Composition Forum 14.2, Fall 2005

Standards of English: Literature as Language Standard

Jeanne Marie Rose

For nearly 200 years, American composition programs have used literature as a measure of "correct" written and spoken language use. Through Hugh Blair's and George Campbell's 18th-century textbooks, which featured excerpts of belletristic literature (Brody 102-09; Connors 72-9); Harvard's 19th-century entrance examinations, which tested students' aptitude for literary analysis (Miller 63-4); and today's granting of college writing credit for A.P. literature exams, familiarity with literature has come to characterize competent student writers and their writing. Because of this vexed history, the question of whether to teach literature in composition courses has elicited considerable discussion within English Studies, with no clear resolution (Crowley; Elbow, 2002; Gamer; Lindemann; Steinberg; Tate). Significantly, literature's status as the benchmark against which other language use should be measured represents one of the many reasons composition theorists like Crowley, Lindemann, and Steinberg oppose its use in writing courses.

The variety and constant change within "literary" language, however, complicates literature's possible contributions to composition. Following Mark Richardson's recent suggestion to "look beyond 'should we teach literature in composition or shouldn't we' to the question of if we teach literature, *how* should we do so?" (279), this essay considers how writing classes that routinely include literature representing non-standard dialects might serve various first-year populations. Students who routinely use non-standard forms typically come to college aware of the practical consequences of language choices yet socialized to reject alternative standards within academic settings. Many privileged students assume standard English represents the correct language and perceive other forms as incorrect versions of it (Barnett 33). By including literature with multiple standards in composition classes, teachers may work against both groups' assumptions and, in so doing, foster a more inclusive view of language. Such an approach could empower users of non-standard forms, who may benefit from seeing the language they use represented in print; help privileged students to recognize that language varieties are always socially constructed; and, most importantly, foster dialogue that raises all students' rhetorical awareness.

In this essay, I suggest recent developments in English studies and popular culture create an opportune moment for writing teachers to welcome such literature in composition curricula. I then describe how studying stories by John Edgar Wideman enabled first-year composition students to engage political and interpersonal issues surrounding language choice, specifically in the case of Black English. Despite teachers' intentions of promoting diversity and empowering non-white or non-privileged students, however, my experience illustrates the extent to which the subject of race remains a source of discomfort for students and instructors—to the point where a class taught in the late 1990s, at which time I was a graduate instructor, continues to shape my pedagogical approach. With reference to this discomfort, I conclude by arguing that exploring literature in writing courses could encourage members of the classroom community, teachers and students alike, to collaboratively confront concerns about language, race, and literacy.

Literature as Language Standard

Despite its use in pedagogies designed to indoctrinate students into standard language use, free of regional, racial, or class-based dialects, literature—ironically—has always representedlinguistic diversity. One need look no further than Chaucer's and Shakespeare's canonical texts to see literary representations of disparate, even clashing, literacies. Recent curricular expansions and multicultural pedagogies have made literature's linguistic diversity all the more obvious. The emergence of "ethnic" writers like Sandra Cisneros, Michael Ondaatje, Salman Rushdie, Amy Tan, and Alice Walker in both academic and popular venues, for example, has broadened the visibility of non-standard forms. These cultural changes, along with diversified college enrollments, pose an opportunity for teachers of writing to make use of literature as a resource for investigating multiple literacies and the rhetorical styles associated with them.

June Jordan's "Nobody Mean More to Me than You and the Future Life of Willie Jordan" addresses this idea, describing how literature can motivate discussions of language standards. In an American literature course entitled "In Search of the Invisible Black Woman," Jordan assigned Alice Walker's *The Color Purple* , a work written in Black English. She expected that her students, mostly black and speakers of Black English, would respond positively to

Walker's novel. Unaccustomed to experiencing their language in written form, however, students' initial reactions were negative: "Just about unanimously, their criticisms targeted the language. I listened to what they wanted to say and silently marveled at the similarities between their casual speech patterns and Alice Walker's written version of Black English" (125). Only after the class translated the novel's opening passage into Standard English, surprised by the awkwardness of the revised version, did they realize that Walker needed Black English to present her characters' identities, experiences, and ways of thinking (125-26).

