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Language Use and the Oral Tradition in AAYA (African American Young Adult) Literature

by KaaVonja Hinton-Johnson

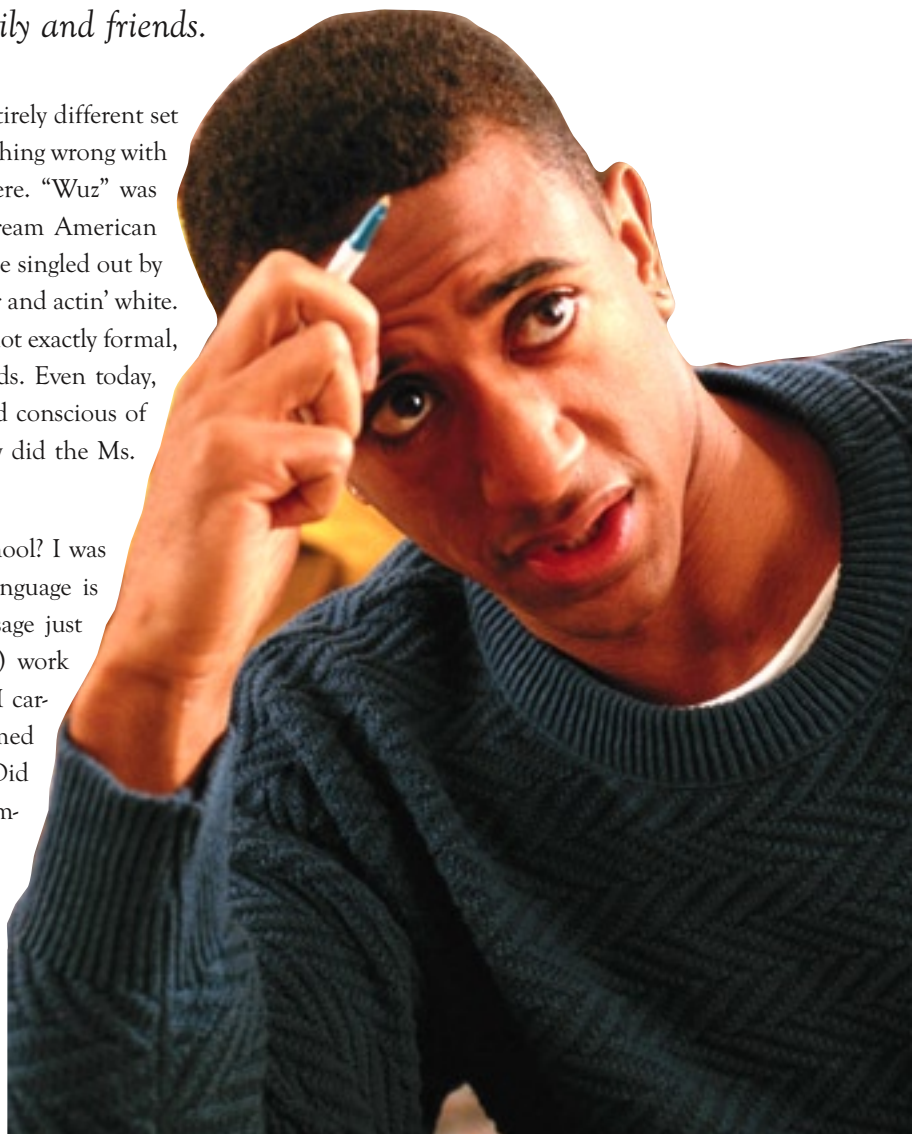
Introduction

In elementary school my favorite teachers taught me that the language used in my home was incorrect, incoherent, and inappropriate. My second grade teacher Ms. Hull, a tall, thin, dark-skinned woman, stands out among the others. I can still see her hovering over us. “Was!” Ms. Hull shouted, “not wuz. Your tongue is lazy.” “You be what?” she’d ask in disgust with one hand on her hip. When this happened, I was sure to get yelled at and lectured. To avoid such humiliation, I quickly learned to, as we said in my neighborhood, “talk proper.” Shame nagged at me. The way I talked was wrong; I was wrong; and so were my family and friends.

