Niagara Falls and I were at the Grand Canyon—since that were in the far distant past when I were a coachboy on the Santa Fe. I was more recently at Niagara Falls.

JOYCE I see. But you never were "I were"! There is no "I were." In the past tense, there is only "I was." The verb *to be* is declined, "I am, I was, I have been."

SIMPLE Joyce, baby, don't be so touchous about it. Do you want me to talk like Edward R. Murrow?

JOYCE No! But when we go to formals I hate to hear you saying, for example, "I taken" instead of "I took." Why do colored people say, "I taken," so much?

SIMPLE Because we are taken—taken until we are undertaken, and, Joyce, baby, funerals is high!

JOYCE Funerals are high.

SIMPLE Joyce, what difference do it make?

JOYCE Jess! What difference does it make? Does is correct English.

SIMPLE And do ain't?

JOYCE Isn't—not ain't.

SIMPLE Woman, don't tell me *ain't* ain't in the dictionary.

JOYCE But it ain't—I mean—it isn't correct.

SIMPLE Joyce, I gives less than a small damn! What if it aren't?

(*In his excitement he attempts to sit down, but leaps up as soon as his seat touches the chair*)

- JOYCE You say what if things aren't. You give less than a damn. Well, I'm tired of a man who gives less than a damn about "What if things aren't." I'm tired! Tired! You hear me? Tired! I have never known any one man so long without having some kind of action out of him. You have not even formally proposed to me, let alone writing my father for my hand.
- SIMPLE I did not know I had to write your old man for your hand.
- JOYCE My father, Jess, not my old man. And don't let it be too long. After all, I might meet some other man.
- SIMPLE You better not meet no other man. You better not! Do and I will marry you right now this June in spite of my first wife, bigamy, your old man—I mean your father. Joyce, don't you know I am not to be trifled with? I'm Jesse B. Semple.
- JOYCE I know who you are. Now, just sit down and let's spend a nice Sunday evening conversing, heh?
- SIMPLE (*Sits down, but it hurts him*) Ouch!
- JOYCE Oh, Sweetie! Let me make you a nice cool drink. Lemonade?
- SIMPLE Yes, Joyce, lemonade. (*JOYCE exits. Suddenly SIMPLE realizes what he has agreed to drink and cries in despair*) Lemonade! (*He sits dejected until JOYCE returns*) Baby, you ain't mad with me, is you? (*JOYCE smiles and shakes her head no*) Because I know you know what I mean when I say, "I is"— or "I are" or "was" or whatever it be. Listen, Joyce, honey please. (*He sings*)

.....

When I say "I am" believe me.  
 When I say "I is" believe me, too—  
 Because I were, and was, and I is,  
 Deep in love with you.

Damn if I ain't!<sup>4</sup>

SEMPLE'S message and its many ramifications seem to have been heeded in suburbia at least, for in recent years the trend in English teaching in white middle class schools has been away from grammatical overkill and toward emphasis on critical thinking, creativity, analytical processes, and the like. (Yes, I know there are still some linguistic purists hovering about in such schools, but the number is dwindling, and I'm gon give the rest of you your propers.) Yet when it comes to the Black English classroom, English teachers are working out of the same old traditional bag of eradicationist (attempting to obliterate Black English) or, more recently, bi-dialectalist (attempting to teach Black students the skill and necessity of being

versatile in both they dialect and "the Man's"). Of course, when you get right down to the nitty gritty, it ain't no essential difference between the two inasmuch as both bees operating on a difference equals deficit model; the latter is simply more sneaky about making this assertion. (Dig it: white middle class kids don't have to be "versatile" in Black English.) Bees that as it may, there is no need to reiterate the many socio-psychological/pedagogical arguments against either of these approaches. As I mentioned earlier, this has already been

<sup>4</sup>Lyrics are from "Deep in Love with You" by Langston Hughes and David Martin. © Copyright 1958, Bourne Co., New York City, New York. Used by permission.

done by Sledd—beyond, I think, anyone's power to "add or detract." (Anyway, Black folks is always in the position of *reacting* rather than *acting*.) Rather, I wish to propose a Five-Point Program for teaching English in the inner-city—a program based on the *real* needs of the Black ghetto student. Over and beyond girding this student to deal with racism—an established given in the American context—these needs have to do with initiating Black students into a confusing, turbulent society of power politics and nearly incredible complexity.