Concerned by her students' negative response to their own language, Jordan proposed to teach a course entitled "The Art of Black English" the following semester. Newly aware of Black English, many of the students from "In Search of the Invisible Black Woman" enrolled. Jordan was concurrently supervising an independent study for Willie Jordan, a black student researching South Africa. After Brooklyn police murder Willie's unarmed 25-year-old brother Reggie, Jordan asks permission to share his story with her Black English class (134). When the students confront police brutality against black life, their study of Black English takes on a new importance, grounded in an awareness of language use and social justice (135). The class decides to compose individual messages to the police in Black English, "prefaced by an explanatory paragraph composed by the entire group" (135). In determining whether to write the opening paragraph in Black English or Standard English, the group faces a choice that alerts them to the social realities of language use in America. After unanimously voting to write their introduction in Black English, the class realizes that "our decision in favor of Black English had doomed our writings, even as the distinctive reality of our Black lives always has doomed our efforts to 'be who we been' in this country" (136). What began as a response to literature became an investigation of language's social significance as students identified connections among literature, society, and language use. {1}

As Jordan's classes suggest, studying multiple standards through literature enables teachers and students to confront issues of racial identity, social justice, and self-expression. After reading Jordan's article in my teacher training seminar, I was eager to incorporate her ideas into my first-year writing course. I chose to teach two short stories by John Edgar Wideman, a writer whose work, like Walker's, features Black English and black oral culture, often in contrast to Standard English.

Wideman's "Doc's Story," collected in Fever (1989), illustrates the intimacy of storytelling. When the unnamed main character's white girlfriend leaves him, he turns to the neighborhoodbasketball court: "Hanging out, becoming a regular at the basketball court across the street in Regent Park was how he'd coped. No questions asked. Just the circle of stories" (2). Joining in the storytelling, not simply by listening but through active participation, affirms his link to black culture and community. At once an art form and a source of entertainment, the stories represent connection among people and sustenance in the face of adversity.

Throughout the story, Wideman portrays Black English as an oral form through which past events, history, and memory become active features of contemporary lives. Speaking in black dialect, a character named Pooner tells a story about "gang warring" in North Philadelphia, in which a gang member is lynched by a rival gang: "Those North Philly gangs don't play... They kill you they ain't finished yet. Mess with your people, your house, your sorry-ass dead body to get even" (4-5). Linguistically, this excerpt uses the double negative, invariant be, and "uncensored speech" (like "-ass words") associated with Black English (Spears 227-28). Pooner's language, however, derives its vitality not from its grammatical constructions but from its collaborative quality, particularly the call and response that allow the other basketball players to join in the storytelling. As Pooner concludes the story, "there was a chorus of You got that right, man. It's a bitch out there, man. Them niggers crazy, boy..." (5). This "chorus," in turn, characterizes the collective authorship and improvisation that makes a story a shared responsibility.

Wideman's "Signs," from *All Stories are True* (1992), juxtaposes black and white literary and language traditions through its portrayal of African-American graduate student Kendra Crawley. At home, Kendra is a member of a larger community whose bond is inseparable from the reliable rhythm of Black English: Her dead mother's house is full of people, loud talk, eating and drinking...you would be frightened if it weren't for something beneath it all, a pulse, a familiar rhythm, like those breaks in a hellfire sermon, the simple call and response breathing room where you are you and the preacher a man you've known most of your life and you can speak to him, him to you, *Uh huh, Amen, Preach, Tell it, tell it Sister* (76).

At her Atlanta university, on the other hand, where Kendra is one of five black students in her program, hostile language and literary genres surround her. The Western Civilization course her fellowship requires her to teach and the racist hate speech she encounters symbolize white expurgation of African-American language, literature, and culture. Forced to explain Western "classics," Kendra becomes aware of her own conflicted relationship to canonical literature. As Kendra explains *Paradise Lost* to a white male student, she ponders black literary and historical figures excluded from the syllabus:

> I could hip you to some true rebel carrying on, child. Martin. Malcolm. Mandela. Saint Douglas. Saint

> Harriet. No, not Ozzie's wife, cracker. Ms. Tubman to you. If the syllabus of Western Civ ever tilted my way. Which it don't, boy. (78)

In addition to addressing African Americans' exclusion from Western Civ courses, "Signs" specifically treats slaves' literacy. During Kendra's undergraduate experience, a professor returned her first essay with a big red X across the first page and a question mark at the end. Her reaction recalls a collective African-American past grounded in slavery, as Kendra interprets the teacher's comments as a sign of her own illiteracy: "This nigger gal don't belong here...Doesn't write or speak our language. We gotta use signs to communicate with her. An X like her daddy signed on the dotted line when he sold her" (79). The story parallels Kendra's exclusion as anundergraduate with the hate speech she encounters in graduate school; the implied message of the returned paper, becomes the literal message of the second "sign," a note reading "*Nig bitch go home*" (83).

