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ABSTRACT

The "Ebonics Resolution" was passed by the Oakland, California, school board in 1996. The proposal called for "imparting instruction to African-American students for the combined purposes of maintaining legitimacy and richness of such language...and to facilitate their acquisition and mastery of English language skills." The proposal was not widely accepted and subject to much ridicule nationally. This paper tells the story of a black student at Boston College who had to repeat her student teaching practicum because of her use of Black English. The paper discusses the case of "Tanya," the only black student in an upper division class, who, because of the close working relationship she developed with her white teacher, was able to write and workshop an essay about her student teaching practicum in a wealthy white suburb where criticism of her language usage was metonymic for racism. It highlights the advantages of a conference-based writing course with a compassionate teacher. It also addresses the author/educator's own covert bias against Black English, which emerged during the transcription work, as well as problems with teaching grammar in the process-writing classroom. (NKA)

"African Americans Have This Slang": Grammar, Dialect, and Racism.

by Karen Surman Paley

"African Americans Have this Slang": Grammar, Dialect, and Racism

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In a recent article in *CCC*, "Ebonics: Theorizing in Public Our Attitudes toward Literacy," Richard Marbeck discusses the public response to the "Ebonics Resolution," which was passed by the Oakland, California school board in 1996. He faults compositionists for not publicly addressing the broad range of criticisms to a proposal that called for "'imparting instruction to African-American students for the combined purposes of maintaining the legitimacy and richness of such language . . . and to facilitate their acquisition and mastery of English language skills'" (qtd. in Marbeck 12). This proposal was not widely accepted and subject to much ridicule nationally. In my presentation today, I will tell you the story of a black student at Boston College who had to repeat her student teaching practicum because of the use of Black English.

In my book I-Writing: The Politics and Practice of Teaching First-Person Writing [SIUP, 2001], I discussed the case of Tanya, the only black student in an upper division class, as a way to highlight what can happen when post-sixties efforts to integrate colleges and universities lead to many situations where students of color are truly in the minority. Because of the close working relationship she developed with her white teacher, Debby, Tanya was able to write and workshop an essay about her student teaching practicum in a wealthy white suburb where criticism of her language usage was metonymic for racism. As I provide you with a look at the development of this essay, I highlight the advantages of a conference-based writing course with a compassionate

teacher. We cannot underestimate the importance of working through humiliating educational experiences in the professional formation of young teachers. I will also address my own covert bias against Black English, which emerged during the transcription work, as well as problems with teaching grammar in the process-writing classroom.

Debby is a middle-aged white teacher who earned her Masters' degree at Boston College and had been teaching there as an adjunct for nearly twenty years. Tanya is an African American senior who grew up in an inner city in Connecticut. She is husky, dark-skinned, and can be either very subdued or rather excitable. Her attire is typical of many college women: she often wears a baseball cap; she also dons a bright yellow and black jacket which says "Ignacio Volunteers," a reference to a Jesuit missionary program sponsored by this Catholic school.

Tanya's second paper for the course dealt with her student teaching. We learn that she was the only black teacher in the school. There were 11 black students voluntarily bused in each day from the inner city in a program called The Metropolitan Council for Educational Opportunity or METCO. A few of these students were in Tanya's classes. The racial dynamics at this school exactly replicated her situation at Boston College at large where students of color constitute a minority and in the microcosm of the advanced writing classroom where she was the only student of color.

Tanya's paper on her teaching practicum began as a personal narrative but moved into a critique of the METCO program. Here are some unedited excerpts from the first draft:

> Have you ever felt misplaced or misunderstood? Or felt as if no one cared or could relate to your feelings? Well I can honestly answer yes to both of these

questions. This past semester I had the opportunity to face these challenges in my placement at the Nixon School.

During my teaching experience . . ., I have contemplated being an African-American in a predominantly all white institution. I found it extremely hard because this was not my goal nor was it the reason I decided to do my practicum at this school.

...