At home, in my community, there was an entirely different set of rules to follow. Once again there was something wrong with the way I spoke. “Was” did not “cut it” there. “Wuz” was the pronunciation of choice. It was Mainstream American English (MAE) that was sure to cause me to be singled out by my peers, yelled at, or teased for talkin’ proper and actin’ white. These early lessons on language use, though not exactly formal, were imperative to my survival in both worlds. Even today, after earning several degrees, I have remained conscious of when to say “was” instead of “wuz,” but why did the Ms. Hulls of the world make me choose?

Why wasn’t my home language valued at school? I was in college when I learned that my home language is systematic and includes specific rules for usage just as any other language. Smitherman’s (1977) work helped me to begin to deal with the shame I carried for years. Ms. Hull must have been ashamed too, for we lived in the same community. Did she see “our” language as inferior? Was she simply trying to help prepare me and the other Black English Vernacular (BEV) users in her class for our futures? What would she have thought of codeswitching? I may never know.

It’s 2004, and a colleague and I are having lunch. We are both single African



American women living in a midwestern town and teaching at a rather large university. There is a pause in our conversation about our respective research and writing when the voices of two white women sitting in a nearby booth float toward us. They are talking about teaching black children. One of the women laments about her attempt to teach black children to say “ask” rather than “ax.” “For years and years I tried,” one woman said, “but they just couldn’t get it.” The other woman agreed, “Yes, I know just what you mean. I’ve tried to get them to stop using that language, too.”

Had they any idea that what they were saying was insulting? That their attempt to rid black children of “that language,” a language many of us associate with those we love, was equally insulting? I was reminded of my elementary school years and, of course, of Ms. Hull. Her attempts to make me stop using BEV made me uncomfortable with being who I am. Were students today feeling similarly?

The emergence of *The Skin That We Speak: Thoughts on Language and Culture in the Classroom* (Delpit & Dowdy, 2002) signified the unresolved debate around language and identity and how the two are often intertwined. The book calls upon educators to reevaluate attitudes toward language forms that differ from Mainstream American English (MAE). Where do these attitudes come from and how do they affect how individuals view themselves and others? The authors of the African American Young Adult (AAYA) novels discussed here seem to make a similar call to readers, asking us to look critically at what we believe about language use, elements of the oral tradition, and identity. In this article, I discuss language use in select novels by two contemporary African American female writers: Rita Williams-Garcia and Jacqueline Woodson. The novels I focus on are Rita Williams-Garcia’s *Blue Tights* (1988) and *Like Sisters on the Homefront* (1995) and Jacqueline Woodson’s *The Dear One* (1991) and *I Hadn’t Meant to Tell You This* (1994). Specifically, I analyze meaning conveyed through language use and elements of the oral tradition.

The novels included in this analysis confirm that a monolithic black language does not exist as blacks choose to express themselves in various ways and for various reasons (O’Neale, 1984). Although the novels are written in MAE, a few of the characters use BEV, nonstandard English, codeswitching or MAE with some usage of the deletion rule (e.g., “cause” rather than “because”). I discuss these books here with the hope that teachers will remember that MAE is not superior to BEV or any other language form, examine their own ideas and biases about language use that differs from their own, and broaden their understanding of BEV and the views of some its users.

About the Books

Madhubuti (1984) maintains “To accurately understand the soul of a people, you not only search for their outward manifestations...but you examine their language” (p. 154). When teaching African American texts that include BEV, it is important to have some understanding of the language and the nuances that surround it. *Blue Tights* features Joyce, a teenager studying dance at a school outside her inner city neighborhood. She is smart and talented, but overwhelmed by the numerous problems she encounters. Her teacher criticizes her because of her body type while her peers and men in the community make assumptions about her sexuality. To make matters worse, her mother, who is single and works as a nurse, seems to neglect her. It takes Joyce’s friend Gayle, who is the protagonist of *Like Sisters on the Homefront*, to help Joyce see that being sexually active will not fill the void in her life. Gayle’s small role in *Blue Tights* as a new teen mother is fully developed in *Like Sisters on the Homefront* where Gayle is fourteen years old and pregnant with her second child. Her mother forces her to get an abortion and sends her to live with her uncle and his family in Georgia. While there, Gayle learns about responsibility, love, family, and oral history from Great, her great-grandmother. These things motivate her to make some positive changes in her life.