Students and "Standards of English"

I want to focus now on my experience teaching Wideman's stories in a first-year writing course at a private university in upstate New York. Out of an incoming class of 1000 students with average SAT scores around 1250, only about 100 students place out of the first-year writing requirement. As a result, students are fairly sophisticated writers before taking the course. My section was oriented around contemporary language issues, and we addressed such topics as electronic media, feminist revisions of fairy tales, perspective in news reporting, and multiple standards of English. The "Standards of English" unit focused on using literature as a means of investigating multiple literacies, rooted in communities. In addition to Wideman's "Doc's Story" and "Signs," the unit included Sandra Cisneros's "No Speak English" and "Woman Hollering Creek," stories that place English, Spanish, and Spanglish in the context of contemporary Mexican-American experiences. We also read Jordan's "Nobody Mean More to Me than You and the Future Life of Willie Jordan." In dialogue with one another, these texts also spoke to discussions of "English Only" legislation, the 1996 Oakland resolution about the teaching of Ebonics, and longstanding attitudes regarding language and literary study.

Talking about race is not easy for first-year writing classes. Despite social and economic realities, American society alleges to have moved beyond racial difference; to bring it up in polite conversation appears retrograde, taboo, even racist. In this late 1990s class, consisting of three black students, twelve white students and myself, a white female graduate student new to teaching, the subject of language use and racial difference created an element of classroom anxiety. We began our unit with the Jordan essay described in the previous section. When I asked the class to share their reactions to the essay, the twelve white students remained silent. The three black students seemed to have a conversation among themselves, with Rob, a young man from Brooklyn, speaking out in support of Black English and the other black students insisting that Black English does nothing to help African-Americans get ahead in society. Torn between wanting to mediate the discussion and feeling that I didn't have license to speak, I remained quiet, letting the black students set our course.

Like my white students, I struggle to find a vocabulary for talking about race. My white middleclass upbringing leaves me with the notion that to discuss race is to enter a danger zone, populated by words that should only be mentioned in hushed voices. Being a teacher adds new levels of uncertainty. By introducing race, do I risk turning my classroom into a forum for white supremacist views? Do I put my non-white students on display, blocking their attempts to assimilate? Don't I have a responsibility as a teacher of language and literature to examine the relationships between language and power in society? And wouldn't it be an egregious oversight to remove race from the equation? But behaving as I did, silent and overwhelmed, I made it seem that race is a black issue, failing to acknowledge that everyone, especially whites, is implicated.

In all likelihood, the three black students felt that they were "native informants," obligated to explain Black English to a white majority who accepted Standard English uncritically. After reading white students' papers, I was uneasily relieved that they remained reticent during discussion. The writing assignment asked students to respond the following prompt: "Featuring Black English and Spanglish, the literature and essays in this unit challenge the idea that there isone uniform English language, used by all English speakers at all times. With reference to at least two assigned texts, please write a four-page essay discussing the language issues these works raise." Several, though certainly not all, white students parodied Black English as an "estranging dialect made deliberately unintelligible by spellings contrived to disfamiliarize it" (Morrison 52), using an exaggerated dialect for the purpose of showing its "incorrectness." Many resorted to a nationalistic rhetoric about the importance of speaking English in America. Moreover, the content of these passages frequently treated unemployment, drug use, and gang warfare—topics associated with stereotypes of black life in America. Writing about internet jokes in the wake of the Oakland resolution, Robin Lakoff points to the racism implicit in such stereotypes: "While many are putatively 'about' the

language itself, it doesn't take much exegesis to detect a racist subtext: speakers of Ebonics are ignorant, sexually promiscuous, and criminal" (240).

