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Code Switching: Celebrating Cultural Dialects in American Speech

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Introduction

“Code-switching” is a linguistic term that describes what occurs when multilingual speakers alternate among languages within short phrases. When my urban students in New Haven do this, they say they are speaking “Spanglish”. Indeed this is commonly heard, as the U.S. Census Bureau reports that almost thirteen percent of the population of the United States speaks Spanish as a second language. ¹ It should be noted that code-switching is a normal occurrence in places that are multilingual, and among populations of newly-arrived immigrants. The term is also currently used to reference the practice of shifting between vernacular and formal language, especially among African Americans.

In the United States, a nation of immigrants, we are no strangers to this phenomenon, and yet the use of dialect and mixing languages often comes under fire and is frequently used to denigrate and negatively stereotype groups who are not proficient English speakers. In literature, however, these rich and varied forms of language are inimitable vehicles for expressing profound cultural textures and are vital to portraying intimacy, identity and origin. For writers, language variations are the tender fibers of characterization.

Consider rewriting *Adventures of Huckleberry Finn* to correct the dialect of Jim. In 2011, Mark Twain’s masterpiece was frankly bowdlerized, sanitized of an offending racial epithet, presumably so teachers could present it more comfortably to high school students. ² Uncomfortable as this epithet is, our difficult job is not to hide controversy, but to show students truths, even ugly ones, and give them the voice to stand up for themselves. What better way to instruct students, especially those who are marginalized, than to allow them to voice their opinions on controversial issues, especially ones that deeply concern them? Vernacular language often contains elements that are more than unconventional: it uncomfortably challenges more than the structure of the language spoken by those in power. These differences are more than expletives and epithets, but also can incorporate clever code or slang that speakers of Standard English may not understand.

As with any aspect of culture, linguistic differences were used to stereotype and demean minority groups, including African Americans, immigrants, and poverty-stricken people of the American South. While other cultural voices assimilated into the American voice, the segregation of African Americans has allowed a continuation of rich variety and difference in American English through centuries of our nation’s history, shaped uniquely by race. Through the twentieth century, stark differences in pronunciation, grammar and

usage were not only delineated by region, but widespread enough so that a controversy arose when some educators proposed teaching this dialect as a new entity called Ebonics. ³ Differences in spoken language became the music that determined race, ethnicity and social class, and the use of African American dialect as opposed to “correct” English became intensely politicized.

The controversy surrounding the “Negro,” more precisely, the Gullah dialect in George Gershwin’s *Porgy and Bess* is one example, with both liberal white and educated African Americans decrying the production as racist. ⁴ *Huckleberry Finn*, an undisputed literary masterpiece is still banned for the casual use of a hateful racial epithet and for Twain’s portrayal of Jim, who speaks in dialect, as inherently racist. William Faulkner would face the same criticism in his depiction of African American characters. ⁵ And black authors, such as Paul Laurence Dunbar and Zora Neale Hurston would suffer the same leveling criticism, mostly from black intellectuals, notably Richard Wright, ⁶ for using dialect as a means of cultural and artistic expression.

However, it is important for students to view the use of authentic speech artistically, and separate it from the belief that it only serves to perpetuate a racial stereotype almost universally perceived as negative, ignorant, and subservient. It is interesting to note that controversy only arises when the art form crosses racial lines or becomes provocative – lyrics of blues songs and Gospel music did not suffer the same criticism when they stayed in the black community. Rock and roll and later, rap and hip-hop music would face dire excoriation from Americans, white and black. The criticism was launched not only at expletives, but dialect and character portrayals as well, fearing these would either be a further provocation of African American anger or a continuance of racist stereotypes.

This forms continuing controversy in assessing hip-hop music today: Has the music indeed become a means to perpetuate an image of young black men as violent misogynists? Tricia Rose, author of *The Hip-Hop Wars* argues that hip-hop has been co-opted to sell records, regardless of the damage it adds to young men who already bear prodigious burdens of racism and isolation. She writes, “We must be more honest in thinking how black ghetto gangsta-based sales are the *results* of marketing manipulation and the *reflection* not only of specific realities in our poorest black urban communities but also of the *exploitation* of already-imbedded racist fears about black people.” ⁷

This unit proposes to open this uncomfortable door. To a large extent, the variations in “black” speech have already blended with the masses, along with a lot of criticism targeting dialect. But then again, even residual subtle linguistic differences draw stark societal lines, some of them creating barriers in educational opportunities and jobs. When we teach our students language, we of course must firmly expect all students to learn to use clear and precise, grammatically correct, eloquent *Standard* English. Eldridge Cleaver, writing in the Los Angeles Times criticized the teaching of Ebonics as a standard language: “African Americans are linguistically creative and have enriched the English language.” But he also argued that “The only place for Ebonics is the streets. We don’t need it in the classroom; we need to rescue kids from Ebonics, the illegitimate offspring of the shotgun wedding of ebony and phonics.” ⁸ Still, we should not forget that language is living and literature is an art form, and here is no place for conformity. Where to begin?

