Encouraging Agitation:
Teaching Teacher Candidates To Confront Words That Wound

By Jeanine M. Staples

> James Gee (1986) suggested that [English] language arts teachers play a crucial gatekeeping role in our society and could either see themselves as keepers of the museum of language or guides into the complexities of language learning. In particular, he noted that those teachers who failed to view the political nature of their practices opened themselves to being pawns at the hands of those who both saw and exercised their political views of the classroom. Many teachers who take inquiry stances on their practice embrace the concept of classroom as a place where language, literacy, and power intersect in ways that can be enabling or stunting. Accordingly, these teachers seek to understand what it means to teach and research language and literacy in ways that call attention to these political and power issues. (Fecho & Allen, 2003, p. 234)

Jeanine M. Staples is an assistant professor in the Language, Culture, and Society Program of the Department of Curriculum and Instruction of the College of Education at Pennsylvania State University, University Park, Pennsylvania.

Introduction

Gee's (1986) emphasis on teachers' consciousness about "the political nature of their practices" posits literacy education as a social justice project. Advocating this stance is particularly important as we work to understand and negotiate post-9/11 literacies, those socially situated and culturally informed literacy practices that acutely traverse, are responsive to, and make meaning from the politically charged popular

culture narratives of our current day and age (Staples, 2008a). These literacies are entangled with constructs like race, gender, culture, language, religion, terror, and sexuality in ways that are globally unprecedented and hyper-communicated at lightning speed. Gee clarifies the importance of teachers' "inquiry stances on their practice" as primary vehicles through which we can influence the ways "language, literacy, and power intersect" to "enable or stunt" the sensitivities, inclinations, and even trajectories of our students (Fecho & Allen, 2003, p. 234). This "enable or stunt" dichotomy is often the result of teachers misunderstanding ways to support students' language learning and the barrage of linguistic violence students are exposed to and utilize on a regular basis.

In this analytic conceptual essay, and from my standpoint as an African American woman teacher/researcher, I present a rich description of a personal sensibility and promising professional practice for literacy educators and those who prepare Reading/English/Language Arts teacher candidates for service among students who are historically marginalized and underserved by schools and communities. First, I examine some of the literature on the racial and gender identities of most teacher candidates in America, the corollary between this group's inexperience with students who are different from them, and conceptions about language in relationship to racism and sexism. Second, I provide examples of the ways demeaning words are used in popular culture narratives among those who are privileged and how their words alienate and oppress "others." Finally, I define the "Agitator Identity Trait" and articulate the ways it can develop promising pedagogical practices among teacher candidates, counter wounding words, and assist students' counter-oppressive thinking and action. While I ultimately contribute these promising practices for identifying and countering overt language adversities as they occur in popular culture narratives, I also present a brief review of the two primary ways language adversities function—covertly and overtly—as a way to frame the intersections of racist and sexist ideologies, language, and human objectification.

Words That Wound

Matsuda, Lawrence, Delgado, and Crenshaw (1993) wrote of "wounding words" and their implications with respect to the field of law and the intersections it shares with sociology and history. Their seminal work paved the way for inquiry into the intersecting fields of literacy education, teacher preparation, media, and popular culture. Their work is significant because hurtful words are frequently exerted in private and public discourse. Words that wound, characterizing individuals as inadequate, and therefore less valuable than those considered normal and favorable, are used to subjugate. Words like "retards," "nappy headed hos," "bitches," "dykes," "kikes," "spics," and "niggers" come to mind. With a greater rate of recurrence, individuals who use these words openly or privately and can be considered power brokers because of their gender, ethnicity, social affiliations, professional positions, and/or

access to broad communication arenas in the public domain, exert or are complicit in the propagation of these words. They wreak havoc on readers and listeners.

Those who promulgate racist and sexist language incite disorder and the deconstruction of humanity in several ways. First, they disregard the insidious nature of wounding words. This ignorance breeds delusion and contempt, which are the bedrock of hate and violence. Secondly, they often have little understanding of the vigor of words in general. Invocations of spoken words affect change. This is true because they articulate an interaction of intention and signification between and among speakers and listeners, and eventually readers and writers. Though it is possible to lace this interaction with kindness and respect, it is more commonly laden with misinformation and fears. In addition, positionality plays a role in the turmoil (Johnston, 2004). The power brokers who use, passively witness, or idly participate in the circulation of wounding words often represent some faction of the centralized majority. As a result, their words arguably indicate some undercurrent of viciousness in society at large. Missed opportunities to indict this usage incite collusion in potentially wide-spread hatemongering.

