

# Represent, Representin', Representation: The Efficacy of Hybrid Texts in the Writing Classroom

Donald McCrary

*ABSTRACT: The article explores the use of hybrid linguistic texts in the writing classroom, both as articles of study and possible models of composition. Standard English linguistic supremacy prevents many students from using their full range of linguistic knowledge. The inclusion of hybrid texts in the writing classroom might help students, in particular working class and non-white students, to establish a linguistic and cultural connection between the beliefs and practices of the academy and those of their home communities. In addition to analyzing hybrid discourse from a popular urban magazine, a newspaper article, a scholarly article, and literary non-fiction, the article analyzes several student responses to hybrid literacy narratives and several student literacy autobiographies that use hybrid discourse. The article argues that students' reading and writing of hybrid texts might increase their awareness of language and eradicate the negative consequences of standard English supremacy.*

Among many of the hip hop generation there is a mandate to “represent,” which means to display one’s skill and knowledge or express one’s home identity in any given social situation. Some of my students “represent” in my writing classroom through dress—oversized clothing, baseball caps, doo rags, and bling—and attitude—laid back, non-committal, and unimpressed. When my students “represent,” they see themselves as embracing their identities and cultures in the midst of academia, as playas in the college game rather than the game of college playin’ them.

While the academy permits my students to “represent” in dress and attitude, it does not extend this courtesy to student language. In the academy, students are told, in a variety of ways, to leave their native language at the door and embrace, instead, standard English. However begrudgingly, most

---

**Donald McCrary** is Associate Professor of English at Long Island University/Brooklyn, where he teaches undergraduate courses in developmental, college, and advanced writing, and American literature. In the graduate program, he teaches sociolinguistics, composition theory, and rhetoric. His articles have been published in *College Composition and Communication* and *Journal of Basic Writing*. Currently, he is writing a book about African American rhetoric.

students heed the academy's dictate and try to acquire standard English; still, there are some students who, as Marilyn Cooper and Michael Holzman explain, see standard English acquisition and school itself as "the negation of the home (and of the street), its values the negation of their values, its skills hopelessly beside the point in a different—more pressing—context." (165). These students know that acquiring standard English doesn't necessarily mean they're going to get the paper, the chedda, the cream they desire. They know that acquiring standard English doesn't mean they can live where they want or do what they like—such as get a Manhattan cab driver to take them to Brooklyn after 8:00 p.m. They also know that their native language has served them very well in negotiating the often difficult public and private terrains of their lives.

Like my students, I know the value of my native language, black English, and the significance it has played in both my public and private life. However, many would challenge my claim that black English is both a public and private language. For example, in "Aria: A Memoir of a Bilingual Childhood," Richard Rodriguez argues for the separation of home and school languages because he believes the former is private while the latter is public: "They do not seem to realize that a person is individuated in two ways. So they do not realize that, while one suffers a diminished sense of *private* individuality by being assimilated into public society, such assimilation makes possible the achievement of *public* individuality" (231). I, however, view black English as a public language because it is the language with which I learned about the world, including the perils of racism, the importance of education, and the consequences of improper conduct. When Moms told me, "Don't go showin' your ass when I take you in this store," I knew she was telling me to behave respectfully, and I knew what would happen if I didn't. The black English I learned at home is the same black English I used outside the home. It got black people through slavery, and it saved my black behind a thousand times.

Hold up. I know what you gonna say. Talkin' that black English is okay at home and with your friends, but don't be speakin' that foolishness in school or at the j-o-b. And don't be tellin' no students they can speak that mess either. You want people (read: white) to think they ignorant? Right. Right. I hear you. I hear you. But let's be real. America loves itself some black English. Half the announcers on ESPN speak it, and I'm talking about the white dudes, too. Americans know more black English than they like to admit. Black English is intelligible and intelligent, and just because somebody tells you different, don't necessarily make it so. And that's what I want the

academy to understand. My students don't speak no broken English. They speak a legitimate dialect that conveys legitimate meanings.

Don't get me wrong. I'm not saying that students should write exclusively in black English, or any other non-standard English language. Instead, I'm preachin' hybrid discourse, and one of the languages students use should be standard English because that is the language the academy knows best, and successful communication is an important concern. However, students should be allowed to combine standard English with other languages when they speak and write in the academy. Elsewhere I have argued that "students should be encouraged to experiment with hybrid discourses because they more accurately reflect the complex linguistic abilities that students—in particular other-literate students—possess" (54). As Elaine Richardson observes, "Effective language education deals with the *total* linguistic, cultural, and historical background of the learner. This background should be taken into account to more fully facilitate the acquisition of additional language registers and styles" (19). Students should be given the opportunity to express meanings in a language that is representational of their linguistic knowledge and complexity. They should be allowed to produce hybrid discourse, an idea and practice that other scholars have utilized in the classroom, including Kermit E. Campbell, Henry L. Evans, Xin Lu Gale, Judith Hebb, and Kelvin Monroe. In fact, I'd like to give particular dap to Keith Gilyard and Elaine Richardson, who, in "Students' Right to Possibility: Basic Writing and African American Rhetoric," blow up the linguistic spot by allowing their students to utilize their different languages in relation to meaningful course content. So, in essence, I'm bitin' from the work of others, but appropriation is honored among black folks, as long as you improvise, too.