Objectives

Rationale

I teach at Wilbur Cross High School, a large comprehensive high school in New Haven, Connecticut. According to the most recent account in U.S. News and World Report, demographically, 80 percent of our students are economically disadvantaged. Around 50 percent of the students are Hispanic and 35 percent are African American.⁹ In 2014, only about 56 percent of our male students graduated after four years, compared to a school average of 65 percent and to a state average of 88 percent.¹⁰ It is interesting to note that the State of Connecticut does not aggregate the data specifically for minority males, but according to a report by the Schott Foundation for Public Education, in 2012, only 58.3 percent of African American males graduated from high schools in Connecticut.¹¹

While creating this unit, I had in mind minority students who are often disengaged from academics. However, parts of it can be adapted for students of all academic levels, and used in schools where the majority is not minority. In fact, examining the incredible artistic contributions African Americans and other immigrant populations made to the English language would be a good lesson for everyone. The unit suggests other texts for you to modify lessons to better suit your own classroom needs.

Recent news is filled with accounts of unarmed black males, many of them teenagers, who were killed by police officers or others. The names read like a somber list of tragic casualties: Trayvon Martin, Tamir Rice, Jordan Davis, Michael Brown, Eric Garner, Walter Scott and Freddie Gray. Anger and desperation fomented by racism come back to haunt the community. In April of 2014, one of our students was killed in a drive-by shooting in front of his home. The boy was a 16-year-old African American. This tragedy hit our students very hard, although such losses are mournfully not uncommon. At the boy's wake, I made a quiet promise to myself to continue to work to help change the negative self-image and desolation that many African American males bear. One purpose of this unit is to work towards reaffirmation of the artistic beauty and power of language in minority groups, particularly African American and Hispanic – and to enlighten students to be wary of negative images and lyrics that do *not* represent who they are.

I believe that teachers have a responsibility to address issues beyond the classroom and, while revealing uncomfortable images and texts that historically have been used to mock black culture might be challenging for teachers, exposing this as racism and teaching students to appreciate the beauty and variety that dialect provides artistically is important to counter these negative and racist tracts. It is difficult to talk about race, to have a frank discussion about unpleasant words, about violence, about racism and negative images of male and female sexuality. But if we believe that we are *in parentis loco*, then we must not shrink from these difficult conversations with our students. (Note: The Latin phrase is particularly amusing for the Hispanic kids in class.)

As English teachers, we walk the language-cultural line every day. Standard English is “white” English to the ears of many of my urban students. It is the language of the elite, and forms a barrier to prosperity as formidable as any Eliza Doolittle faced. The linguistic-cultural line that shapes a story about crisis of identity in George Bernard Shaw's *Pygmalion*, is not a new story but it is still very relevant. The elite language is not the mother tongue of many of my students. Beyond being uncomfortable to use, it is pretentious and worse: Students resist code-switching because it is akin to being a traitor to one's own tribe to “sound white.”

While certainly we need to teach Standard English, we also need to be careful in explaining *why* a standard form is necessary. We also need to teach that non-standard English is the living part of any language, and it a constant spring of dynamic expressiveness. Without it, any language is doomed.

This unit will strive to show students the necessity of using dialect to depict characters in literature, and the need of using authentic, creative, living language in modern poetry and spoken word. In her book, “ *Dialect and Dichotomy: Literary Representations of African American Speech* , Lisa Cohen Minnick argues that written representations of African American dialect is “inextricably intertwined with racial attitudes and issues that help to define the American experience and, by extension, the national literature.” ¹² While it is important for literary critics to consider the artistic use of dialect, it is more important for students to celebrate how dialect conveys characters affected by time and place, and be able to discern between racist and artistic representations. Difficult and probably uncomfortable class discussions about language and racism will be encouraged.

Assignments for this unit include: 1) Learning the history of the English language to illustrate that all languages evolve and that language is power. 2) Analyzing images to explore the history of racism. 3) Examining literary works that use dialect artistically and creating rubrics to assess artistic values in dialect. 4) Examining examples of non-standard English in song, poetry and spoken word to assess their emotional, personal or cultural probity. 5) Using this information to write a formal synthesis paper. 6) Creating a performance piece or video.