Consequences of spoken words should be of particular interest to English/Language Arts educators and university instructors of teacher candidates because, as Gee (1986) suggests, teachers are power brokers; most students learn the impact of words and language under the tutelage of their classroom teachers. This language learning is exciting and important because it can yield another type of influence, one that can be advanced to counter the weight of power brokers who sow discord. Teaching students concrete ways that words wound can inspire empathy and active participation in social justice work. It can contribute to whole bodies of citizens reared in critical consciousness[1] and able to counter word usage they understand as detrimental to individuals, groups, and society.

I argue that instruction within teacher education programs should include attention to the multiplicity of meanings that words convey and the weight those meanings have in relationship to lived experiences and the perceived significance of human beings. Wounding words and their negative impact on perceptions of human worth can be thought of as language *adversities*. Language adversities are words and phrases that constitute linguistic violence—an umbrella of harmful language variations that range from subtle to grievous (Gay, 1998, 1999). This type of violence occurs when words are used to afflict or provoke hardship. It is what happens when hurtful words, with their barrage of meanings and implications, are used to reduce people in ways that trivialize not only lived experiences but also individuals and the group(s) to which they identify (Johnston, 2004).

Teaching Teacher Candidates about Words That Wound

DiAngelo (2006) notes that the most recent data about American educators show the majority of elementary and secondary school teachers are White women. Nearly a decade ago, the teacher population was 87% White (American Associa-

tion of Colleges for Teacher Education, 1999) and 74% women (Snyder, 1999). Recent research indicates that the percentage of White teachers in public schools is increasing (Gay, 2003; King, 1991; Snyder, 1999; Su, 1996, 1997). It may be hypothesized from these statistics that many White teacher candidates do not interact with "diverse" students in any direct or sustained ways in their preparation programs. For the purpose of this discussion I conceptualize "diverse" students as those who are from cultural, economic, linguistic, and ethnic backgrounds that are different from White, middle class, standard-English language users. Sleeter (2001) recently conducted an extensive review of the literature on how universities prepare these teachers to engage, understand, and respect the lived experiences of diverse students who are notably underserved. She noted that research suggests universities combine the methods of "community-based cross-cultural immersion experiences" with "multicultural education coursework" and train teacher candidates who are more aptly equipped to engage in literacy work with diverse students (pp. 96-100). Unfortunately, Sleeter (2001) also reports that:

> Most White [teacher candidates in predominantly White institutions] are fairly naïve and have stereotypic beliefs about urban children, such as believing that urban children bring attitudes that interfere with education (Avery & Walker, 1993; King, 1991; Su, 1996, 1997). Most White [teacher candidates] bring little awareness or understanding of discrimination and its effects. (p. 95)

Although it is not explicated in Sleeter's (2001) article, it is implied that use of the term "urban children" refers to those from cultural, economic, linguistic, and ethnic backgrounds that are different from White, middle class, standard-English language users. It is, therefore, critical that when White, women teacher candidates, along with all pre- and in-service educators, do interact with diverse students, they are able to recognize the ways in which racism and sexism reproduce themselves. This reproduction is often accomplished through spoken words. In effect, racism and sexism, as evolutionary social constructs, are embodied by and transferred within expressed language adversities. To understand language as a vehicle for racist and sexist ideologies, one must first understand these constructs as beholden to word usage.

Racism and Sexism in Our Mouths

I rely on Lee's (1992) definition of racism to engage in a discussion about the role language plays in perpetuating derogatory ideologies. Lee writes that racism is a social construct institutionalized by "any act[s] or ideas[s] which limit, deny, or grant opportunities, services, resources, rights, or respect to a person on the basis of skin color" (p. 103). I take liberty in expanding this definition to encompass sexism as a phenomenon that compromises a person similarly, but on the basis of gender. I forefront racism and sexism in this discussion because although most teacher candidates are women, Black feminist research has shown that White women are

usually concerned about isolating and misogynistic rhetoric when it is imposed upon other White women and girls; but, even if unwittingly, White women are less aware of this type of language when imposed upon women and girls of cultural, economic, linguistic and ethnic backgrounds different from their own (Collins, 1990; hooks, 2000). Although I am also concerned about the perpetuation of heterosexist language adversities, I do not distinctly engage in a discussion about them here because they are, for now, adequately correspondent with my attention to sexist language adversities.

However, I do include within these definitions attention to not only individuals but also groups of people. I do this because the insidious and pervasive nature of racism and sexism cannot rest in isolation. Racism and sexism morph through various social, political, cultural, economic, and intergenerational points of entry. All these points of entry are made possible and perpetual through the spoken word. Therefore, racism and sexism, when enabled in any way (i.e., through written business policies that hinder the career trajectories and economic securities of particular individuals and groups; social practices linked to legislation like police profiling, neighborhood gentrification, or education exclusions; or cultural practices that evolve from norms like name calling and ethnic- or gender-centered slander), are steeped in attitudes and beliefs that are uniquely transferable by the spoken word.