Sadly, for white privileged students, these sketches constitute a realistic view of black life and black language. William Lyne's comments in "White Purposes" are helpful in understanding classroom dynamics like the one described above. "Despite all the rainbow rhetoric," he explains, students who attend today's colleges and universities are generally white and wealthy (79). Given undergraduate demographics, "it should come as no surprise that many students in American universities (the postmodern bourgeoisie) defend dominant ideologies[...]this situation should provoke neither alarm nor dismay" (Lyne 79). Instead, says Lyne, teachers should view such attitudes as an opportunity for teaching the antifoundationalist theories that have long been popular in composition circles as a means of empowering disenfranchised students who already understand that knowledge and language use are situational (76-9). In this way, teachers can educate "'centered' students as to how those larger social structures are robbing them of their humanity" (Lyne 79). While my class fell short of achieving this goal, largely because my own intimidation prevented me from moderating discussion, Lyne's remarks characterize the pedagogical benefits of bringing non-dominant ways of thinking and speaking into composition classrooms.

Ideally, the study of multiple standards teaches students to respect diversity; to understand that language use is often a matter of choice, woven into the fabric of a community's life and values; and to recognize that non-standard forms are often a necessary means of expression. Moreover, as Amy Devitt's comparison of language standards to spoken and written genres suggests, attention to language standards allows students to develop a broad awareness of language that they might subsequently apply to academic, professional, and social situations—the "practical" ends students typically seek in writing courses. Explaining that language standards and genres both operate according to a principle of constraint and choice, Devitt asserts, "Language standards, like genres, represent established expectations of what 'good' language-users do in particular contexts; to subvert these expectations of language standards is to invite consequences, both good and bad" (45-6).

Despite students' possible discomfort and even resistance to studying non-standard forms, Lyne's and Devitt's remarks, taken together, indicate that such attention fosters rhetorical awareness. Interestingly, while Devitt's comments suggest the study of multiple standards benefits all students, Lyne, as noted above, believes white privileged students have the most to gain from studying non-standard forms. His remarks nevertheless illuminate 'marginal' students' rhetorical strategies, particularly the prior awareness of language conventions and proficiency using multiple standards that one can expect from 'marginal' students enrolled in private, competitive universities. For this reason, I want to focus on writing by two black students in mycomposition course, essays that emerged through the combined study of literature and writing and represent complex negotiations of students' conflicting memberships in the classroom and in their communities. As I argue in the following section, it is instructive for teachers to acknowledge the diverse forms that students' understanding of language and social power take among marginalized and minority students, an awareness with pedagogical applications for all students.

Negotiating Classroom Identity

Not surprisingly, the three black students in the class wrote about Black English in the assignment described above. {2} I will be concentrating on writing by Rob, from Brooklyn, New York, by way of Jamaica, and Jackie, also from Brooklyn.{3} Jackie had spent her whole life in New York City, and Rob had immigrated from Jamaica as a child. Both spoke Standard English during class, without discernible New York or Jamaican accents. They used Black English occasionally for classroom banter with one another, indicating that their readings of the literature were grounded in experiences negotiating multiple standards.

Victor Villanueva's categorization of immigrant and minority are helpful in comparing Rob's and Jackie's responses to the literature. Generalizing, Villanueva indicates that the immigrant seeks to take on the culture of the majority. And the majority, given certain preconditions, not the least of which is displaying the language and dialect of the majority, accepts the immigrant. The minority, even when accepting the culture of the majority, is never wholly accepted (23). I suspect Rob's "immigrant" status and Jackie's "minority" status may account for their disparate attitudes toward Black English. Rob readily embraces it, while Jackie is more hesitant about its use, especially in institutional settings. As an immigrant, Rob may feel comfortable celebrating Black English, either because his self-identification as Jamaican frees him from the cultural stigma associated with Black English or because his experience in Jamaica enables him to view Black English as a majority language. Jackie's writing, on the other hand, shows she is more attuned to the social realities of discrimination, a position informed by an awareness that, to borrow Villanueva's words, "the minority, even when accepting the culture of the majority, is never wholly accepted" (23). Significantly, both students were writing with an awareness that their essay would be shared with

classmates in small peer review groups. Such awareness of audience, coupled with their instructor's palpable uneasiness discussing race, likely mitigated their rhetorical strategies.