### I. Examination of Alternative Life-Styles

It is now a cliché to speak of the identity crisis of contemporary Americans, yet for Black youth particularly, the crisis is very real since in many significant dimensions, Black culture is diametrically opposed to white middle class culture. Witness, for example, the ghetto culture's hair styles, mannerisms, patterns of dress, dance, etc. (many of which, of course, have been adopted by white youth as a mark of rebellion). On a larger scale, note the conflict between value systems wherein the ghetto's pimps, hustlers, and sundry other brothers into an "illegit" thang are idealized and respected. The Black youth must decide is he gon square up and join the mainstream or get super-hip and remain in the street thang?

A for instance. In my study of 28,000 words of data collected from a group of Black junior high students,<sup>5</sup> one young man wrote a letter glorifying the status of pimp, maintaining that the pimp's life was a "life of ease. All you have to do is eat and sleep." Finding the statement and the student's attitude "horrendous," the teacher made the student rewrite the letter. Yet any pimp that you can get

<sup>5</sup>Geneva Smitherman, *A Comparison of the Oral and Written Styles of a Group of Inner-city Black Students*, unpublished doctoral dissertation (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan, 1969).

into a deep and truthful rap with, as well as writers such as Baldwin, Brown, or Iceberg Slim (author of *Pimp*), will all attest to the difficulties and anxieties of this way of life. Thus this young brother's analysis was not so much "offensive" as grossly oversimplified. Here, then, would have been a good place for the English teacher to step in, not as legislator of morality or proponent of *either* status quo but as a sort of intellectual gadfly, prodding the student to treat and research this complex life style (and others as well) in a sophisticated and deeply analytical manner.

### II. Emphasis on Reading

The literature on Black "culturally deprived" students is shot through with statistical information on the reading disabilities of Black ghetto youth. Of the students from whom the aforementioned data were gathered, only one was reading on grade level. In fact, though "reading problems of the disadvantaged" is now a cliché in educational circles, no one can deny the excruciating reality of the problem. While, admittedly, English teachers are not trained remedial reading specialists, I have seen inexperienced teachers do some rather effective things with, for instance, an SRA kit. In point of fact, the gravity of the literacy problem is such that I feel virtually ANY activity geared in this direction is preferable to frittering away valuable classroom time on "correct" usage drills or rewriting the "mistakes" on a composition.

### III. Emphasis on Oral Work

McLuhan has alerted us to the disappearance of our print-oriented culture (though, with reference to II above, obviously we'll always need functional literacy), and anyone who has carefully observed people in the world of work, professional or otherwise, has noticed the paucity of writing jobs. Let's face it: writers and English majors aside, once

students leave academia, they probably ain't gon never write another theme. Furthermore, Black culture is an oral culture, and here's where the rappin' ability of our students enters in. One eighth-grade student wrote the following theme about the "civil disturbance" of Detroit '67:

I don't like riots because they destroy things that have taken people life times to build. It leaves some homeless without food, and cause man thier good heath or their lives.

In a taped interview with this student, he responded to the question about the riots by not only filling in more details but also using several sophisticated words and linguistic structures that did not appear in the theme.

Everybody stole them something. Everybody was looting. Everybody was looting last year. I seen a boy get—a policeman—get shot in a pawn shop. But he—the three boys—broke in the pawn shop and climbed down through the skylight. So the police came and they knew the police was gon shoot 'em if they caught 'em. So they waited, they waited for one of 'em to come down the skylight, and they took them rifles and all three of them opened up on them. Dead on hits. They hit him with so much force, he just popped out that chimney dead. He just popped out that skylight dead. They ain't—they just—they hit him with a barrage of bullets and rifles.<sup>6</sup>

Other researchers, for example, Kochman<sup>7</sup> and Labov,<sup>8</sup> have described similar findings, attesting to the high verbal ability of Black students in their own dialect. This strength, coupled with the fact that the future will demand far more

<sup>6</sup>*Ibid.*

<sup>7</sup>Thomas Kochman, "Rapping in the Black Ghetto," *Trans-Action* (February 1969) 26-34.