I tried my hardest to think and be positive about Nixon. However, I kept thinking about the students who are part of the METCO program . . . Who does the student turn to when they have issues that a teacher can not answer? ... Are these students having the same feelings I am? Are they feeling lonely, alienated, unconnected to the school socially?

[Several paragraphs follow about the history of METCO in the community.]

Even though there are many issues that students have to face, I believe that the classroom teacher plays a major role in their life. They can either empower students or disable them. I am not too familiar with all the METCO students but in my classroom we make it our business to respect other cultures and be are of stereotypes and racial misconceptions of a certain race. I think that all future teachers should be aware of cultural and socially differences. (Sic)

Debby's initial questions about the paper had to do with focus. As she told Tanya in one of their weekly and lengthy conferences, "You are spending so much time explaining the program that I lose where you're connected to it. And then you end up with almost like

an argument paper, 'I think our future teachers should be aware of cultural and social differences.'" Or as Debby would later email me,

> That beginning was VERY troubled . . . She raised a lot of emotional issues that she never really followed through with, and it was almost, it seemed to me, as if she started with those other things and either got so caught up in them or emotionally charged by them and then had to back off and kind of HIDE her feelings by dealing with the sort of expository aspect as a way to feel more comfortable with it. Maybe she was a little NERVOUS she had gone too far.

Thus Debby argues that Tanya's first draft did not succeed in connecting the personal material with the expository critique of the program.

Their conference on the METCO essay, which was lengthy, went way beyond their differences over the paper's focus. Eventually Tanya described an interaction at her practicum that had humiliated her. Tanya's self-disclosures came about as a result of Debby showing that she was compassionate toward Tanya's position as a person of color who was outnumbered by white people in this elementary school. For example, when Tanya blurted out that she was the only black teacher at the school, Debby's empathy revealed itself in a metaphor she introduced. "You are in this kind of sea of white teachers or non-black teachers, and there are these 11 kids . . . in that same experience." It was just after the use of this image of a sea of white teachers that Tanya began to introduce incidents into the conversation that were not reported in her METCO paper. From a pedagogical point of view, we can see the importance of the one-to-one conference as it created the opportunity for inquiries and for the teacher's display of empathy. Without these factors, the fuller narrative regarding the practicum might not have emerged. As Debby would later say of this conference, "Here's this person who

never says a word in class, all of a sudden she's so open . . . I've never really had that kind of an open conversation with anybody."

Tanya revealed her discomfort in the advanced writing class itself, a discomfort related to racial and class differences. After Debby invited Tanya to workshop her student teaching paper in class, because it could "broaden people's perspectives and raise their consciousness about other lives," it became clearer how much Tanya feared being "misplaced and misunderstood." "I don't like to touch on the issue of race because I don't want people to be like, 'Oh, there's another story about race.'" I suggested that she was bringing up issues related to class as well as race, and she emphatically agreed. "Like I don't relate to certain people because, you know, economically we're not coming from the same place."

T: And it, I mean BC is a good school

D: Yeah, we know that. It is a good school, but I often wonder if I were a minority person, I mean I'm Jewish, and I would never recommend a Jewish kid to come to this school.

I think this was a particularly important moment in the conference. Debby's indication that she feels like a religious outsider at BC enabled Tanya to experience her as empathetic and she, in turn, would open up more.

Tanya proceeded to describe how she felt coming to a largely middle class white campus from a nearly all-black inner city school. Her voice rose nervously and her face twitched as she revealed that she had felt inadequately prepared to be at BC. "I have to present myself like I didn't get in here affirmative action and I have good grades, but then again my grades are not as good as yours, and this is what I have a hard time with now, just, like, I'm not ready for college. Like, you know, maybe I should have went to a

preparatory school for a semester." The fact that Tanya did not feel entirely comfortable showing her insecurity to us is indicated by her suddenly switching to the second person plural, fusing the two of us with the white students she is hypothetically speaking to. ("My schooling was not as good as yours.")