An important feature of language is hybridity, which my man, Mikhail Bakhtin, describes as "a mixture of two social languages within the limits of a single utterance, an encounter, within the arena of an utterance, between two different linguistic consciousnesses from one another by an epoch, by social differentiation or by some other factor" (358). Although many in the academy construe academic discourse as a noetic field, which James Berlin defines as "a closed system defining what can, and cannot, be known; the nature of the knower, the known, the audience, and the nature of language" (2), according to deconstruction theory, all language contains fissures, breaks, and absences that reveal the nature of the discourse and allow linguistic penetration. When we talk about the importance of Bakhtinian theory and hybridity for the writing classroom, we often ignore what John Trimbur calls "dissensus," which

Mary Kennedy describes as a sociolinguistic ground “against which writers can develop and distinguish, their own voices, their difference, and in this way make a contribution to larger conversations” (88). Contribution is something we need to dig on because that is what is denied to many other-literate students in the academy—the freedom to make a contribution to academic discourse by using their own language or voices and the values embedded within them. Using hybrid discourse would allow students to identify and reconcile their encounters with different languages, to shape them into a single utterance representative of their linguistic knowledge, to make a valuable contribution to academic discourse. Moreover, we should not ignore the heteroglossic nature of language, by which, according to Bakhtin, [a]ll words have the “taste” of a profession, a genre, a tendency, a part, a particular work, a particular person, a generation, an age group, the date and hour. Each word tastes of the context and contexts in which it has lived its socially charged life” (292). If we follow Bakhtinian theory, then language derives from participation in specific communities, and my students’ use of words such as “frontin’” or “representin,’” carries with them the political, social, cultural, and political beliefs and values of all those who have uttered those words. To deny the use of any language in the academy is tantamount to devaluing the social contexts in which that language is created and expressed. Such a move privileges one set of ideologies over other ideologies that may be both intellectually and personally expressive to students. Rather than prevent students from fully participating in academic discourse by erecting walls of linguistic intolerance, cross-cultural communication might be encouraged between the academy and students, enacting what David E. Hollinger calls “affiliation,” which “suggests a greater measure of flexibility consistent with a postethnic eagerness to promote communities of consent” (7). As Victor Villanueva tells us, “When we demand a certain language, a certain dialect, and a certain rhetorical manner, we seem to be working counter to the cultural multiplicity that we seek” (183). Take that and rewind it back, as the rapper Ludacris might say. Privileging standard English is “working counter to the cultural multiplicity that we seek.”

It’s time to fish or cut bait. If we really believe in cultural multiplicity, if we’re not just making noise but want to bring the noise, then we have to get serious about what we say and do with language in our classrooms. Either our students’ lives and cultures—and language is a central aspect of both—have meaning, or they don’t. Either students have a right to their own language, or they don’t. Either we’re real multiculturalists or we’re bootleg multiculturalists, and the bootlegs sold in my neighborhood ain’t worth a damn.

Constructed largely through intracultural rhetoric—the languages that different groups speak within their cultures—hybrid discourse can be found in such diverse English forms as sermons, novels, songs, poetry, and non-fiction writing. For example, Laura L. Behling locates hybridity among many multicultural American writers, including some African-American writers such as Charles Chestnutt, Zora Neale Hurston, and Charles Johnson who “use culture-specific myths or language and style from oral traditions . . . to doubly challenge traditional canonicity . . .” (416). We see the use of hybrid discourse in Terry McMillan’s short story, “Ma’Dear,” in which the widowed narrator, Hazel, discusses one of the male suitors she endured after her husband’s death:

Chester Rutledge almost worked ’ceptin’ he was boring, never had nothing on his mind worth talking about; claimed he didn’t think about nothing besides me. Said his mind was always clear and visible. He just moved around like a zombie and worked hard at the cement foundry. Insisted on giving me his paychecks, which I kindly took for a while, but when I didn’t want to be bothered no more, I stopped taking the money. He got on my nerves too bad, so I had to tell him I’d rather have a man with no money and a busy mind, least I’d know he’s active somewheres. His feelings was hurt bad and he cussed me out, but we still friends to this very day. He in the home, you know, and I visits him regular. Takes him magazines and cuts out his horoscope and the comic strips for the newspaper and lets him read ’em’ in correct order. (458)

Hazel is seventy-two years old, and her language reflects her age; however, it seems clear that her speech, or more precisely McMillan’s writing, reflects a mixture of black English and standard English forms. One cannot ignore that McMillan is rendering Hazel’s narrative in writing because the language follows standard English conventions, including the coordination of independent clauses, proper use of commas, punctuation of interjections, and verb tense consistency. Despite the use of black English, note the consistent formation of the verb series in this sentence: “Takes him magazines and cuts out his horoscope and the comic strips for the newspaper and lets him read em.” McMillan is using a standard English grammar convention to construct a sentence in black English. This narrative represents the very conscious efforts of a writer to use her knowledge of two languages to render a fictional narrative reminiscent of the speech of a particular black person at a particular time.