More than two decades ago, Purnell (1982) stated that "teaching [teachers about] language use is one of the most controversial arenas in academia" (p. 231). She explains that this controversy is a result of concerns about "students' rights to their own language, double-speak, the imperialistic implications of language," and "whether we shape our language or it shapes us" (p. 231). She argues that teaching teachers about language is further complicated because it cannot be separated from the context that informs it. To further explain the role of context as the bedrock for language learning, she presents a brilliant discussion of a "bias" that linguistic anthropologists have noted as ubiquitous within human populations. This bias relays and performs instances of racism, sexism, and other "isms" through linguistic iterations. That is, the general ideas one has about what happens in the world outside oneself and the ways people are categorized, labeled, or conceptualized are not unilaterally realized by external events. Rather, up to a certain point one sees, hears, contemplates, and empathizes with whatever the grammatical system of one's language has made one sensitive to, and has trained one to look for in experience (Purnell, 1982).

Kluckholn (1976) discusses this bias further. He describes it as "sinister" because "everyone is unconscious of [their] native language as a system through which we understand and enable racism and sexism" (p. 149). He explains:

> The language says, as it were, 'notice this,' 'always consider this separate from that,' 'such and such things belong together.' Since people are taught from infancy to respond in these ways, they take discriminations for granted as part of the inescapable stuff of life. (p. 151)

The danger of this bias, when unchecked, leaves members of dominant groups, to which the majority of teacher candidates belong, susceptible to the perpetuation of various levels of linguistic violence against students who are different from them in addition to an underdeveloped sense of how to teach against such violence. Understanding this bias further illustrates the ways "isms"—those institutionalized social, cultural, and political constructs like racism and sexism—are manifested.

Provoking "isms" Covertly: Quiet Violence from Our Lips

Peter McLaren, a noted critical pedagogue and theorist, states that universities have used critical pedagogy to give many White teacher candidates "a language with which to unpack the intractable antagonism of the capital/labor dialectic and open it up for scrutiny" (Pozo, 2003, p. 3). Research has shown that presenting teacher candidates with words to name and interrogate these structures segues attempts at personal location within said structures (Aaronsohn, Carter, & Howell, 1995; Cochran-Smith, 2000; Lawrence, 1997). Although these attempts are frequently met with layers of resistance that include conflict, opposition, ambivalence, and guilt, they can be useful in providing some point of experience with language that exposes and reshapes racist and sexist frameworks in societies (Lawrence & Bunche, 1996; Wiggins & Follo, 1999).

For example, teacher candidates learn the meanings and uses of loaded/layered academic terms like "other," "self-reflexivity," "emic/etic knowledge," "hegemony," "misogyny," "people of color," "reproduction," "oppression," and "center/margins" in many foundational methods and urban education courses. They learn how these terms are used to describe individuals and groups, and the ways they account for lived experiences. According to McLaren, points of experience are energized by such words, allowing teacher candidates opportunities to participate actively and creatively in critiques of "the manifold mediations of social forces and social formation" (Pozo, 2003, p. 3). This is accomplished through "explorations of one's self and social formation in a language that uncovers the role of 'isms' in daily life" and through "explanations of how social relationships have been racialized and linked to patriarchy" (Pozo, 2003, p. 3).

This type of work is necessary. However, the language of critical pedagogy can instigate an ironic consequence. Because, as Sleeter (2001) contends from her research, the majority of teacher candidates lack valuable experience with people who are different from them, use of this new language can yield discourses and actions that limit, even deny, opportunities, understanding, and respect. These limitations and denials are consequences of the self-centeredness and separatism that the language and context of critical pedagogy sanction. During my training as a graduate student I reflected on this consequence extensively. After reading several biographical and autobiographical texts that illustrate and describe the ways rac-

ism and sexism function in the lives of individuals and groups who are historically marginalized (Anzaldua, 1999; Collins, 1990; Friere, 1987; hooks, 2000; Lorde, 1984; McLaren, 2006; Moraga & Anzaldua, 1984; Williams, 1991), many of my White women peers commingled words like “poor,” “illiterate,” “uneducated,” “dirty,” “frightening,” and “lazy” with the aforementioned academic terms. While such terms may have been useful while grappling with their responses, the fact that they too often went unpacked was quite troubling. As the only African American woman teacher in my graduate program, I responded viscerally to my peer’s use of such language and the lack of interrogation of their language choices. While reflecting on their spectrum of indifference, skepticism, and anger, I wrote:

> One can interact with an (auto)biographical text in many ways. One can engage, trouble, and/or juxtapose it with others. Yet, when the voice that authors the text is questioned—not critiqued—but questioned for validity and authenticity, then in effect the stories of the text may eventually be interrogated and deconstructed. Considering discussion, presentation, intentions, and choices are necessary in a quest for understanding. However, questioning the authenticity of a voice that speaks to lived experiences often provokes attempts to dismantle its assertions. I suppose that tangential strategy is eligible for intellectual reserve. Yet, I notice with irritation that this doubting, rejecting stance is not often (if ever) utilized in cases when the voice of a White man or woman is heard or read. What makes this analytic literacy/literary tool useful then? I think it is useful when the reader or listener is taken to unrecognizable, painful places. When one’s thought processes are disrupted because of a call to juxtapose one’s personal reality with the unspeakable realities of one’s neighbor, a desire to corrupt one’s mouth with wounding words, close one’s eyes, cup one’s ears, and turn away, is palpable. (Staples, 2000, Journal Entry)

The type of unobvious linguistic violence that is initiated when teacher candidates integrate their linguistic biases with a “language for liberation” like that of critical pedagogy (McLaren, 2006, p. 221) is subtle and slippery. Without an audience that includes those trained to listen for and confront the usually elusive natures of racism and sexism, the ramifications of these words can remain hidden or arguably accepted. They are concealed because they are so often couched in niceties. They are allowed because they appear laced with analytical thought and integrity. Yet, when White women teacher candidates disregard or discredit lived experiences by integrating their linguistic biases with the language of potentially counter-oppressive pedagogical frameworks, power and influence among members of the dominant, centralized majority are most certainly reified. This is so first because White women teacher candidates are simultaneously members of two of the most socially valued and protected majority groups in the world: Caucasians and Caucasian women (Schick, 2000). Their views and standpoints are commonly esteemed by virtue of their person. Second, White women teacher candidates’ prominence will increase. In the very near future, this group will comprise 90%

of all American school teachers (American Association of Colleges for Teacher Education, 1999). This majority role indicates that these future educators will establish teaching and language learning cultures for nearly all students in America, including those who are adversely labeled, underserved, and marginalized within schools and/or society.

Schick (2000) studied the processes by which White racialized and gendered identities are inscribed as normative constructions in the discourses of White women teacher candidates. Her analysis indicates that members of this group have "processes that enable them to profess liberal values and innocence from racist and sexist acts while accessing discursive repertoires which perform them as dominant and rational" (p. 98). Her findings, along with other research on the attitudes (Barry & Lechner, 1995) and discourse practices (Lawrence & Bunche, 1996) of White women teacher candidates, suggest the gravity of provoking racism and sexism in the linguistically covert ways described above. Such provocation can result in a tightly wound tapestry of ambiguous but definitive boundaries against the life trajectories of underserved children.

Provoking "isms" Overtly: Loud Violence from Our Throats

Language is also *overtly* used as a vehicle for racism and sexism. Gay (1999) writes that linguistic violence assumes that language is a foundational establishment and that its harm is psychological and continually transferable. This means that linguistic violence can develop into a procedural invariant. It will not change or cease unless it is interrupted, redirected, and/or eliminated. John Galtung, a premier theorist and practitioner in peace studies and sociolinguistics, explains that linguistic violence, including the most overt kinds, can be understood as occurring within a triangulation of qualifying parameters. They are: direct, structural, and cultural. Galtung (1990) expounds:

> Direct linguistic violence [like name-calling] is an event; structural linguistic violence [like using language to contort policies or inhibit acceptance, belonging, or progress] is a process with ups and downs; and cultural linguistic violence [a combination of direct and structural violence] is an invariant, having a 'permanence' that remains essentially the same for long periods, because of the slow transformations of basic culture. (p. 295)

Galtung contends that all linguistic violence can evolve to the cultural level and become entrenched, negating individual and group identities over time. Galtung (1990) further explains this matrix by stating that wounding words "emerge within every corner of the direct-structural-cultural violence triangle and are easily transmitted to the other corners" (p. 296). He further suggests that when these adversities are "institutionalized and the violent culture internalized, direct

linguistic violence also tends to become substantial, repetitive, and ritualistic, like a vendetta" (p. 296).

While most White teacher candidates are unlikely to intentionally perpetuate such vendettas, they are positioned to effectively observe, question, and interrupt them. There are multiple opportunities to do so. As stated earlier, overt language adversities are becoming more recurrent in popular culture narratives. Popular culture narratives (PCNs) are media texts such as films, videos, television programs, Internet websites and blogs, urban or street fiction, and popular periodicals. These narratives are artistic tools of public discourse that perform creatively and purposefully the languages, signs, social situations, political dilemmas and cultural contradictions particular to human beings and our lived experiences. They reflect and affect our sensibilities, meaning-making, and determinations. Elsewhere, based on data-driven research of African American urban adolescents' critical literacy practices in relationship to various media texts engaged after school, I further describe these narratives and a student/teacher (co)constructed framework that can be used to produce and facilitate transactions with them (Staples, 2008b).