Woodson’s *The Dear One* also includes a pregnant teen mom, Rebecca. Rebecca’s family is poor so she goes to live with her mother’s college friend, Catherine, until the baby she plans to give up for adoption arrives. Catherine’s daughter, the protagonist, is unhappy about Rebecca’s arrival at first, but in time the girls become close friends and learn from each other. An unlikely friendship between two girls is also at the center of *I Hadn’t Meant to Tell You This*. Marie, a middle class black girl, befriends Lena, a poor white girl. Both girls have lost their mothers, and it is this loss that brings them together. Then Marie learns Lena’s secret, her father is molesting her, and the girls’ friendship ends abruptly when Lena runs away. The novels discussed here are appropriate for secondary students. They are rich with cultural markers, strong plots, and engaging conflicts.

BEV (Black English Vernacular)

Since slavery, African/African Americans have used a language system that combines their native tongue with the language spoken by their oppressors (Madhubuti, 1984; Smitherman, 2000). I use the term “African/African American” because the language originated with African born slaves brought to the U.S. and then passed on to blacks, people we now call African Americans because of our African heritage and the fact we were

born in the U.S. Some of the terms and pronunciations found in BEV derive from West African languages.

Dialect, black idiom, Black English Vernacular (BEV), African American English Vernacular (AAEV), or the more recently popularized Ebonics are just a few of the labels linguists use to describe the language spoken by blacks. In this paper I will use Black English Vernacular (BEV). I use Mainstream American English (MAE) to describe language used by whites and others in the United States, especially while in the work place and in academia.

For African Americans, the spoken word has been linked to complex matters concerning “intelligence, creativity, literacy, culture, politics, race, and representation” (Harris, 1997, p. 687). These associations still exist today. Often when teachers hear black students using BEV, they make assumptions about their intelligence and ability to learn. For example, Delpit (2001) maintains “Most teachers are particularly concerned about how speaking Ebonics [BEV] might affect learning to read” (p. 24). She goes on to explain, “There is little evidence that speaking another mutually intelligible language form, per se, negatively affects one’s ability to learn to read” (p. 24).