We can't talk about hybrid academic discourse without giving big props and much love to Geneva Smitherman, linguist supreme, whose groundbreaking 1977 *Talkin and Testifyin: The Language of Black America* paved the way for scholarly hybrid discourse. Other academics have embraced hybridity, as Patricia Bizzell informs us in "Hybrid Forms of Academic Discourses: What, Why, How." Exploring the texts of a range of academic writers—Mike Rose, Keith Gilyard, Victor Villanueva, and Helen Fox—Bizzell demonstrates how these writers' use of hybridity "is greater than the sum of its parts, accomplishing intellectual work that could not be done in either of the discourses alone" (13). A more recent example of hybrid academic discourse is an essay by the genre crossing Lee A. Tonouchi published in *College English*. In this excerpt from the essay, Tonouchi uses hybrid discourse to discuss the prejudice speakers of Hawaiian Pidgin endure:

In da real world get planny Pidgin prejudice, ah. Dey, da ubiquitous dey, dey is everywea brah, dey say dat da perception is dat da standard English talker is going automatically be perceive fo' be mo' intelligent than da Pidgin talker regardless wot dey talking, jus from HOW dey talking. Get studies dat show dis kine speech biases and discriminations, but I no need really look da studies, cuz I can see dis happening insai my classrooms. (76)

Say what you will about Tonouchi's writing, I for one know exactly what he's saying, and to me, his use of Hawaiian Pidgin gives his ideas more depth, makes them more representational of the people for whom he's speaking. His Pidgin represents a specific history and culture lived by a specific people, who no longer seem mere objects of study, as they do in most academic accounts of their lives, but real living, breathing subjects.

In my own classroom practice, I use hybrid texts to help students to understand that their primary language holds meaning even outside their home environments, and that this language is capable of expressing and supporting complex thoughts. I use hybrid texts to awaken my students to the possibilities and use of language, to heighten their awareness of how language works and to what purpose. A central component of language acquisition is active engagement with language, and my students find the hybrid texts extremely interesting and familiar, responding to them with confidence, comprehension, and commitment. My goal is not to have my students parrot or reproduce hybrid discourse of their own, although I make it available to them as a rhetorical option. Rather, my goal is to help my students to recognize that although

standard English is a dialect of the powerful, it is not the only dialect with which people can make powerful meanings. My goal is to help students understand that other dialects, say, black English, are equally legitimate, and that privileging standard English is undergirded by social, political, and economic forces, not linguistic legitimacy. Most importantly, my goal is to help my students use a fuller range of their linguistic competencies as they communicate to and within the academy. To awaken students to their own linguistic competence, I ask them to read, discuss, and write about hybrid texts and literacy autobiographies, some of which employ hybrid discourse, and all of which speak to their own cultural realities. To facilitate further this linguistic exploration and play, I ask students to write literacy autobiographies and encourage them to use hybrid discourse as a means to representing and enacting their own linguistic knowledge. In what follows, I will discuss, respectively, several of the assigned hybrid texts, several student journal responses to assigned literacy autobiographies, and several student literacy autobiographies that are suffused with hybrid language. I have masked the identities of the students I use in my discussion.

Many popular culture magazines, including *XXL*, *Vibe*, *Don Diva*, and *DUBS*, acknowledge the sophistication and diverse interests of their audiences by infusing their articles with hybrid discourse that demonstrates knowledge of both black and mainstream language and culture. Of the different magazines on the market, *Slam* is quite interesting because it is one of the first sports magazines written for the hip hop generation. Taking its title from an expression for dunking a basketball that originated in black urban youth culture, *Slam* magazine offers articles about professional, college, and high school basketball that through hybrid discourse both celebrate and tweak basketball and mainstream traditions. Particularly illustrative of hybridity within *Slam* is the “Trash Talk” column, a letters to the editor feature that combines basketball acumen, urban contemporary black English, and standard English written correspondence conventions. Here is a letter from the February 2005 issue:

Yo Slam!:

What’s up from Poolesville High school—it’s first period and I’m lookin’ at my mail from today and what do I find? T-Mac givin’ me a cold stare. I was like, “hell yeah! My boy T-Mac on the cover!. The whole issue was off the chain! But I got a question: How come you don’t put my other main man J-Dub (Jason Williams for all the Slim Shadys that don’t know the name) on the cover? Have you seen the

new jerseys? They look sick. All I'm saying is look at the Nuggets. First they suck, then with some new gear and Carmelo, they make it to the playoffs. So I'm sayin' that Memphis makes a good run at the championship this year. But hey, I might be wrong, that's just what I'm sayin'.