These narratives have five primary descriptors. First, PCNs portray nuances of social constructs. Race, class, gender, and sexuality are often at issue in them. Second, they depict archetypes—representative human paradigms that embody "types" of identity. Third, these narratives often mingle standardized English and variations of English. This mingling allows characters, authors, or narrators the ability to texturize social situations and individuals in specific ways. Fourth, they produce or describe visual representations that signify and complicate language. That is, compositions of rich, moving and still images are depicted and invoked to pictorially translate what is expressed. Lastly, PCNs provoke readers to deeper revelations of predicaments of human conditions and the complexities of personhood, place, word and image. This provocation can be (and often is) initiated by both print and visual popular culture narratives (Staples, 2008b).

Youth engage these narratives frequently in their out-of-school literacy lives (Alvermann, 2002; Alvermann, Moon, and Hagood, 1999; Moje, 2000, 2002, 2004; Staples, 2005, 2008a, 2008b, 2008d) even though they routinely include words like "nigger," "kike," "spic," and "bitch." Such words signify a sadistic and harmful undercurrent within our society at large. Yet, instead of considering whether wounding words are the proverbial chickens or eggs in the cycle of racist and sexist ideologies and practices, I am interested in the idea that "linguistic violence is an unavoidable consequence of the institution of language" and the question of "whether through conscious affect it can be eliminated" (Gay, 1999, p. 13). Many sociolinguists concerned about ways to eliminate language adversities do so by attempting to encourage a consciousness among power brokers, like teacher candidates. In order to substantiate such a consciousness, one must realize the gravity of overtly racist and sexist language.

Interrupting the Provocation of "isms"

Several theorists and practitioners have determined that individuals and groups who are subjected to overt language adversities are disproportionately more likely to suffer emotional, social, and psychological trauma that can be passed on intergenerationally (Gadsden, 1998; Teicher et al, 2006; Vissing, et. al., 1991) and communally (Burgest, 1973; Dhaouadi, 1988; Irigaray, 1989; Lang, 1988; Murray, 1979; Ross, 1981). In addition to this, overtly wounding words can surpass the walls of American schools that serve diverse students and affect global populations. Gay (1998) takes this into account when categorizing linguistic violence and contributes what Galtung's conception does not. Instead of placing linguistic violence in a triangulated matrix, Gay (1999) presents it in a continuum that can escalate or deescalate. His work allows us to pinpoint the weight and context of word adversities. This identification can support meaningful intervention. Gay (1999) states that word adversities range from "subtle"—covert words that wound—to "abusive" or "grievous"—overt words that wound. He cautions that it is relatively easy to move from "abusive" to "grievous" word adversities.

The clearest examples of "grievous" words are found in totalitarian and genocidal language. Sub national, religious, and ethnic groups can use totalitarian and genocidal language to instigate mass murder. In fact, overt adverse words represent some of the most globally intractable practices of linguistic violence. Critical feminism has exposed overt wounding words and their ramifications. It has suggested ways to supplant linguistic violence. Gay (1998) provides a table to classify linguistic violence (See Appendix I). To support readership, I have included examples of adverse words that constitute these types of violence within his table. Feminists propose active frameworks for intervention. For instance, Jaggar (1983) speaks powerfully of naming—the act of designating and possibly re-labeling a threatening idea, word, or practice—in ways that re-appropriate power in favor of the object of contention.

Questioning is another act of intervention. Cameron (1990) and Hardman (1993) both explore the ways critical questions about violent language can remove ambiguity and menacing. Cameron (1990) states, "in posing and answering questions about violent language, one can refuse the status of language and its role in the construction of our personalities and circumstances" (p. 97). In addition, Ruddick (1989) suggests "transforming" language adversities through the alteration of cultural practices. Cameron (1990) expounds upon the importance, and difficulty, of Ruddick's idea. Ruddick explains that "changing language is like changing the law; it affects the form but not the substance; it is necessary but insufficient; along with linguistic transformation, cultural transformation must be accomplished" (1989, p. 99).

These strategies for confronting and dismantling linguistic violence in the classroom can function as explicit techniques that are interwoven within the fabric of one's pedagogy, discourse and practice. They include regular reading, writing, speaking or listening prompts for naming and re-labeling wounding words (i.e., What

individual or group is discussed in relationship to the words "stupid" or "slut" in this report or broadcast? Why is the relationship problematic? How might the words be interrogated, displaced or eliminated? Why are these actions important?)