Aspects of the Oral Tradition

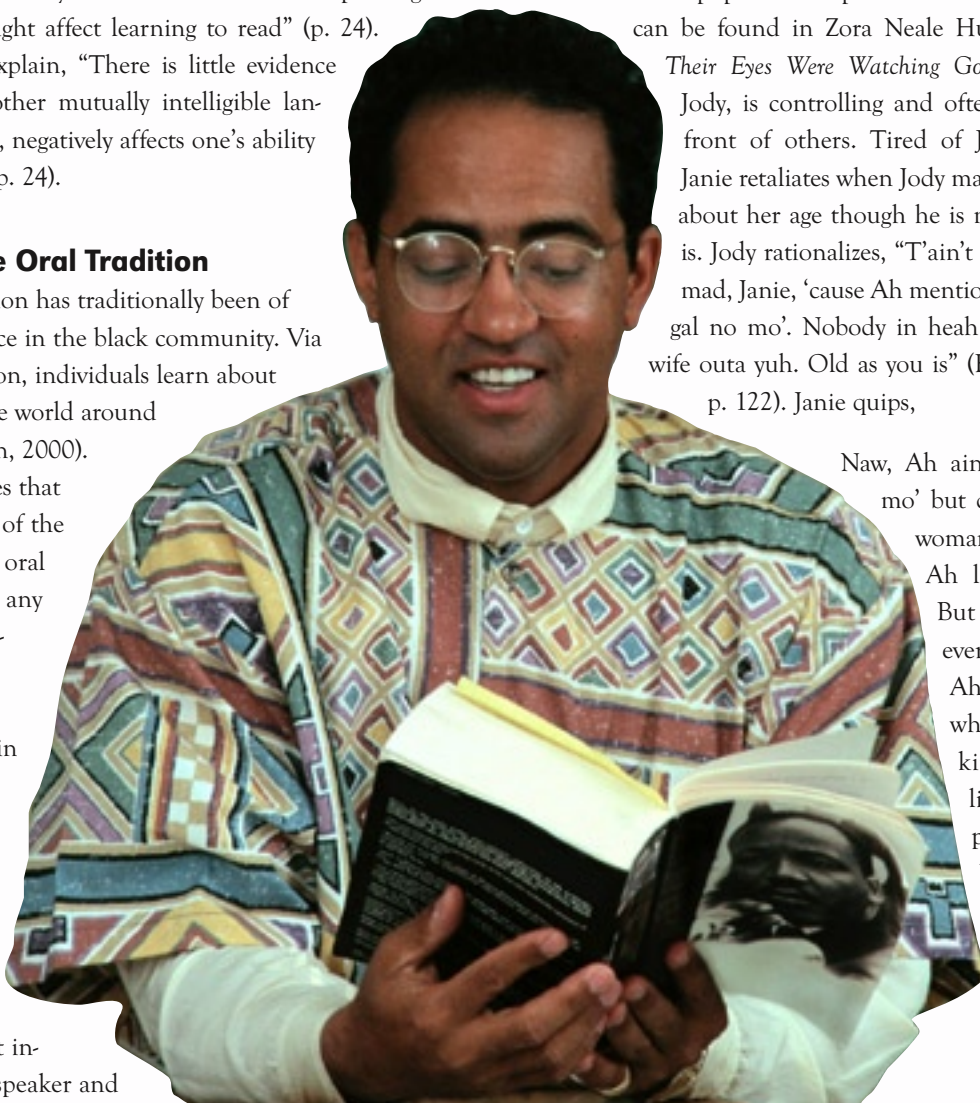
Oral communication has traditionally been of extreme importance in the black community. Via oral communication, individuals learn about themselves and the world around them (Smitherman, 2000). Smitherman argues that an understanding of the African American oral tradition precedes any meaningful understanding of BEV. Elements of the oral tradition are in African American literature. At the heart of the African American oral tradition is the spoken word and performance. In most instances there is a speaker and

an audience. Wit, speed, and articulation are a must. Songs, such as the spirituals created by slaves, proverbs, sermons, bragging, joking, and toasts are all part of the oral tradition, but here I focus on signifying, storytelling, and spitting game (i.e., love rapping).

Signifying

Signifying has been a part of the documented African American literary tradition since the 1500s (Gates, 1988). It is a complex topic as is much of the oral tradition and language use in the black community. Signifying often involves “talking back” in a sarcastic, disrespectful and/or insulting way, but the effect is generally humorous and ironic. Yet, as Mitchell-Kernan argues, signifying “does not...always have negative valuations attached to it; it is clearly thought of as a kind of art—a clever way of conveying messages” (in Gates, 1988, p. 83). Smitherman (1977) has written extensively about the use of signifying in black literature targeted at adults. A popular example she has referred to repeatedly can be found in Zora Neale Hurston’s (1937/1978) *Their Eyes Were Watching God*. Janie’s husband, Jody, is controlling and often humiliates her in front of others. Tired of Jody’s mistreatment, Janie retaliates when Jody makes negative remarks about her age though he is much older than she is. Jody rationalizes, “T’ain’t no use in getting’ all mad, Janie, ‘cause Ah mention you ain’t no young gal no mo’. Nobody in heah ain’t lookin’ for no wife outa yuh. Old as you is” (Hurston, 1937/1978, p. 122). Janie quips,