PS: Yo, I need a job like Shaq needs a foul shot. Do you think you could hook a bro up with an internship or somethin'? (19)

Although I don't necessarily condone a high school student reading his mail during class, the letter writer does demonstrate comfort and skill playing with and within the conventional letter format, presenting a salutation that combines formal convention with an urban contemporary black English phrase—"Yo"—which can be translated as "hello" or "how are you?" In addition to colloquialisms such as "I got a question," "How come you don't," and "I was like," the writer uses modern black English phrases such as "off the chain," "they look sick," "All I'm saying," and "hook a bro up," as well as basketball lexicon such as "T-Mac," "J-Dub" and "new gear," to confirm his membership in the *Slam* discourse community, honoring but disrupting the traditional letter to the editor convention. As in a traditional letter of this genre, the writer responds to an article or idea in the previous issue of the periodical, using the letter as an opportunity to praise the previous issue but lobby for the inclusion of one of his favorite players, Jason Williams, on the cover. The writer anticipates the opposing view that Williams plays for the average Memphis Grizzlies and might not deserve to be on the cover by comparing the team's present situation to that of the 2004 Denver Nuggets. The present/refute strategy is a difficult one to teach, and it is interesting to see a high school student using it so deftly, as well as other forms of argument. In fact, in the postscript, the writer uses both argument and metaphor to convince the editors to give him an internship. Throughout the letter, the writer uses black English words and generational basketball lingo to create a hybrid form that is nonetheless comprehensible to a mainstream audience because it also employs a conventional letter form. There is an exuberance, an atmosphere of linguistic play in all the "Trash Talk" letters, the readers engaged in lively debates about topics in which they are invested. For those who believe that letter writing is a dying art form in America, in particular among young people, the "Trash Talk" participants clearly challenge that notion. Furthermore, the letters column challenges the belief that black English is unintelligible. In *Slam*, writers from diverse ethnic and racial backgrounds—including many white readers—exhibit



facility with hybrid discourse, demonstrating the linguistic availability of both standard and non-standard dialects.

Greg Tate, whose groundbreaking 1992 essay collection, *Flyboy in the Buttermilk*, helped awaken me to hybrid discourse, demonstrates his linguistic fluidity in a more recent article about the white rapper Eminem, written for the alternative New York weekly, the *Village Voice*. Adopting hybrid discourse allows one the freedom to acknowledge and address different audiences. In "White Freedom," Tate reviews Eminem's latest cd, *Encore*, arguing that Eminem's "exercise of white privilege," which both inflates and constrains his artistry, fails to express the essence of black art:

It [Eminem's exercise of white freedom] has also found him scribed on the covers of hip hop magazines as the greatest living rapper, which always makes me laugh and think of how predisposed white supremacy has made even colored journalists crown any white man that takes a Black art form to the bank, to mo' money than Shine ever seen, as the greatest who ever lived. Fred Astaire, Benny Goodman, Elvis, Eric Clapton, Larry Bird, take your pick. As if any of them understood the kind of casual fatalism I overheard on 116<sup>th</sup> and Adam Clayton Powell the other day, where one brother say to another, straight-faced and not a hint of irony, "He'll be out soon, he didn't get much time, he only got 10 more years." All that August Wilson sheet in other words. The real Black Angst. The kind of angst that only the burdensome, belaboring crucible of white supremacy could twist into those bizarre, contorted, and comforting expressions of Black Pleasure and Irony known as bebop and hip hop and the blues. (84)

Greg Tate constructs a discourse that weaves black and standard English to produce a linguistic quilt of sophisticated and complex critique. Tate combines black English forms such as "mo' money than Shine has ever seen," "one brother say to another," and "all that other August Wilson sheet in other words" with stylized standard English expressions such as "casual fatalism," "belaboring crucible of white supremacy," and "contorted, and comforting expressions" to create a stylish and engaging critique of Eminem's music and its relation to both the black world and the greater society. Tate honors his audience by expecting them to make the linguistic leaps with him, using different cultural, historical and political references as he freely selects language that captures his own complex knowledge of the world. Tate anticipates au-

dience knowledge of both Shine and Benny Goodman, both Adam Clayton Powell and Eric Clapton. Moreover, he gives as much privilege to the phrase “mo’ money than Shine ever seen” as he does to “belaboring crucible of white supremacy.” Tate uses a raw urban sentiment “he only got 10 more years” to uncover the “kind of angst” that is created by a black experience that suffers from the cruelties of white supremacy but struggles to find a way to express adequately that condition, a condition, Tate argues, of which Eminem is blessedly ignorant. Overall, Tate’s discourse is driven by rhetorical purpose rather than so called correctness, which prompts him, for example, to use the antiquated and, in some contexts, offensive word “colored” because it evokes an idea of an oppressive thinking and social condition.