The only essay to unproblematically accept Black English, Rob's paper opens with a paragraph contrasting black speech to standard written English: It ain't no jive talk. It ain't nothin you see in no schoolbook, no newspapers, or none a them white magazines. It be Black English. Yeah you heard me Black English. It be how I communicate with my people. Yeah I could talk that proper English that those white folks talk, but it ain't of no use to me. I live with the black folks, so I speak like the black folks ... I sees all them other Chinese, French, and Spanish havin they language teached in school, why they ain't be teachin my language?

Like Geneva Smitherman in *Talkin and Testifyin* (1977), Rob substitutes Black English for conventional academic prose, though he reverts to Standard English for the following four pages, possibly because of the constraints of the writing class. The opening passage nevertheless allows him to discuss Black English by example, calling attention to its conversational dimension. This opening paragraph identifies the social privilege of languages taught in schools and asks why educational institutions demand speakers of Black English give up their culture. The way he poses this question—"why they ain't be teaching my language?"—introduces a topic that emerges throughout the essay, the relationship of language to individual identity.

By treating language as a matter of self-identification rather than group identification, Rob seems to dissociate himself from minority groups and facilitate his own assimilation. When he writes about Black English, he ignores the social discrimination many users of Black English encounter, focusing instead on himself, whom he describes as "a black individual from a culture rich in history, intelligence, and perseverance." In emphasizing his distinctiveness and overlooking the details of black "history," "culture," and "perserverance"—all potential euphemisms for slavery—I suspect he is also enacting white society's fashionable "acceptance" of diversity in cases where difference is minimized or ignored.

Rob's reading of the literature similarly stresses selves in isolation, apart from consideration of racism in society. He interprets "Doc's Story" mainly as a disagreement between two lovers:

> The main character of the piece loses a woman that he feels strongly about due to her inability to understand his language, his culture. In his culture, language is a means of passing down cultural information from generation to generation. We get the impression that the woman he longs for is white. White, a culture which mainly uses literature as its main means of passing along cultural information. In essence, she speaks one language and he another.

Although Rob acknowledges differences in black and white literacies and language use, his analysis of the lovers' conflict avoids detailed consideration of race relations or the relative social power of these literacies. This strategy deflects attention from contemporary educational inequalities and historical racism—stereotypes of black male rapists, for example—that plague interracial romance. I see Rob's focus on the characters in the story as an attempt to avoid confronting discrimination on a broader, societal level. At the same time, literature like Wideman's offers a useful starting place for discussions of race in composition classrooms. By discussing race in the context of fictional stories, students enter a zone from which they can draw examples. I personally would have liked Rob to go further in his discussion, but I need to remind myself of the difficult position in which he found himself. Had he included more concrete, analytical discussion of racial inequalities in his essay, he may very well have jeopardized his assimilation into the classroom community.

Jackie's essay is more attentive to racial and linguistic minorities' exclusion from dominant culture. Her essay suggests ambivalence toward Black English, a conflict that I read in terms of allegiance to her racial identity and awareness, similar to Kendra Crawley's, that Black English is perceived as deficient within white professional and academic spheres. She opens her essay with an insistence on racial pride, but she separates blackness from Black English, or at least demands that the two are not synonymous: "Say it LOUD. I'm Black and I'm proud. Proud of jazz music, collard greens, kinky hair, black-eyed peas, corn bread, Black English. Black English?" Her doubts about whether Black English falls into the category of black achievement is a steady theme: I don't regard Black English as improper English and I embrace it as part of African American culture. Just because something deviates from the standard, it is not necessarily improper. Black English is present in our speech, our literature (Toni Morrison and Alice Walker), and in our music (the blues, rap). However, I do view Black English as a barrier to success. Black English is not widely recognized as a language and therefore there is a time and a place for its use. Black English can be appropriately used to express a point. However, itobviously cannot be spoken in a professional or educational setting, if the goal is to succeed in mainstream America. I have little or no chance of getting a job, if I tell a prospective employer, "I really be wantin a job here cause I ain't got no job right now."