Teaching Strategies and Classroom Activities

1) The History of English: Discussion on Language and Power and Discovery Draft

One good way to defuse racial or ethnically biased overtones in a discussion of linguistic differences is to present students with a brief history of the English language. English happens to be a very good language to discuss since a cultural and linguistic crisis in the language was created by an invasion of Anglo-Saxon England by the French in 1066. After the Norman invasion and until Chaucer’s time in the mid-14th century, the language of the Plantagenet English nobility was *French* . This conquest would transform the language spoken in England over the next three centuries, creating a cultural divide between words such as “dog” and “canine”. The conquered language became the lowly diction of the new language as French and English melded into Anglo-Norman (the “Franglish” of the time) to Middle English, and then to Modern English. But the melding of two different language branches endowed Modern English with endless synonyms, richness, and variety in diction. The spread of English as the British Empire expanded continued to add once “foreign” words to our language. In fact, the very power of English derives from a dynamic linguistic cultural exchange. In effect, our *standard* language serves its purpose in allowing us all to communicate clearly and efficiently, no matter where we come from. But it is the *vernacular* language that has always given it a heartbeat.

This lesson will be presented in a lecture using a Power Point program I have developed. ¹³ The lecture will have a formal discussion afterwards regarding language and power in the world of our students. Students will have the ability to share personal stories and think about how variations in dialect, having an accent, or using a different level of diction shapes how people judge them. Dialects vary from one end of America to another, and also from one end of the Spanish-speaking world to another, and students will be encouraged to follow

discussion protocols as likely this exchange will become passionate. Students will read the poem “The Albuquerque Graveyard” by Jay Wright and takes notes to consider what it means to “parse your tongue”¹⁴ to cross social and cultural lines in America. Teachers should guide students to realize that linguistic lines are not just ethnic ones, but economic ones as well. Indeed this entire unit might be recast along socio-economic lines, such as is evident in Shaw’s *Pygmalion* or the lovely film version, *My Fair Lady*.

Students will discuss suggestions to eliminate use of language variations or attempts to legitimize them. Students will take notes on articles describing moves to legislate English as the official language of the United States, and articles regarding an official designation of African American dialect as Ebonics, and note their own opinions on these issues. Students will also be asked to take notes on a formal discussion on how their own use of language allows them to be expressive. This might be the use of cultural neologisms (slang) or speaking a different language in itself. Are there things you cannot express in English, or in Standard English? When creating characters, how important is it for writers to use language that is realistic?

Students will use their notes as a starting point to write a personal response as a discovery draft for their final papers, including their own experiences at home and school, and in the neighborhood. Some teacher questions might include: How does use of language vary? Are there places where different ways of speaking creates barriers or misunderstanding? Does discrimination occur because of differences in dialect, language or diction? Are there circumstances where you shape your speech differently, depending on where you are? How important is it for writers or musicians to use authentic language when creating characters or songs?

2) Presenting a Historical Context: The Pyramid of Hate and Racist Images

The next step of the unit will present lessons so students can examine how images and language was used from the end of the Civil War to demean and stereotype African Americans and other ethnic groups. It might be wise to specifically explain to students that the images they will view are disturbing, and that knowledge of the history of bias and racism fortifies our ability to counter racism in the present. A brief historical time line that documents the social and political landscape from the end of slavery, to the Jim Crow Era and the Great Northern Migration, the rise of immigration, and the Civil Rights movement is provided in Teacher Resources.

A good place to begin might be the presentation of *The Pyramid of Hate*, a notable image created by the Anti-Defamation League to teach how various ethnic groups have been targeted and dehumanized in a pattern that builds to genocide. It is important to recognize these steps to stop hatred from taking hold. Students will take notes on discussion topics expressed in this image, such as stereotyping, bullying and discrimination, and how perhaps some of these are issues that divide them and their own neighborhoods in violence. What creates hatred? Do we have the power within us to overcome it? Students will write down opinions this topic. By understanding our own strengths, can we depersonalize the hatred directed towards us through discrimination? Do we need to culturally assimilate to avoid prejudice?

Viewing Images of Racism in Historical Context

For this lesson of the unit, students will gather information from images including film and graphic art. Students will begin by viewing an interesting video by Lupe Fiasco¹⁵ that questions misogynist and violent lyrics in rap and hip-hop music. The video also references minstrel performances as background images. Students might not be aware of what minstrel was. Viewing a video example from a film such as *Holiday Inn* might be informative, coupled with a brief history of the form.¹⁶ Students will take notes during a formal discussion of both videos. Is Lupe Fiasco’s assertion that hip-hop promotes misogyny true? Another video

worth viewing is *Hip-Hop: Beyond Beats and Rhymes*,¹⁷ which questions the negative – but profitable – portrayal of young urban black males as “thugs” in hip-hop. Student will then write an analysis on how stereotyping through speech and image fosters hate and affects self-esteem among the target groups. Can target groups also fall into the same pattern of promoting negativity about their own culture?