Donnell Alexander is another young black writer who luxuriates in hybrid forms. Alexander’s autobiography, *Ghetto Celebrity*, is suffused with different voices and perspectives about language, sometimes intermingled, sometimes isolated, but always demonstrative of a writer who embraces and utilizes his multiple linguistic selves. In this brief excerpt from his book, Alexander writes about the unexamined racism exhibited by his editors at an “alternative” newspaper:

**MY TOP EDITORS WANTED CRIME STORIES FROM ME— WASN’T THAT WHAT** hip hop was about? – and if you couldn’t come up with that, pieces that posited niggas as pure victims would suffice. The *Weekly* was supposedly embracing diversity, but I was the only one who had to be diverse. The editorial mavens only deigned to see their favorite agendas in the vastness of my black mess: sexism, crime, poverty, whatever—when also up in there were jokes and camaraderies, spirituality and innovation. . . . What my bosses received well was writing about race that fell into the category my colleague Ernest Hardy named Water-Is-Wet Journalism. Water-Is-Wet material got praise and good placement within my host newsprint providers when it succeeded, foremost, at edifying white people. And I could dig that; that was they hustle. But when exploring racial issues relevant to LA’s nonwhite majority (or some breathing subset thereof), I had to burn a ridiculous amount of space and energy explaining facts that were basic if you weren’t white and/or middle class. In writing about the current lives of the 1965 graduates of Jordan High School in Watts, I first had to explain that Watts wasn’t always a terrible place to live. Niggas knew that shit. Water is wet. And, my flow suffered. (145-46)

Beginning the subchapter with boldened capitals, a move that flaunts tradition while calling attention to the text, Alexander exhibits a facile touch with hybrid discourse, the integration, once again, of standard English and black English. Using black English words and phrases such as “niggas,” “up in there,” “that was they hustle,” “niggas knew that shit” and “my flow suffered,” with highly stylized standard English words and phrases such as “posited,” “suffice” “editorial mavens,” “only deigned to see,” and “foremost,” Alexander demonstrates his ease with two languages or dialects without sacrificing meaning. In fact, Alexander employs hybridity to render a rather powerful statement on unconscious racism and the oppression of the white gaze, which demands he write articles that “edify” white people but forestall or prevent any real analysis of his own. Alexander counters this standard English sentence—“I had to burn a ridiculous amount of space and energy explaining facts that were basic if you weren’t white and/or middle class”—with this succinct but linguistically loaded black English sentence—“Niggas knew that shit”—a brief but complex declaration that carries with it the anger, frustration, history, and truth of the many blacks who, under the white gaze, must explain even the simplest realities of black life to an unaware and often disbelieving white audience. Alexander’s writing exemplifies the power of hybrid discourse, which can be utilized in the writing classroom not only to challenge standard English supremacy but also to help students engage in academic discourse in a manner that respects and utilizes the linguistic competence and complex meanings they bring to the classroom.

Before writing the literacy autobiography essay, the students read, discuss, and write about, primarily through journal entries, the various hybrid texts and literacy narratives I assign. In addition to the hybrid texts I have discussed, students read Kelvin Monroe’s “Writin da Funk Dealer: Songs of Reflections and Reflex/shuns,” Maxine Hong Kingston’s “Girlhood Among Ghosts” and an excerpt from Victor Villanueva’s *Bootstraps*. I devote considerable class time to discussing and writing about significant moments within these texts, although I allow students to connect with the texts at their own points of entry. I will discuss student responses to the literacy narratives because they represent a transition between the hybrid texts previously discussed and the literacy autobiography writing assignment. The literacy narratives are written in hybrid discourse and, thus, serve as content and language models for the students’ own writing. The students wrote journal entries, locating significant ideas within the texts. As journals entries, correctness and revision were not concerns. Here is an excerpt from Tamara’s

journal entry on *Bootstraps* in which she discusses the verbal-deprivation theory of black English:

I enjoyed [when] that author talked about spelling. That brought up a lot of memories because I hated spelling as a child. [Although] the author enjoyed spelling his method of memorization never worked for me. I do admit I rarely studied vocabulary words. They were just a pain for me. I do regret doing that because maybe I would have had more verbal stimulation, or more verbal expression . . . which Bereiter talks about in his theory of why Black children do not excel in learning Standard English. I found his theory of Black English to be interesting but not something that is unpredictable. Even though I went to an all white school to get a better education, the advances of the school backfired on me. I was silent in school because of my means of expression which Bereiter talks about. I could not express different things the way my white peers could. I spoke Black English at home, and my peers and teachers were unfamiliar to that. Now though things have changed because Black English is popular amongst white kids.

Tamara ignores or disagrees with Villanueva's negative assessment of Carl Bereiter's research, which links black children's poor school performance to weak language abilities. Tamara was educated in white schools and was often the only black child in her classes. This linguistic/cultural divide was exacerbated by her experiences with neighborhood peers, who would deride her for attempts at speaking standard English. Tamara was certainly in an unenviable sociolinguistic position, and her confusion and pain are evident in her writing. Nonetheless, I think it is valuable for Tamara to explore her literacy experiences to identify her pain and confusion, to give them a name, to begin to understand them and perhaps heal them. Much of Tamara's literacy is constructed around her experience as a person living in two worlds and the languages that separated her from both of them. It will be difficult, I think, for Tamara to reconcile her membership in two distinct discourse communities that seem hostile to one another, but her brave and honest attempts to explore her construction of literacy might help her to make sense of her language knowledge and her feelings about it.