Such prompts can be utilized by teachers at the beginning, within, or at the end of a literacy-focused lesson. The strategic practice of questioning the prevalence, context and implications of wounding words can also function explicitly. Teachers can help students to generate their own set of inquiry-based questions around linguistic violence. This strategy includes teachers' focus on utilizing, with students' voices, the interrogatives "why" and "how." It means apprenticing students in their inquiry into the (ir)rationality and utility of wounding words. These two strategies complement each other and support the difficult processes of transforming cultural practices invoked by and through language usage.

Wounding Words in Popular Culture Narratives

Assisting White teacher candidates in the work of these conscious practices toward cultural transformation must begin with university training and continue with support from school leadership. I have thought about ways to attend to instances of language adversity in my classroom, particularly with regard to the ways these adversities are directed toward women of color, as a way to support new colleagues' knowledge and professional practice in literacy classrooms. Based on years of work with "disengaged"[2] African American urban adolescent readers and writers both in and out of schools, I have found that several activities support awareness of language adversity. Activities that can be thought of as native to English/Language Arts classrooms—responsive discussions, free writing, round-robins, mapping, journaling and interviewing—can all be used to support deeper thinking on word meaning and usage and embed the strategies discussed above (Staples, 2008b). For example, one might read or listen to Don Imus and Mike McGuirk's April 2007 comments about the Rutgers University women's basketball team and discuss the denotations of their words and the groups to which they were ascribed. Students and teachers could read or listen to Snoop Dogg's "Break a Bitch Till I Die!" or "Can You Control Yo Ho?" song lyrics then identify, define and question each adverse word or phrase. Or, a teacher might decide to read, discuss, and write responsively to radio-talk show host Dan Savage's derogatory comments about Diane Sawyer as a "lying whore" or Barbara Walters as a "double-talking slut" and transform the culture they support.

For an international perspective, teachers and students could read and interrogate excerpts from the compilation reports issued by the United Nations. Many of these reports present studies of bride burnings, honor killings, female infanticide, sex trafficking, mass rape as a weapon of war, and other hideous forms of violence against economically disadvantaged women of various ethnicities and religious affiliations. Of course, the type of language that makes this type of sadism possible

is also discussed in the document. The Rwandan massacres of the 1990s present a specific example of grievous linguistic violence. With regard to the ways politically and socially powerful individuals can "exploit the power of social patterns" with language, Mark Buchanan (2007) of the *New York Times* discusses how the word "subhuman" was used to describe the Tutsi tribe in the months prior to the Rwandan genocide. The implication was that this word, among others that wound overtly, bore a direct correlation to compliance with hate mongering, war crimes, and a type of irrationally justified acquiescence to participation in torture and murder.

Yet, while reading, writing, and discussion activities offer points of entry to conversations about language adversity, they frequently leave something to be desired. The active resistance that many teachers long for within classroom communities is often missing. Its absence is due to the fact that, usually, students do not know what to do with these words. Correspondingly, novice teachers do not know what to do with them either. Feeling shocked, uncomfortable, or even angry about them seems commonsensical. Determining that something should be done in protest is reasonable. However, an understanding of what that "something" is frequently remains underdeveloped, and with it a move to action. This is the case because English/Language Arts activities that center language adversities, and White teacher candidates that may be in charge of teaching against them, need an accompanying attitude that bears a framework for movement. My compounded identity has afforded me an attitude with this attribute. It is called the Agitator Identity Trait.

The "Agitator Ide ntity Trait"

My Agitator identity emerged while I was a teacher candidate. It developed while I was a doctoral candidate. It is in competition with an antithetical attitude, one that shies away from appropriating and interrogating wounding words because of intimidation or a wrongfully perceived sense of helplessness. The antithetical attitude is a consequence of the Koon Identity Trait. My reference to kooning emerges from a popular culture narrative: Spike Lee's 2001 film *Bamboozled*. It is a satire of African American representations in mass media. In the movie, Lee indicts the status quo for its tendency to require a degree of buffoonery from Black actors and actresses. He also indicts African Americans for their compliance with this expectation. To illustrate his point, Lee portrays a series of common scenarios and language adversities African Americans face in industry settings. These scenarios depict the daunting choice one must make between the role of Koon and Agitator.