Naw, Ah ain’t no young gal no mo’ but den Ah ain’t no old woman neither. Ah reckon Ah looks mah age too. But Ah’m uh woman every inch of me, and Ah know it. Dat’s uh whole lot more’n you kin say. You big-bellies round here and put out a lot of brag, but ‘tain’t nothin’ to it but yo’ big voice. Humph! Talkin’ ‘bout me lookin’ old! When you pull down yo’ britches,



you look lak de change uh life [*italics in original*].
(pp. 122-123)

Smitherman (2000) explains that traditionally playing the dozens and signifying were two separate forms of verbally insulting someone. But recently the two have been conflated. This is not surprising since signifying and playing the dozens are closely related (Gates, 1988). In fact, Gates refers to the dozens as a “mode of Signification” (p. 99). The dozens involves two speakers who take turns verbally attacking each other’s mother and/or other family members. One might say, “Your Mama’s so ugly they use her face to make animal cookies.” And the other might reply, “I know you’re not talkin’. Your momma so fat she ain’t seen her feet in years.” There are specific rules or criteria (Smitherman, 2000) for playing the dozens: exaggeration, figurative language, and perfect timing. As seen in the example above, both an immediate and equally hyperbolic statement is required when playing the dozens.

Storytelling

Storytelling is a rich part of the African American oral tradition. It too relies on performance, figurative language and hidden meaning. This part of the oral tradition is extremely significant to many African American women. Richardson (2002) asserts, “Storytelling remains one of the most powerful language and literacy practices that Black women use to convey their special knowledge” (p. 687). Busia (1988) explains, “As black women we have recognized the need to rewrite or to reclaim our own *herstories*, and to define ourselves” (p. 1). This need for and use of story is powerful as it lends black women authority over their own experiences and voice, and it allows them to define themselves as subjects rather than objects. For as Morrison (1994) warrants, “[I]t is no longer acceptable merely to imagine us and imagine for us. We have always been imagining ourselves....We are the subjects of our own narrative, witnesses to and participants in our own experience” (p. 375).

Once again, Hurston’s *Their Eyes Are Watching God* offers a good example. When Janie returns to town after being away for a year and a half, she tells her best friend Pheoby multiple stories that explain events that occurred during her absence. In an effort to give “de understandin’ to go ‘long wid’ the story, Janie

must also tell about other pivotal happenings in her life that occurred long before her brief absence (p. 19). Stories are not told merely for entertainment; they are lifenotes (Bell-Scott, 1994) used to help black women make sense of personal experiences and of the world. Thus, storytelling becomes epistemological (Collins, 2000).

Spitting Game

A gentleman waiting to get his haircut greets a woman entering the barbershop with son in tow. “How you doing, lady?” he asks. “Fine,” she replies with a grin. He smiles back, “I didn’t ask you how you were looking. I asked you how you doing.” She smiles and sits down, and he begins a conversation about last night’s

basketball game with the other men in the barbershop while contemplating how he plans to ask her for her phone number. As in this example, spitting game, an updated name for what Smitherman (2000) calls love rap, refers to communication typically between a man and an unfamiliar woman; however, women also engage in this type of discourse with men. Smitherman (2000) asserts that listeners outside the black culture have misconstrued this form of talk between black men and black women. Particularly, she says whites label it as “aggressive,’ ‘brash,’ ‘presumptive,’ or ‘disrespectful’ behavior by black men toward black women” (p. 209).

*One might say, “Your
Mama’s so ugly they
use her face to make
animal cookies.” And
the other might reply,
“I know you’re not
talkin’. Your momma
so fat she ain’t seen
her feet in years.”*

Language Use and Class Distinction

Language use often depends as much on class as it does on race. In the small town where I grew up, it is often difficult to distinguish between the language spoken by poor, rural blacks and poor, rural whites. The differences in speech are extremely subtle, relying heavily on intonation, pitch, cadence, rhythm, facial expressions and other nonverbal cues. Williams-Garcia’s novels, *Blue Tights* and *Like Sisters on the Homefront*, include mainly working-class characters who use BEV. In the following example, a woman, whose race is not indicated, tells Gayle: “Babies’ ear-drums pop from the compression. It helps to have something to suck on” (Williams-Garcia, 1995, p. 22). Gayle replies using BEV: “See this bottle in his mouth?...mind ya bizniz. Okay?” (Williams-Garcia, 1995, p. 22). In this example, Gayle uses BEV as a point of emphasis. She intends to emphasize, both to the woman and

to any onlookers, her autonomy. In the same novel, Gayle's uncle's middle class family uses MAE.