I asked her why, in the first class, she had said she needed help with grammar. What came out at this point, after about thirty minutes of conference dialogue, was a description of the most painful incident that she experienced in her practicum, the event driving her feeling "misplaced and misunderstood." Behind her concern about grammar lay the issue of black dialect; she had to repeat her practicum for using it. Her supervisor and her teachers told her, "'Your grammar needs to come out more' and things like that. Like I dropped the 'ed's' when I'm talking."

D: No wonder you don't like to talk in class. You think everybody's going to be

...

T: Maybe that, Maybe that's it. I mean I, I, I see myself as a very outspoken person and umm when that happened to me I was in tears. I was

D: I don't blame you.

T: I was just really upset. And they told me like a week left before it ended. Like my practicum ended. I was going to be all done. They were like, "You need to do an extended practicum. You need to work on the verbal communication to your students."

The experience of being chastised for her oral speech had made a big impact on Tanya. She would take their advice to heart by doing a second practicum in another school and by naming her focus in the advanced writing class as grammar. Her switch from first to third person illustrates the extent to which she internalized the criticism. "I

needed more time in the classroom and 'your grammar needs to come out more.'" Suddenly she was the voice of authority addressing herself. Tanya did not explicitly tell us that she thought their criticism was racist and I think she had mixed feelings here: both that she did, in fact, have poor grammar and that she was being discriminated against for using black dialect.

However, as I replay the tapes of their conferences and struggle to transfer oral into written discourse, I find a part of myself wanting Tanya to be clearer, more precise. I think of a discussion about taping and transcribing in *Writing Ethnographic Fieldnotes* (Fretz, Rachel, and Shaw) that argues that a transcript is never verbatim reproduction. The authors write,

> [A] transcript is the product of a transcriber's ongoing interpretive and analytic decisions about a variety of problematic matters [such as] ... inaudible or incomprehensible sounds or words. (9)

There are many parts of the tape recording of Debby and Tanya where I am frustrated by "incomprehensible sounds and words" as well as my inability to communicate changes in pitch that indicate anxiety. Now I have come to see an opposite frustration: that at times I could hear what she was saying all too well. I had a strong a desire to present Tanya at her "best" so that my invoked white reader would sympathize with her. When I examine what I mean by her "best," I realize that I am no different from her supervisor and the teachers at her practicum. I wanted her to use Standard English and she did not. I felt myself flinch when I typed her statement, "I should have went to preparatory school," and fought off the urge to edit. I realize my own racism in wanting her to be less guilty of "natural speech elisions" than a white student.

After learning that Tanya had to do another practicum, Debby had a breakthrough insight about the METCO paper. Tanya may have dropped herself as the focus of the text because she either did not want to recall or did not want to make public the shaming she felt at her practicum.

Three weeks after their conferences, Tanya would workshop the paper in the writing seminar. In the draft she presented to the class, there were tighter connections between her own feelings as a person of color in a majority white institution, the problems the METCO students faced, and her call for changes. The paper concludes,

> Through this experience I discovered the need for change in the METCO program. I think that if METCO wants to integrate students, there should be support systems for the students in the school. There should be teachers who are the same race as METCO students, and there should be seminars to help teachers become more culturally aware of their students' environment. Through supportive services established within school systems that have METCO students, the METCO program can change the lives of many young people in a positive way, instead of making them feel as alone and isolated as I felt.

I think Tanya's achievement here is impressive. Instead of pulling the reader in two directions, Tanya is able to fulfill her rhetorical mission: to share how she felt and to critique the program. While there are links between the two from the beginning to the end of the paper, the main transition is accomplished through the sentence, "My own experience at the Nixon helped me to focus on the issues of the METCO program." I am reminded of Aristotle's chapter on narration in the *Rhetorica*. He calls for intermittent narration in oratory, using it to depict character and demonstrate moral

purpose. Tanya skillfully blends narrative elements within her argument about the program. The examples she offers make her argument more compelling.