The choice is impacting and definitive. A Koon is an individual who assists the perpetuation and standardization of a particular group as superior by forfeiting active resistances to wounding words and images, assuaging inflated egos, accommodating exclusively self-centered attempts at introspection, shunning self-reflexivity, and disregarding Afro-centric and other inclusive epistemologies and

practices in one's personal, professional, and academic lives. The Agitator Identity Trait contradicts and undermines kooning. I named the Agitator Identity Trait in response to Frederick Douglass' 1857 speech instructing sympathizers in practices that could eradicate slavery, discrimination, and racist and sexist propaganda in the West Indies. In response to the idea that protest, countermanding, and counteraction could be passive and reserved, and simultaneously affective, Douglass (1857) stated:

> The whole history of the progress of human liberty shows that all concessions yet made to her august claims, have been born of earnest struggle. The conflict has been exciting, agitating, all-absorbing, and for the time being, putting all other tumults to silence. It must do this or it does nothing. If there is no struggle there is no progress. Those who profess to favor freedom and yet depreciate agitation, are men who want crops without plowing up the ground, they want rain without thunder and lightening. They want the ocean without the awful roar of its many waters. This struggle may be a moral one, or it may be a physical one, and it may be both moral and physical, but it must be a struggle. Power concedes nothing without a demand. It never has and it never will. (p. 204)

Douglass' emphasis on agitation as a facilitator of freedom, power, and change conveys the importance of assuming an assertive, conscientious, and receptive sensibility in social justice work, including teaching. In light of Douglass' words and work, in addition to the words and work of other Black feminists (Collins, 1990; hooks, 1989, 2000), I have conceptualized an Agitator as an individual who repels censorship of self and "others" by re-naming, critically questioning, and transforming wounding words, images, and practices that are rendered valid by senses of superiority, twisted humor, or titillation. An Agitator openly and frequently indicts the patriarchal White social and capitalist establishment and other domineering structures in societies, political arenas, and economies. This denunciation is accomplished by provoking critical consciousness and advocating social justice work in one's personal, professional and academic lives.

Realization of the Agitator Identity Trait is particularly meaningful to me as an African American woman teacher, researcher, and literacy teacher educator because it provides a way for me to confront the linguistic violence that attempts to bind me and the groups with which I affiliate. It simultaneously allows me to support new colleagues in the same confrontation. And as importantly, it helps me to accurately gauge my professional progress and trajectory within the field. In the past, I used the word "kooning" to describe some of my behavior in teacher preparation. I did so because at times I enacted kooning instead of agitation in order to move through the system of academia and certification. I contend that all people of color (or otherwise marginalized individuals) who live or travel to any degree in White, middle class, heterosexist, mono-linguistic, male-centered America, koon at some time or another. My work now concentrates on processes that eliminate the Kooning Identity Trait as it inevitably compromises intellectual work.[3] It also leads to a drastic, intergenerational erosion of character, loss of credible substances of being

and collusion in the degradation of all people. I excise kooning by encouraging agitation in literacy education and teacher preparation. The Agitator Identity Trait can support White teacher candidates in this work.

Teaching Teacher Candidates To Confront Words That Wound

The Agitator Identity Trait moves one to act. Its presence supports the elimination of kooning and takes for granted that one will do something to identify, confront, and eliminate wounding words. Encouraging teacher candidates to assume the role of Agitator begins with thinking through teacher preparation activities that counter the work of adverse words and take up an agitating stance. Agitators:

> Assume new words to describe the meaning and implications of demeaning ones;
>
> Place oneself inside of controversial scenarios and commentaries, making words personal, more effective, and fueling empathy;
>
> Generate critical "who/what/when/where/how/why" questions that explicate the insinuations of words and their impact on individuals and groups;
>
> Draw attention to the social, historical, and political impetuses of depreciating words;
>
> "Out" the delusion and contempt that fester as a result of wounding words;
>
> Write and broadcast "counter narratives" that speak directly to words and word usage (Delgado & Stefanic, 2001);
>
> Plan means for private and public action that expose, document, educate, and perpetuate knowledge about the effects of these words;
>
> Hold other Agitators accountable to resolutions for action, implementation of plans for action (i.e., rallies, publications, demonstrations, plays, press releases, concerts, lectures, fundraisers, shifts in familial/personal dialogues and individual language choices, etc.), and reflection toward improvement of actions.

These practices can produce powerful individual voices of resistance among White teacher candidates and their future students when indoctrinated as real aspects of classroom cultures and rooted in pedagogical expectations. Over time, they can result in orchestras of voices that rise up against meta-narratives of ignorance and division. With developmentally appropriate iterations, the application of these practices can become expectations for all teacher candidates and school students. That is, with endorsement by leaders within the field of English/ Language Arts and institutions

of higher education, agitation can become a tool for intervention and socio-political change, one introduced by highly skilled and sensitive teachers in elementary, middle and high school classrooms, and that carries over into adulthood.