MAE usage marks class distinctions in Woodson's novels too: Catherine and Marion, professional black women of substantial means, only use MAE, while Rebecca, a poor pregnant teen, primarily uses BEV. It is suggested that this is largely because of where Rebecca is from, Harlem, as well as her social class. Nevertheless, the novels also make it clear that within the black community MAE usage is often seen as distinguishable by race. Hence, MAE users are often accused of "actin' white." For example, when Afeni does not understand some of the terms Rebecca uses, Rebecca becomes frustrated with her and exclaims, "Learn the language already.... God! You're black. Talk like it" (Woodson, 1991, p. 68). This statement makes two vivid points: 1) Rebecca sees Afeni's language use as an attempt to distance herself from her black identity and 2) BEV is a language one must learn; it is not innate.

Afeni, however, refuses to allow Rebecca the last word, and interestingly, toward the end of the novel, Afeni's language use changes as she finds a way to negotiate BEV and MAE usage by combining the deletion rule and nonstandard terms like "nah" though the majority of her conversation encompasses MAE. Afeni, like many of the other characters (e.g., Joyce, Rebecca, and Marie's father) learned to codeswitch.

Codeswitching

Codeswitching can be described as a variance of discourse largely based on audience and objective (Richardson, 2002). For example, when I was in Ms. Hull's classroom I might say, "I read all of the time," but to convey the same idea at home I might say, "I be reading a lot." Researchers have found that a large number of blacks, regardless of class or educational attainment, use some form of BEV (Stanback, 1985; Smitherman, 2000). In *I Hadn't Meant to Tell You This*, Marie's father, a middle-class, black, college professor primarily uses MAE, yet he speaks differently when he is talking to Marie under informal conditions such as during a game of basketball. The opposite is true for *Blue Tights*: the majority of the characters chiefly use BEV, even despite educational accomplishments. For example, Minnie's nursing degree does not interfere with her use of the words "ain't," or "causa," neither does it stop her from saying such things as "Don't you be no fool" (Williams-Garcia, 1988, p. 86). Perhaps when Minnie is at work she employs codeswitching as Joyce does at school and within the community. Joyce is an "A" student, which implies she is adept at schoolwork, but when she talks to friends or others outside educational settings she frequently uses BEV.

Mastery and Use of MAE

The novels strongly suggest that class and educational opportunity, not race, are more salient determinants of mastery and use of MAE. For this reason, most of the characters in *Blue Tights* who live in Joyce's community are BEV users while the majority of the characters in Afeni's (*The Dear One*) suburban community are not. This is also suggested when Rebecca and Afeni wander into a poverty-stricken area of town and encounter a white girl who employs nonstandard English similar to Rebecca's BEV: "There's no coloreds livin' over cross this side" (Woodson, 1991, p. 110). Similarly, Marie (*I Hadn't Meant to Tell You This*) tells Lena, who is physically white, "You talk like a black girl" (Woodson, 1994, p. 19). Yet, Marie and her close friend Sherry, who is also black, use MAE. This causes one to wonder: What black girl is Marie comparing Lena to? To complicate matters, Sherry adamantly suggests that Lena is white trash as if this clearly explains why she "talks black." Is being black and poor one and the same and therefore equal to being white trash, which makes someone white, appear black yet obviously different from Marie and Sherry?

Smitherman (2000) suggests that the black community is linguistically divided into two groups: the "haves" and the "have-nots" (p. 39). Those classified as the "haves" have a firm understanding and manipulation of MAE brought about through educational attainment while "have-nots" do not. To the preceding statement, I would add that whites might be divided in this same way. Lena drifts in and out of school and from school to school, and as a result, her grades are mediocre. Thus, Lena's use of nonstandard English is a direct result of her class status as well as her limited education.