I found the class in which she workshopped this paper to be thrilling. Due to time constraints, I will summarize. It seemed as though the class would re-enact the shaming she received in the her practicum when a male student said, "I'm on the other side. You know, being a white male." As it turned out, this white male had his own "there are problems with METCO" story to tell. The teacher he was assigned to in his practicum complained about having to do "diversity stuff," and then offered no assistance whatsoever to a non-English speaking student from Ecuador, saying that eventually she would catch on. "What I found really amazing was that we were working in the groups one day, and [the student from Ecuador] was in the group and there were two METCO students, and they were actually helping her try to translate." Other white students in the seminar wanted Tanya to focus on individual case examples and to avoid making any kind of generalizations about METCO at the Nixon school.

It is my sense that the experience of sharing some of what life is like for black people to her white classmates and of having them listen with a combination of identification, respect, and discomfort enhanced her self-confidence. As she puts it in her final essay for the course, a self-reflexive piece, "The feedback that I received was so constructive that I felt, for the first time, proud of my writing . . . I think that I taught the students something." In this statement, she also waffles about the issue of grammar, which she feels was not sufficiently attended to in the class. The accumulation of positive comments, her praise for the class, her developing self-confidence, her inspiration to pass on the pleasure that can accompany the writing process to future students, is intersected by a sub-plot, the lingering self-doubt about grammar. Tanya remained uncertain about

her ability to use grammatically correct Standard English. I later learned that when she told Debby in their first conference that she wanted to work on grammar, Debby gave her a handbook and told Tanya that she would make corrections on her paper "rather than just teach her rules," and Tanya could then ask her questions about the corrections. As the semester went on, Tanya realized that she wanted to use their conference time to discuss the content of her essays, so she did not ask Debby when she had questions about the corrections, and Debby, to my knowledge, did not ask her if she had any questions. In my own experience with conferencing, I find that it has been all too easy for me to neglect the final editing stage of the writing process. I think in this case, Tanya would have benefited from some extra tutoring in the school's writing center. Yet, I also think that even if Tanya had received extra help on sentence level errors, it is highly possible that the shame she felt from her practicum experience would continue to undermine her confidence about writing correct Standard English for a long time.

I have focused on Debby's work with Tanya as it highlights a lot of the issues that set the context for teaching writing on college campuses today: blending narrative and argument; discussing the content of essays without pushing grammar out of the picture; white teachers working with black students in predominantly white institutions; black students receiving an education in environments that they experience as hostile or indifferent; the need of white educators to examine their own hidden preferences for Standard English; and the effectiveness of small writing classes and regular one-to-one conferences in establishing what Lad Tobin calls "writing relationships." Tanya's course evaluation shows ambivalence; she felt she did not learn rules of grammar, but she also said that she could now do a better job of correcting her own mistakes. Because of the strength of her relationship with Debby, Tanya was able to share a very damaging

experience in an educational environment that exactly duplicated the demographics of the site of that experience. Tanya took a big risk here, as both her teacher and her classmates could have re-enacted the same pedagogical trauma and faulted her for using conventions of Black English. That did not happen. I doubt that the writing seminar will ever erase the memory of her practicum, but it is my sense that it will go a long way in helping her to value herself as a writer. Perhaps she will eventually come to view herself as someone who can revise and eventually produce well-written essays, able to employ Standard English for certain audiences. While learning the language of the dominant classes she may also come to believe that, as Lisa Delpit puts it, "Each cultural group should have the right to maintain its own language style" (292).

At some time during our education, many of us have had vexed and shaming experiences. I think Tanya shows us the importance of working through these experiences in a supportive environment. Without such help, we are at risk of passing along the abuse to some of our own students, as educational improprieties become multi-generational. That Tanya could share her experience with Debby and with me demonstrates that she does not completely embrace her evaluators' view of her. As she puts it in the first draft of her METCO paper, "Even though there are many issues that students have to face, I believe that the classroom teacher plays a major role in their life. *They can either empower students or disable them*" (emphasis mine). Given her experience in the writing seminar, I would say the prognosis for Tanya, as a teacher, is a good one.

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