<sup>8</sup>William Labov, *The Study of Nonstandard English* (Urbana, Illinois: National Council of Teachers of English, 1970).

speaking than writing of our students, suggest that oral work should be substituted for much of the written work in the English classroom. This could be done through improvisational drama, panel discussions, debates, short speeches, etc.

#### IV. Intensive Study of Language and Culture and Both Social and Regional Dialects

What students need (and here I would say both Black and white students) is not models of correctness—they have their own anyway—but a broader understanding of the intricate connection between one's language and his cultural experience, combined with insight into the political nature and social stratification of American dialects. They need to see how language is not something decreed from on High but an evolutionary dynamic, fluctuating according to the dictates of its users; those users of words, who, to paraphrase LeRoi Jones,<sup>9</sup> have the power to define reality; those dialect pace-setters, who in America happen to be white and middle class. It is axiomatic that if Black people were in power in this country, Black English would be the prestige idiom. This is a point which cannot be stressed too often, for frequently we find even Black students themselves with a negative image of their speech. They too have been brainwashed about the "inherent and Absolute rightness" of white, middle class dialect and do not realize that language can be/has been for Black people in America a tool of oppression. On the other hand, while the Black junior high students I interviewed all conceded that their speech was "wrong" according to school standards, none said that they would change their dialect nor that of their parents and peers. It is obvious, then, that only educational institutions—

<sup>9</sup>LeRoi Jones, "Expressive Language," in *Home* (New York: Morrow and Company, 1966), pp. 166-172.

English teachers in particular—and the dominant culture, which, unfortunately, schools reflect rather than lead, make Black ghetto students feel that their language and experience are negative and inconsequential.

Of course, here too, as with my point on reading, I recognize that English teachers frequently are not trained in linguistics, but inservice programs and workshops could be one way of providing such vitally needed knowledge. (After all, we did it for the “new math.”) In the meantime, there are several one-shot sort of language lessons that could be used. One idea would be to excerpt passages from a book like *Manchild in the Promised Land* (New American Library, 1965), particularly those in which Claude Brown, the “linguist,” is at work—for instance, his explanation of the import of the Black use of the word “baby,” or his comments about achieving gang status through his own rappin’ ability (pp. 171-2, 79-80). Other ideas are suggested by Neil Postman and Charles Weingartner in *Teaching as a Subversive Activity* (Delacorte, 1969). For instance, they describe a classroom discussion in which the students come to understand the relative meaning of the word “right” in reference to language matters (pp. 70-75). Still another idea would be to combine language study with that of literature by letting your students dig on some of the new Black poetry, most of which is highly oral and written in the Black. I highly recommend super-bad Don Lee’s *Don’t Cry, Scream* (Detroit: Broadside Press, 1969). There is a \$5.00 very excellent tape that can be purchased from Broadside and used with the book.

V. Emphasis on Content and Message, Logical Development, Use of Supporting Details and Examples, Analysis and Arrangement, Style, Specificity, Variation of Word Choice, Sentence Structure, Originality, etc.

I am referring here to the *real* com-

ponents of rhetorical power. If we recognize rhetoric as the art of persuasion and the aim of composition, both oral and written, as communication of that art, we can readily see that we’re talking about elements which have nothing to do with the English teacher’s “mania for correctness.” Audiences are moved by message and style of delivery, not correct spelling, lack of copula deletion, or the addition of the *s*-morpheme to third-person-singular-present-tense verbs. For instance, in the themes I analyzed, the students compared quite favorably with other writers of American English in terms of the ratio of adjectives to verbs—i.e., they used a significantly higher proportion of adjectives than verbs. Such a degree of modification and qualification is generally considered to make for a lively, clear, and precise style. Yet, on a word-variation analysis scale (i.e., measurement of the ratio of *different* adjectives to the total number of adjectives), the students’ scores were disappointingly low by comparison to other writers. One student used the word “big” to denote largeness of size seven different times in a one-paragraph theme. Note also the fact that simple sentence patterns of the N V and N V N type occurred with heavy preponderance in most of the themes. Or consider the following theme, by one of the ninth-grade girls in the study, which is weak in many of the areas I mentioned under the heading of this section—though the mechanics are probably at least passable, even to the most rigorous correctionist. (I’ve underlined certain phrases and sentences that I’ll comment on following the theme.)