Another dimension to the "haves" and "have-nots" theory of MAE acquisition and its tie to educational ability relies on the eagerness of those who believe they must correct and instruct those who "have not," as seen in the following exchange between Cookie and Gayle: Cookie says, "You called the baby 'it.' It's a him. Just a small point of grammar...." To which, Gayle replies, "Yo look girlye...don't be telling me about *him* and *it*. Schools out. Okay?" [italics in original] (Williams-Garcia, 1995, p. 28) This theme is intertextual, as there is a nearly identical scene in *The Dear One*: Rebecca says, "Look at all those fishes." When Afeni corrects her, Rebecca responds, "Look! Just 'cause I'm in your ritzy house...doesn't mean you gonna teach me how to talk....you better consider yourself lucky I'm here, whether I'm here saying 'fishes', 'fish,' or 'fried fish!'" (Woodson, 1991, p. 45). In the examples above both Gayle and Rebecca are positioned as the

“have-nots” financially and educationally. Yet they are able to use wit and sarcasm to signify or get smart with/ tell off their offenders. At will, sophisticated BEV users, like Gayle and Rebecca, can employ elements of the oral tradition with ease.

Signifying

Lee (1993) utilized signifying as a scaffold for learning and relating to literary works in an important study of texts for adults. The AAYA novels in this article also use this rhetorical strategy and can be used by teachers who employ Lee’s model when teaching African American students. The examples below use signifying, not as a game of insult such as the dozens (Gates, 1988; Smitherman, 2000), but as a means to criticize or insult a person indirectly without references to his or her mother or other family members. For example, when Aunt Em (*Blue Tights*) sings “Going Up to Yonder” in an effort to sing louder than Smokey Robinson, Minnie says, “Well, go soon so we can hear our record” (Williams-Garcia, 1988, p. 19). This statement is meant to serve three purposes: 1) to let Aunt Em know they realize she does not want them to listen to secular music; 2) to assure Aunt Em that they have no intentions of cutting the music off; and 3) to humorously suggest that Aunt Em take on an impossible task (a trip to heaven).

Examples found in *Like Sisters on the Homefront* are similar. After Ruth Bell learns that Gayle is pregnant a second time she exclaims, “What you think I’m running? Does my door say South Jamaica Welfare Hotel? No. Do you see Hoe House on my mailbox? No. It say 150-11 South Road. Have the nerve to say ‘Whitaker’ on the welcome mat” (Williams-Garcia, 1995, p. 4). As seen in this example, a series of rhetorical questions asked and answered by the speaker are common when signifying. Even Great insults Gayle, though it takes Gayle a moment to realize it: Great says, “You the one like to taste the breeze high up ‘cross the crease your backside” (Williams-Garcia, 1995, p. 42). A statement like this may appear to be unintelligible to some, but those familiar with signifying notice that Great is insulting Gayle for being promiscuous. Later, Great is more obvious with her criticism of Gayle: Great says, “Something ugly as you otta be sweet.” First Gayle ignores Great’s insult because she is busy recalling the times boys have told her otherwise, but when Great says it a second time, Gayle asks, “Granny, is you trying to break [signify] on me?” (Williams-Garcia, 1995, p. 50).

Gayle enjoys exchanging insults. More than once, Gayle hopes Cookie will join her in a game of insults:

‘That’s your name? Constance? ...They don’t call you that all day long, do they? Con-stan-suh. Hurts my throat.”

Had she been true, homegirl would have said, “Like Gayle’s so hot.” Instead she sang cheerfully, “Everyone calls me Cookie,” which was why Gayle couldn’t like her. (Williams-Garcia, 1995, p. 30).

For some, the outcome of signifying is not to insult but to bond and to expose parts of one’s story through criticism and humor. While quite young, many BEV users learn that this essential verbal skill is respected in the community.