There is a gaping dearth of empirical research into classrooms in which teachers and students discuss and construct activist stances against linguistic violence. There are some recent works compiling thought on the ways normalizing discourses can marginalize the experiences, knowledge, and material needs of people with disabilities (Palmeri, 2006). Other works deal with linguistic differences in encounters of "Others" on British television (Gieve & Norton, 2007). And another seminal piece details the ways media "other" certain groups through language choice (Jaworski, 2007). However, the absence of critical thought into the ways teachers might establish a conceptual framework for understanding linguistic violence, such as the one generated here, or use research on language and pedagogy to re-name, question, and transform cultural practice, is problematic. It is troubling because this dearth exists simultaneously in relationship to the escalation of linguistic violence in media (Lewis, 1996).

Conclusion

As linguistic violence increases in public discourse, English teacher candidates must learn ways to facilitate processes that combat words that wound. African American feminist epistemologies (Collins, 1990; Royster, 2000) provide information about historical and cultural ideologies of language and resistance. Queer theories of opposition (Blackburn, 2002/2003), make available information about youth work and language reclamation. Theories about the merger of linguistic and ethnic identities (Anzaldua, 2002) shed light on racialized and nationalized perspectives on linguistic variation, diversity, and adversity. Ideas about language, cultural assimilation, and formation of the self (Bakhtin, 1981) help form understandings of the social nature of dialogue. And, knowledge about the intersections of literacy, psychology, sociology and teaching (Chung & Pennebaker, 2007; Cushman, 1998; Knoblauch & Brannon, 1993; Pennebaker, 2002; Pennebaker & Stone, 2003 all present information about the ways literacy/literary education intersect(s) ideologies about the individual, groups, and society.

It is imperative that we remember, as Bakhtin (1981) explained, "language, even at the level of individual words, serves as an arena where opposing ideologies of identity and exclusion play themselves out" (p. 18). With this notion in place, we can take for granted that teacher candidates, and the underserved students they will engage, need to learn the social and cognitive practices to centralize these oppositions and deconstruct them for the betterment of democracy, inclusion, respect, and genuine appreciation of individuals and groups deemed "different" from them.

Notes

[1] I define critical consciousness as sense-making employed to deconstruct the parameters and problematize the enactments of various implicit and explicit social structures (i.e. cultural, linguistic, spatial, economic, religious and sexual) used to subjugate, repress, empower or authorize individuals, groups, and/or ideologies.

[2] "Disengaged" means that my students resisted individual and collaborative interactions with texts (including conventional methods of reading and writing), participation in conversations with others about information found in texts, and producing works pertaining to, or answering questions about, what they did or did not understand about information within texts.

[3] Intellectual work is the synergy of socially situated literacy practices and culturally situated knowledge produced at the intersection of literacies and popular culture narratives. This phenomenon is "intellectual" because it is inspired by the complexities of local knowledge. It is "work" because it is exerted through tensions within and among activities that couch the meanings and messages of various types of texts. Intellectual work is manifested when people are motivated to engage with texts and nurture a positive self-efficacy in relationship to activities that are meaningful to them. The results of sustained intellectual work are often evidenced by production of layered understandings, new texts, and critical consciousness among individuals and/or groups.

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Appendix I

A Typology of Linguistic Violence with Examples of Language Adversities

Subtle Linguistic Violence	Abusive Linguistic Violence [A Type of Direct Linguistic Violence]	Grievous Linguistic Violence [A Type of Direct Linguistic Violence]
Children's Humor	*Heterosexist Language*	*Warist Language*
(example of language adversity—"What's black and white and red all over?")	(example of language adversity—using the words "dyke," "gay," "queer," "bitch," etc. as individual and collective insults)	(example of language adversity—referring to nations or communities as " the axis of evil" or individuals and groups as "casualties of necessary engagements")
Literacy Restrictions	*Racist Language*	*Nuclear Language*
(example of language adversity—confined inmates who are categorized with denotations like "animalistic" or "incurably insane"; academic or political terminology mixed with linguistic biases to describe, discuss or question the lived experiences or voices of "othered" people) "stupid," "slut," "retard"	(example of language adversity—using words like "nigger." "kike." spic," or "chink" to refer to individuals and groups)	(example of language adversity—use of the terms "obliteration" and "extermination" in relationship to groups, nations, and/or communities)
"Official" Languages/ Dialects	*Sexist Language*	*Genocidal Language*
(example of language adversity—de facto social policies and arguments implying that standardized English is representative of normalcy, credibility, and trustworthiness)	(example of language adversity—"bitch," "punk," or "faggot" to refer to individuals and groups)	(example of language adversity—referring to groups of people as "sub-human" or "expendable")