[ASSIGNMENT: If everybody knew what war was like, would we still have war?]

No! Some people just don’t understand the *hardship* of a war. *Some* say lets keep fighting and we still are fighting. *More people are being killed and the poor are starving to death.* To me

war is a terrible thing to happen in any country. *The causes of a war maybe very simple, one side will disagree on a subject that is brought up. Like the poor should have money or better conditions to live in. The people should put in money for the poor. The other side may not agree. Instead they think the government should do the work. This may cause a war. Little things like this and more can destroy the world.*

1. Nature or kinds of hardships not specified.

2. "Some say . . ." who?

3. "More people are being killed . . ." should follow the next statement since the former explains why the writer thinks war is a "terrible thing."

4. The statement beginning "the causes . . ." diverges off in another direction, although in the writer's mind, it may be related to what precedes; if so, the connection should have been clearly established.

5. "One side . . ." again lack of specificity; who or what category of people is being referred to here?; similarly with the phrase "the other side," no clear identification of opposing forces being alluded to here.

6. ". . . the government should do the work." Aren't the "people" the government? In the context of American politics, this is a profound question, not to be dismissed so lightly.

7. "This may cause a war." No example or when or how such a disagreement leads to war.

8. "Little things . . ." LITTLE????  
!!!!

Do you see where I'm coming from

with my Five-Point Package? Fundamentally, I am talking about survival strategies that extend far beyond the classroom. I am talking about the acquisition of those tools essential for thinking through a situation and making decisions. I am talking about telling it like it T. I. IS so effectively and persuasively that your audience will move in whatever direction you desire. I am talking about teaching Black students that language can be/is power, that they can/must develop that power, and that ultimately in the struggle for Black liberation, the pen may be/is mightier than the Molotov cocktail.

In conclusion, lest it seem that I am taking to task only elementary and secondary school English teachers, consider the following paper, written by a Black college freshman at Wayne State.

[ASSIGNMENT: Take a position on the war in Viet Nam and present arguments to defend your position.]

I think the war in Viet Nam bad. Because we don't have no business over there. My brother friend been in the war, and he say it's hard and mean. I do not like war because it's bad. And so I don't think we have no business there. The reason the war in China is bad is that American boys is dying over there.

The paper was returned to the student with only one comment: "Correct your grammar and resubmit." Now, I ask you, English teacher, why you be doing the thangs you don't do?

9 Fine. Don't do the homework. Homework is "and always will be" a tug-of-war between parents and teachers in primary school. A lot of parents complain when there's too much of it. Please don't forget: PE is good for them, after all, and doing it is in their best interests. As is homework, and most of the above. Thank you for reading and see you in school. "The true beauty of making useless things [is] this acknowledgment that you don't always know what the best answer is," Giertz says. "It turns off that voice in your head that tells you that you know exactly how the world works. Maybe a toothbrush helmet isn't the answer, but at least you're asking the question." Bring TED to the non-English speaking world. TED Fellows. Join or support innovators from around the globe. Instead it happened just because I was enthusiastic about what I was doing, and I was sharing that enthusiasm with other people. To me that's the true beauty of making useless things, because it's this acknowledgment that you don't always know what the best answer is. And it turns off that voice in your head that tells you that you know exactly how the world works. stand. why, she be doing the things she don't do.' L E T me say right from the bell, this piece is not to be taken as an indictment of ALL English teachers in inner-city Black schools, for there are, to be sure, a few brave, enlightened souls who are doing an excellent job in the ghetto. T o them, I say: just keep on keepin' on. R.