Here is Pamela's response to Villanueva's *Bootstraps*, in fact her response to the Bereiter discussion. Note how it differs from Tamara's response:

The part of the [essay] that was most interesting to me was when the professors performed tests on the black children to gain a better understanding of why they were performing poorly in school. After the tests were taken the professors come up with the solution that “language of the culturally deprived. . . not merely an underdeveloped version of standard English, but. . . basically non-logical mode of expressive behavior.” Instead of the children being labeled as incompetent, it was understood [by Villanueva] that they behaved in that manner because of their environment. The [essay] made me look at a lot of things regarding English and black people differently.

Pamela reads the Bereiter discussion in Villanueva’s text and interprets it quite differently from Tamara. Unlike Tamara, who attended a predominantly white high school, Pamela attended a predominantly black Afrocentric high school in the Northeast. Most of her teachers and classmates were black and black history, culture, and literature were serious objects of study. Pamela’s educational and sociolinguistic experiences allow her to integrate the ideas within Villanueva’s text into a consciousness that, as she puts it earlier in her journal entry, “already [has] an understanding of the struggles we as black people face with literacy.” Understanding the struggles and challenges that many blacks face regarding the societal demand to acquire standard English and dismiss black English, Pamela’s ideas about black people and language are further problematized by her transformed thinking. For Pamela, Villanueva’s text becomes a distinct encounter.

Before I discuss the literacy autobiographies of several students, I will end this part of the discussion with an excerpt from Yolanda’s journal response to Kingston’s “Girlhood Among Ghosts,” a much-anthologized essay that illustrates Kingston’s difficulties negotiating American school class as a Chinese girl. Yolanda is sympathetic toward Kingston’s plight:

Kingston didn’t feel comfortable in her new space and decided to become silent. Her silence for her was her protection against dealing and interacting with people. When asked to speak up, fear overpowered her. Her inability to speak was because she felt like a stranger, an alien invading someone’s territory. I think Kingston couldn’t really handle the pressure of American school mainly because she didn’t receive any help from school, instead of embracing her diversity, teachers and students isolated her and ignored her diversity, [thus] she became a silent creature.

Yolanda's perceptive idea about the refusal of the American school to recognize Kingston's dilemma and help her navigate the social and educational stream is important to understanding the state of literacy in our society. Rather than blame the young Kingston for her inability to integrate successfully into the American school system, Yolanda rightly places the blame on the school system itself, which should recognize Kingston's social and linguistic difference and address those issues proactively and sympathetically. Many of my students shared Kingston's school dilemma, and some of them took complete responsibility for their failure to negotiate the literacy demands of the classroom. The students' embrace of silence was a typical reaction to being thrust into an environment where neither teachers nor students understood or cared about their culture and language. Kingston's essay spoke volumes to many of my students about the inadequacy of most schools to address the problems of bilingual and non-native speakers and the silence this school inadequacy can produce in some students.

After the students thoroughly discussed and wrote about the hybrid texts and literacy autobiographies, some of which employ hybrid discourse, I assigned the literacy autobiography essay to encourage the students to investigate their own history with and feelings about language, in particular the language used at home and school, because the intersection of these two linguistic sites is often where students first experience feelings of language confusion and shame. In writing the essay, the students were encouraged to use the different languages they possess. Here is the writing prompt I gave them:

For this essay, you should explore your literacy practices/experiences and how they affected your formal schooling. If you were not born in America, then you might discuss your home and school literacy practices in both your native country and America. Here are some ideas to consider:

What language did you learn at home? What are/were your reading practices at home? What were your experiences with reading and writing at school? Did your home literacy practice help or hinder your literacy in school? Besides reading and writing, did other experiences—watching television or movies, attending church—affect your literacy? Do you experience any problems with reading or writing in school today? What are the best and worst experiences you had with reading and writing in school? Was there a teacher with whom you had a particularly good or bad experience concerning reading and/or writing?

For this assignment, feel free to use hybrid discourse; in other words, you may use multiple languages in this essay, keeping in mind the language knowledge of your audience. However, one of the languages that you use should be standard English. Thus, someone might write his or her essay using standard English and black English, or standard English and Spanish, or standard English and Creole. If you want to write the entire essay in standard English that is entirely acceptable. If you want to use more than two languages to write your essay, that is acceptable, too.

The essay should be at least four typed or word processed pages.

The students wrote three versions of the literacy autobiography, my comments urging them to consider issues, among others, of standard English supremacy, multilingual confusion, and cultural awareness. The most difficult aspect of the assignment for students was reconciling their feelings about their native language with their school instruction in standard English. Many of them had been told that their native language was forbidden in school because it was incorrect or ignorant. Thus, they had difficulty legitimizing their native language, let alone infusing it in their writing. Nonetheless, some students were able to make a linguistic leap of faith and reconsider the relationship between their native language and formal writing. Here are several examples of student texts that use hybrid discourse as a way to express complicated feelings and ideas about language legitimacy. As always, I have changed the identities of the student writers to maintain their privacy.