Storytelling

Rich in the African American literary tradition, storytelling is a device often used in AAYA literature. In *Like Sisters on the Homefront*, storytelling is used to help Gayle develop cultural identity and an understanding of her mother’s view of the world. Sensing that Gayle can benefit from knowledge of her ancestors more than anyone else in the family, Great entrusts the family history to Gayle who gathers self-worth and motivation from it. It is also because of storytelling that Gayle develops a desire to be a better daughter to her mother. The “love story” Aunt Virginia tells Gayle based on her mother’s and father’s past helps to reveal her mother’s vulnerability and plight. This information forces Gayle to become sympathetic to her mother’s situation. She no longer sees Ruth Bell as an adversary, but as someone like herself, someone bombarded by obstacles difficult to overcome.

In *I Hadn’t Meant to Tell You This* and *The Dear One*, references are made to stories about African American history recalled by the girls. For example, Marie repeatedly recalls that her father participated in the civil rights movement, and she realizes that his participation helped shape who he is and how he has raised her. Similarly, when Afeni sits in class listening to the teacher talk about Native Americans, she recalls what she has been taught about them outside of school and criticizes the teacher for not revealing the whole truth about Native Americans’ experiences. Those girls who have been told stories about their families, African American history, and the stories of other cultural groups appear to have a firm grasp on their cultural identities.

In a recent article published in the *Journal of Adolescent and Adult Literacy*, Cline & Necochea (2003) describe a childhood that lacked a print-rich environment. In fact, the authors could not recall being read to by their parents as children. Yet, they maintain that stories and other elements of the oral tradition proved just as powerful and necessary to their literacy development as any bound book. Additionally, they urge teachers to expand notions of acceptable literacy practices.



Spitting Game

Spitting game allows a black man who is unfamiliar with a particular black woman to engage in a conversation with her devoid of animosity. Smitherman (2000) claims “black women are accustomed to...[this type of] verbal aggressiveness from black men” (p. 209). For instance, Gayle tells Cookie about the appeal of a man’s verbal game: “...find a boy who knows all the moves, all the talk, and forget it. You be dropping your drawers before you know it” (Williams-Garcia, 1995, p. 68). It is Gayle, however, who decides that spitting game is not an exclusively male domain. Gayle encourages Cookie to “[g]o on over there and say ‘praise the Lord’ or whatever yawl say to get that rap going” (Williams-Garcia, 1995, p. 99).

Although black women may be accustomed to this type of language, some black women view it as offensive. The two novels by Williams-Garcia illustrate the conflict that surrounds this issue. Gayle seems to support Smitherman’s (2000) theory concerning black women and their tolerance of black men who spit game, yet Joyce does not. This type of discourse, participated in by an individual who is physically attracted to someone, does not

work unless the individual being pursued is in compliance. If the individual being pursued is a black woman who verbalizes noncompliance, animosity between the woman and the man spitting game occurs. Somehow a black woman’s refusal to quietly, or silently, tolerate this type of discourse is perceived as disloyalty by the black man spitting game. Thus, when Joyce refuses to be cordial to a man who is spitting game at her, he verbally insults her “and makes like he [is] going to come after her” (Williams-Garcia, 1988, p. 55). Joyce’s actions can be perceived as her feminist stance against the sexism she faces daily from men who, though probably unknowingly, offend her and make her feel like an object rather than a human being.

Final Thoughts

Teaching AAYA using theory grounded in African American culture might yield a richer reading of these works. While I have suggested the use of black feminist theory in other places, (Hinton-Johnson, 2003; Hinton, 2004), here I add an analysis of BEV and elements of the African American oral tradition as Smitherman’s (1977) and Gates’s (1988) seminal works suggest.

In addition to this, *The Skin That We Speak* (2002) challenges us to take on what at first appears to be a difficult task. We are asked to respect and understand our students' home language while simultaneously teaching our students the language of power. Further, Delpit (2001) suggests that we make the "actual study of language diversity a part of the curriculum for all students" (p. 23). Literature, like the books I discuss here, will help us begin to do this.

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