Even as she dissociates herself from blacks who speak only Black English, Jackie consistently identifies herself as

black throughout the essay. Her references to “our literature” and “our music” are interesting in this respect; her position as one of three black students in the class may have prompted her to select authors and types of music that have been embraced and appropriated by the white mainstream, such as Toni Morrison’s fiction or the rap music enjoyed by white suburban teens. Her stereotype of unemployment, resembling the tropes her white classmates used in their papers, is a more clear-cut indicator of her desire for membership in mainstream culture, complicated, no doubt, by a fear that other students or potential employers may assume she lacks competence in the standard language.

Like the non-mainstream students Lyne describes, Rob and Jackie are already adept code-switchers who bring an arsenal of rhetorical strategies to the writing classroom. Even though Rob supports its use unproblematically and Jackie criticizes Black English, the essays’ mutual insistence on “sameness”—in Rob’s case the equivalence of all language and in Jackie’s the similarities between her views and her white classmates’—can be interpreted as an appeal to their teacher and classmates. I would imagine that the two also weighed their seemingly contradictory affiliations in their home communities and on campus. Perhaps they sought to fit into the white undergraduate community while simultaneously recognizing the personal costs of assimilation and the likelihood of rejection. Forced into the role of representative blacks in a group of white students, Rob and Jackie were probably constrained by a sense that their comments could be perceived as a larger “black perspective” rather than their own opinions. By giving voice to the realities of racism, they could very well antagonize other students, as well as the teacher who had remained so quiet about the subject of race during discussion. Our collective silence may have signaled to Rob and Jackie that their audience sought a non-confrontational, non-divisive meditation on Black English. Regardless of these speculations, their essays illustrate Rob’s and Jackie’s commitment to and ease adjusting their language use according to the demands of the situation. With that in mind, I want to briefly consider their essays’ conclusions.

Rob concludes his paper with humanist generalizations that accentuate equivalent exchange:

> Disparities in language not only cause miscommunication, but separation. A barrier that cannot be broken unless we begin to try and understand each other. We speak the same language and yet at the same time we create a world of confusion and hatred. The ability to speak the same language is something that should unite us.

Like his theme of individuality, Rob’s references to “understanding” and his announcement that Black English and Standard English constitute “the same language” mask racial difference. The essay does not address racism, violence, or prejudice overtly, and the euphemistic reference to “confusion and hatred” could be seen as a maxim or a cliche. Consistent with the silence his teachers and classmates appeared to value, however, this refusal to confront social reality is necessary in order to claim black and white languages are of equal status. By withholding concrete signifiers of racial difference and disparate social opportunity from the essay, Rob lets the discussion take place on a comfortable abstract level that I view as a strategy for membership in the group.

Taking a different tactic for membership, Jackie’s essay announces a position on Black English overtly compatible with her perceptions of white students’ views. Her insistence that “there is an appropriate time and place for the use of Black English,” for example, shapes her response to Jordan’s class and their letter to the police. According to Jackie, because Jordan’s class understood that the police and the media would reject their letter if it were in Black English, their choice was inappropriate: “Personally, I think that if they were going to speak like that, then maybe they should have stayed silent. The purpose of language is to *effectively* communicate. One of the most important elements of writing is to keep your audience in mind.”

While keeping her white audience is mind seems to be an organizing principle of Jackie’s essay, her conclusion is particularly interesting in this respect. Here, her writing could be interpreted as a mockery of Black English akin to her earlier remark about the job interview. Or, it could be an example of code-switching analogous to Smitherman’s: “On a final note, if you wanna be succeedin in this here society, speak da language. You ain’t hear what dey be sayin’? When you in Rome you better be doin what dem Romans be doin. In other words, if you want to *effectively*communicate, speak Standard English.” This passage allows Jackie to demonstrate her fluency in both languages, announce a position synonymous with the class’s prevailing attitude, and simultaneously illustrate Black English’s verbal artistry. Despite the claim that Standard English is the language of “effective” communication, the sentences in Black English actually prove the opposite of what the Standard English sentence announces—they too communicate effectively, showing the necessity of Black English for expressing particular views. This interaction between two standards allows Jackie to outwardly reject her spokesperson status in white culture while less obviously choosing a mix that combines the two standards she uses.