Marietta, a young woman of Cuban and African-American ancestry, juggled three languages—Spanish, black English, and standard English—as she navigated her way through several households and several schools. Here she discusses the language confusion that resulted from her multilingual experience:

I began to get very confused and irritated between learning Standard English at school, Black English at home, then Spanish on the weekends. . . . So when I was ten my mother asked my father to “tell yo mama to stop makin’ my baby learn dat Spanish.” Abuela did not like this idea and wanted to continue teaching me. But mi papa told her not to teach me anymore porque he saw it was hurting his hija. Abuela soon gave up and ended my forced Spanish linguistics, “Lo siento “ (I’m sorry), she would repeat. Even though mi abuela

had ended my Spanish lessons, I still maintained knowledge of it over the years by speaking it when I talked to my sisters on the phone. So when I would visit her [Abuela], I took the initiative to *hablar en español* to ensure her that I still knew some of what she taught me.

Marietta is caught in a difficult linguistic web, as she strives to untangle the different languages in her world. It doesn't help that her mother, who speaks black English, decides that Spanish is the problem, and like the schools, decides upon the eradication method. Marietta, however, wants to retain and maintain her Spanish, perhaps sensing its connection not only to her grandmother but her Spanish culture. Although Marietta's struggle with three languages is somewhat atypical, what is typical is the lack of support Marietta received at school, where neither her black English nor Spanish was acknowledged. Marietta was fortunate to have a teacher who, in Marietta's words, "encouraged me to never give up and work harder at what I was doing." However, if Marietta had been supported in embracing her full linguistic competence, at perhaps understanding better the different languages that she spoke, then perhaps she would not have viewed her linguistic diversity as a problem to solve, but a complexity to manage. Marietta's use of her different languages in her writing allows her to express this linguistic complexity in a way that is both real and representational. Acknowledging and utilizing her linguistic arsenal helps Marietta to make sense of her language history and recognize the importance of the different languages in her life, languages that hold significant cultural and personal meanings for her as she learns to navigate the world.

Brenda is an African-American woman who aspires to be a creative writer. Brenda grew up speaking both black English and standard English, and here she discusses her black English experience, using a scenario that occurred in her high school cafeteria to highlight the meanings or "codes" embedded in black English and the inability of teachers to decipher them:

If the teachers had been able to understand me and some of my fellow classmates who occasionally spoke black English in the classroom and always spoke black English in the lunchroom, then the teachers would have an advantage of knowing what was being spoken about. Big Bully in the classroom:

**Big Bully:** Yo, son, watup!

**Son:** watup!



**Big Bully:** You, you knowtha deal, go get them things, son.

**Son:** wat thing?

**Big Bully:** Don't get snuffed, son, you know I don't like to be repeating myself..

**Son:** A'ight, dog! (Emphasis Brenda)

During this situation in the lunchroom, no teacher said anything. While Big Bully was extorting Son, they didn't really have reason to involve themselves without physically seeing or mentally knowing that extortion was occurring.

When I first read this section of Brenda's essay, I asked her about the names "Big Bully" and "Son," and she told me they were pseudonyms. My curiosity stemmed from the fact that many young black men call each other "son," a mark of familiarity among friends that is related to equally familial appellations such as "brotha," "cousin" (or cuz), and "nephew," which the rapper Snoop Dogg is fond of using. Employing hybrid discourse enables Marietta to exemplify an important point about linguistic awareness. Although black English is excluded from the classroom, knowledge of the dialect might be beneficial for teachers, who might use that knowledge to better understand the lives and behaviors of their students. As Brenda correctly notes, the teachers might have prevented Big Bully from robbing Son, or at least been aware that a crime was taking place around them. Although "snuffed" is a word that the teachers might have known, perhaps they didn't understand it in the context Big Bully used it, or thought it was merely a case of hyperbolic language among teenagers. Or perhaps the teachers merely ignored students when they used black English, believing not only that they couldn't understand the language but also that those who used it rarely, if ever, said anything of consequence. Whatever the case, the utilitarian nature of language is quite evident in Brenda's example, as is the teachers' inability to recognize black English and protect one of their students.

The final example of student writing comes from Margaret, a Caribbean-American student who grew up speaking patois, and later encountered standard English. Margaret is typical of many of my students who are conflicted about their native language, perceiving it as "broken" and perhaps inferior but maintaining warm feelings for some of the people who speak it. Here Margaret recalls her grandmother's dictate about the importance of acquiring standard English.

With the foundation that my grandmother has built for her family, literacy is taken very seriously. You don't want to embarrass yourself or who you represent by seeming ignorant. "If you know howta speak, speak properly na man. Not everybody havta know ya bizness. O, Goud, when you go out dere present yaself like a young woman." . . . Words of a wise woman, my grandmother.

Although I identified the irony in Margaret's text, it was difficult for her to see it, even after revising twice. Earlier in the essay, Margaret tells us that her grandmother "is an elementary school teacher, and our grammar has and will always be corrected wherever she is." Yet Margaret never shows her grandmother speaking standard English. Instead, every representation of the grandmother's language is in patois. Here is another example: "All ya needta straightin dis house. I never seen children lazy so." Margaret considers her grandmother a wise woman who inculcated in Margaret the importance of acquiring standard English, yet Margaret fails to recognize that her grandmother dispensed much of her wisdom in patois, and that patois was used to impart information and ideas, even about the importance of standard English. Standard English supremacy wages such a linguistic and psychological assault on other-literate students that it is extremely difficult for many of them to resist its pernicious effects; however, Margaret's confusion notwithstanding, hybrid discourse holds hope in unlocking the chains of linguistic domination and freeing students to recognize, and perhaps use, the rich language variety they possess.