A pessimistic reading of this class’s response to non-standard language could claim that the “Standards of English” unit fell short of its goal of unmasking Standard English’s “correctness.” I now recognize that the failure to include white writers maintained a sense that white language is normative. Moreover, my own discomfort with race prevented

me from helping privileged students, as Lyne suggests, acknowledge the invisible academic and professional opportunities that accompany use of the standard language.{4} A more troubling aspect of the class was that the black students became ambassadors of Black English whose language use became a matter of speculation for the entire class. In light of Rob's and Jackie's responses, one could argue that, rather than teaching white students to see themselves as raced, the environment in the class prompted black students to position themselves in various ways as "unraced" as they strove for assimilation and acceptance.

Further Implications

As Rob's and Jackie's negotiations show, writing classes are zones in which multiple languages and literacies come together, as they do in society, and conflicts between the "standard" and other forms necessarily arise. Rob's and Jackie's dissimilar views of Black English are particularly instructive in this respect, and their remarks illustrate the complex and diverse attitudes toward Black English among its users. Although the students attending the university described above came to college as sophisticated writers, exploring multiple standards through literature may be a particularly salient choice in teaching students identified as "basic writers," a label frequently applied to students who have not mastered the standard. Among non-white or working-class students who are not linguistically dominant, literary study could be an empowering activity that validates their "home languages" while teaching strategies for meeting arange of rhetorical situations.

Whether we conceptualize students' language in terms of discursive proficiency or standards used and mastered, studying literature in writing courses allows students and teachers to probe the social significance of all language choices. As indicated above, however, this new emphasis challenges two centuries of literature and language pedagogy founded on a belief that literature and students' writing are disparate kinds of language. Even as recently as Lindemann and Tate's 1993 *College English* debate about the teaching of literature in composition, the two, regardless of their disparate positions about whether to teach literature in composition courses, reached a tacit consensus: when literature and writing are included in the same course, they involve two different categories of language (Lindemann 311; Tate 317). Peter Elbow bemoaned this widespread belief in 2002, announcing, "I'm sad that the composition tradition seems to assume discursive language as the norm and imaginative, metaphorical language as somehow special or marked or additional" ("Opinion" 536).

Fortunately, Elbow and others are beginning to identify ways in which teaching literature and writing together as language allows these struggles to become part of English curricula. Elbow's *What is English?* (1990) and Robert Scholes's *The Rise and Fall of English* (1998) argue that English studies must stop separating literary study from other investigations of language use. Both envision language study, which would situate literature in relation to other forms of language, as more suited to the highly textualized, heteroglossic quality of contemporary life. Similarly eager to bridge literary study and students' apprehension of language, James Berlin's last work, *Rhetorics, Poetics, and Cultures: Reconfiguring College English Studies* (1996) proposes a "rhetorically constituted English studies" committed to preparing students for participation in democracy. Here, he calls for an English studies that challenges the hierarchy between "poetic" or literary works and rhetorical texts, including students' writing, so as to stress the extent to which all discourse is implicated in structuring consciousness (xvii). Perhaps the most far-reaching vision of a revised English studies, David Bleich's recent work on the "materiality of language" identifies all language as "material," having a "palpable weight" in society that erases the distinctions between literature, writing, and speech and allows English pedagogy to engage them simultaneously ("Materiality" 123).

As these scholars maintain, English studies must reinvent itself in response to new student populations and changes in society and technology. Consistent with these proposed changes to English studies, composition pedagogy has an opportunity to allow literature to speak to and with language standards otherwise ignored in educational contexts. In this way, teachers and students may work together to engage the uneasy, at times oppositional, yet inevitably dialogic relationships encompassing language and literature, school and society.

Notes

1. David Bleich's *Know and Tell* offers a similar reading of Jordan's class (44-51). As the class responds to police violence, making a public statement in a genre of Black English, they recognize that "to choose to act, speak, or write in a genre is to make a social choice that matters"(49). (Return to text.)
2. Students' writing is cited with their written permission. All students' names have been changed. (Return to text.)

3. The third black student, a Nigerian man whose family lives in Houston, submitted a research paper for this assignment. Since he did not respond to the literature, I will not be discussing his writing in depth in this essay. (Return to text.)
4. Retrospectively, could I reconceive this unit, I would have assigned literature by white writers who do and do not use Standard English, including works identified as regional literature, women's literature, and youth literature, so as to broaden the binary thinking this class experienced. Works that may have problematized the notion of a singular standard include "regional" literature by Eudora Welty and Harper Lee; "women's" literature like Helen Fielding's *Bridget Jones's Diary* , also notable for its use of British English; and youth-identified literature like Douglas Coupland's *Generation X* . (Return to text.)