What I hope to illustrate with these excerpts of student literacy autobiographies, and have tried to explain throughout this essay is the possibility of using hybrid discourse to awaken students to their multiple literacies as they dismantle the barriers—linguistic, cultural, psychological—erected by standard English supremacy. I ain't saying that writing in hybrid discourse is easy; most of my students used languages other than standard English only when writing dialogue. Nonetheless, I contend that exposing students to hybrid discourse and encouraging dem to play around wif it, might help them to see that standard English isn't the only language game in town, that they know more about language than the schools give them credit for, that they can do a little somethin' somethin' with language, too. Equally important, exposure to hybrid discourse might increase students' awareness of language, help them to examine language more closely, to recognize structures, words, and styles. It is counterproductive to our notion of critical literacy and mul-

ticulturalism to have students believe that any aspect of their language or culture is inferior and unintelligent. Hybrid discourse may help students to feel more empowered about their own experience and competence with language. And that ain't nothin' to shake a stick at. Ya heard?

### Works Cited

- Alexander, Donnell. *Ghetto Celebrity*. New York: Crown, 2003.
- Bakhtin, Mikhail. *The Dialogic Imagination*. Texas: University of Texas P, 1981.
- Behling, Laura. "'Generic' Multiculturalism: Hybrid Texts, Cultural Contexts." *College English* 65.4 (March 2001): 411-26.
- Berlin, James. *Rhetoric and Reality: Writing Instruction in American Colleges, 1900-1985*. Carbondale: Southern Illinois UP, 1987.
- Bizzell, Patricia. "Hybrid Forms of Academic Discourses: What, Why, How." *Composition Studies* 27 (Fall 1999): 7-21.
- Campbell, Kermit E. "Real Niggaz's Don't Die: African American Students Speaking Themselves into Their Writing." *Writing in Multicultural Settings*. Ed. Carol Severino, Juan C. Guerra, and Johnella Butler. New York: MLA, 1997. 67-78.
- Cooper, Marilyn M., and Michael Holzman. *Writing as Social Action*. Portsmouth, NH: Boynton/Cook, 1989.
- Evans, Henry L. "An Afrocentric Multicultural Writing Project." *Writing in Multicultural Settings*. Ed. Carol Severino, Juan C. Guerra, and Johnella Butler. New York: MLA, 1997. 273-86.
- Gale, Xin Lu. "The Stranger in Communication: Race, Class, and Conflict in a Basic Writing Class." *JAC: A Journal of Composition Theory* 17.2 (1997): 53-68.
- Gilyard, Keith, and Elaine Richardson. "Students' Right to Possibility: Basic Writing and African American Rhetoric." *Insurrections: Approaches to Resistance in Composition Studies*. Ed. Andrea Greenbaum. Albany: SUNY UP, 2001: 37-51.
- Hebb, Judith. "Mixed Forms of Academic Discourse: A Continuum of Language Possibility." *Journal of Basic Writing* 21.2 (2002): 21-36.
- Hollinger, David E. *Postethnic America: Beyond Multiculturalism*. New York: Harper, 2001.
- Kennedy, Mary Lynch. *Theorizing Composition: A Critical Sourcebook of Theory and Scholarship in Contemporary Composition Studies*. New York: Greenwood, 1998.

- McCrary, Donald. "Speaking in Tongues: Using Womanist Sermons as Intra-Cultural Rhetoric in the Writing Classroom." *Journal of Basic Writing* 20.2 (Fall 2001): 53-70.
- McMillan, Terry. "Ma'Dear." *Breaking Ice: An Anthology of Contemporary African-American Fiction*. Ed. Terry McMillan. New York: Penguin Books, 1990. 457-65.
- Monroe, Kelvin. "Writin da Funk Dealer: Songs of Reflections and Reflex/shuns." *College English* 67.1 (September 2004): 102-20.
- Richardson, Elaine. *African American Literacies*. New York: Routledge, 2003.
- Rodriguez, Richard. "Aria: A Memoir of a Bilingual Childhood." *The Writer's Presence*. Ed. Donald McQuade and Robert Atwan. Boston: Bedford/St.Martin's, 2000. 222-41.
- Smitherman, Geneva. *Talkin and Testifyin: The Language of Black America*. Detroit: Wayne State University P, 1986.
- Tate, Greg. "White Freedom." *Village Voice* 17-23 Nov. 2004: 84. "Trash Talk." *Slam* 12.1 (February 2005): 19.
- Tonouchi, Lee A. "Da State of Pidgin Address." *College English*. 67.1 (September 2004): 75-82
- Trimbur, John. "Consensus and Difference in Collaborative Learning." *College English* 51 (October 1989): 602-16.
- Villanueva, Victor, Jr. "Maybe a Colony: And Still Another Critique of the Comp Community." *JAC: A Journal of Composition Theory* 17.2 (1997): 183-90.