Works Cited

Barnett, Timothy. "Reading 'Whiteness' in English Studies." *College English* 63 (2000): 9-37.

Berlin, James. *Rhetorics, Poetics, and Cultures: Reconfiguring College English Studies*. Urbana: NCTE, 1996.

Bleich, David. *Know and Tell*. Portsmouth: Heinemann, 1998.

—. "The Materiality of Language and the Pedagogy of Exchange." *Pedagogy* 1.1 (2001): 117-41.

Brody, Miriam. *Manly Writing: Gender, Rhetoric, and the Rise of Composition*. Carbondale: Southern Illinois UP, 1993.

Cisneros, Sandra. "No Speak English." *The House on Mango Street*. New York: Vintage, 1989. 76-8.

—. "Woman Hollering Creek." *Woman Hollering Creek*. New York: Vintage, 1991. 43-56.

Connors, Robert J. *Composition-Rhetoric: Background, Theory, and Pedagogy*. Pittsburgh: U of Pittsburgh P, 1997.

Coupland, Douglas. *Generation X*. New York: St. Martin's, 1991.

Crowley, Sharon. *Composition in the University*. Pittsburgh: U of Pittsburgh P, 1998.

Devitt, Amy J. "Genre as Language Standard." *Genre and Writing: Issues, Arguments, Alternatives*. Eds. Wendy Bishop and Hans Ostrom. Portsmouth: Boynton/Cook, 1997. 45-55.

Elbow, Peter. "Opinion: The Cultures of Literature and Composition." *College English* 64 (2002): 533-546.

—. *What is English?* New York: MLA, 1990.

Fielding, Helen. *Bridget Jones's Diary*. New York: Viking Press, 1998.

Gamer, Michael. "Fictionalizing the Disciplines: Literature and the Boundaries of Knowledge." *College English* 57 (1995): 281-86.

Jordan, June. "Nobody Mean More to Me than You and the Future Life of Willie Jordan." *On Call*. Boston: South End Press, 1985. 123-40.

Lakoff, Robin Tolmach. "Ebonics—It's Chronic." *The Language War*. Berkeley: U of California P, 2000. 227-51.

Lindemann, Erika. "Freshman Composition: No Place for Literature." *College English* 55(1993): 311-16.

Lyne, William. "White Purposes." *Genre and Writing: Issues, Arguments, Alternatives.* Eds. Wendy Bishop and Hans Ostrom. Portsmouth: Boynton/Cook, 1997. 73-80.

Miller, Susan. *Textual Carnivals: The Politics of Composition.* Carbondale: Southern Illinois UP, 1991.

Morrison, Toni. *Playing in the Dark: Whiteness and the Literary Imagination*. New York: Vintage, 1992.

Richardson, Mark. "Who Killed Annabel Lee: Writing about Literature in the Composition Classroom." *College English*66 (2004): 278-93.

Scholes, Robert. *The Rise and Fall of English: Reconstructing English as a Discipline.* New Haven: Yale UP, 1998.

Smitherman, Geneva. *Talkin and Testifyin: The Language of Black America*. Boston: Houghton, 1977.

Spears, Arthur K. "African-American Language Use: Ideology and So-Called Obscenity." *African-American Language: Structure, History, Use.* Eds. Salikoko S. Mufwene et. al. New York: Routledge, 1998. 226-50.

Steinberg, Erwin. "Imaginative Literature in Composition Classrooms?" *College English* 57 (1995): 266-80.

Tate, Gary. "A Place for Literature in Freshman Composition." *College English* 55 (1993): 317-21.

Wideman, John Edgar. "Doc's Story." *Fever.* New York: Henry Holt and Company, 1989. 1-11.

—. "Signs." *All Stories are True*. New York: Vintage, 1992. 74-95.

Villanueva, Victor. *Bootstraps: From an American Academic of Color.* Urbana: NCTE, 1993.

"Standards of English" from *Composition Forum* 14.2 (Fall 2005)