Students will then view a historic assortment of propaganda images with text or dialogue that were used to justify political isolation and to disempower various groups of minorities, and immigrants including Irish, Italians, Asians and Jews as well as African Americans and Hispanics. There are many available on the Internet and currently on YouTube. It might be interesting for students to view racist cartoons, watched mostly by children. (See Teacher Resources) How effective were these images as indoctrinating tools for young people to see others or themselves? While viewing these, students will take notes and analyze what they see and hear to organize their thoughts for a formal class discussion afterward and provide material for their synthesis papers. Film examples might include *The Birth of a Nation*, *The Jazz Singer* and *Gone with the Wind*. Are there still examples of denigrating propaganda present in our society, on the Internet or Twitter? Should hate speech be illegal? Have can people counter these images? How can language, in particular used as a means of discrimination? Perhaps as a counter balance, students might view *The Migration* series by Harlem Renaissance painter Jacob Lawrence.¹⁸ Students should take notes on all images and classroom discussions for their final synthesis paper.

Exploring Language and Art: The N-Word and Dialect Debate

The next step of the unit examines how dialect and ethnic variations in language enrich our literature, and enrich the artistic expressiveness of students themselves as writers. Let’s code-switch!

But first: Variances in language, including dialect and accents are often nefariously targeted to mock and demean minorities. The language that one speaks is idiomatically referenced as one’s “mother tongue” because it is so inherently comingled with identity and comfort, that to tear one away from it and force one to speak another is an act of violence. To use dialect or accent in dehumanizing ways eats at the soul; it tears out the tongue and serves to silence or annihilate the self. When language is thus raped and made to yield to oppressive forces that dirty and degrade it, can it ever be resurrected to a place of dignity and artistic respect?

For most American immigrants, a natural shift in language happens in the second generation, as children growing up absorb the new language in what Noam Chomsky recognized as the miracle of language acquisition in the human brain. By the third generation, unless isolated in ghettos or a special effort is made, the language of the grandparents is forgotten. In the past, immigrants were escaping brutal conditions from their home countries for the promised land of American, and the effort was decidedly to learn English and to become American. The effect of degradation because of accents or language therefore would only last one generation.

For Spanish speaking populations, the power of linguistic denigration had its effect in the past, but is now washed away under the sheer volume of Spanish-speaking immigrants. In many parts of the country, Spanish is a *de facto* second language. The majority minority group in the United State is now Hispanic, and growing. Globally, Spanish surpasses English as a world language. Politicians in the United States – more Republicans than Democrats – are using their knowledge of Spanish on the campaign trail to win votes.

African American dialect traveled its own route. Consider Democratic Senator Harry Reid’s statement that he could support Barack Obama as a candidate because he was “light skinned” and spoke with “no Negro

dialect.”¹⁹ Strict racial segregation that included education, housing, and professional isolation made the ability to “pass” linguistically much more difficult and much less desired for African Americans, creating an intractable connection of language to race. The debate takes place within the African American community in a way that is perhaps more poignant and meaningful than outside of it.

While the Teacher Resources in this curriculum unit suggests material to help teachers shape the dialect debate, including the once-promoted teaching of Ebonics, there is one succinct racial epithet that encapsulates this discussion for African American students. It should be fairly easy to cover this topic in a class discussion, especially in an urban setting: The “n-word” debate.

Most of my students over the years have been quite clear on their use of the n-word as a somewhat tender form of address between friends, once in a while, oddly, even directed at white friends. Even when used negatively by black students, it carries no more weight than “dude” might carry for Southern Californians. Be brave. Take a breath. A unit on use of African American dialect cannot avoid this one. Your students will do all the talking, but open the door and ask them what they think of this word. My students will patiently explain that *their* word is spelled and pronounced differently from the heinous one. They will also patiently explain that it would be inappropriate for anyone who is not black, and probably, inappropriate for anyone who is a teacher to comfortably use this word when addressing African American students. For students, the distinction is fairly clear – the word *they* use is simply not the same word as the other one. Or is it? You might want to take a look at Oprah quizzing Jay-Z on this topic as a starter.²⁰

Here is the lively debate then: When and how is dialect *not* hateful, and not discriminatory? What are the rules? When is it appropriate for writers and musicians to use this particular word and other forms of African American speech, and when is it not appropriate? What about stereotypical portrayals? When should one use formal speech instead of informal speech? Are expletives ever allowed? Students will provide enough original commentary, but there are many discussions in articles and online that offer different viewpoints. Based on this probably heated discussion, students will write short papers to argue their particular viewpoints.

To introduce the next section, students will be asked to read and comment on Richard Wright’s essay opposing Zora Neale Hurston’s use of what he perceived was demeaning African American dialect.²¹ Time to explore literature.

3) Exploration of Literary Use of Dialect and Aesthetics of Oral Tradition

Since the population of Wilbur Cross High School is largely black and Hispanic, my choices of texts for this unit will focus on use of African American dialect and bilingual Spanish in literature. However, the unit suggests other works that use other types of dialect. The texts examined here are works taught in advanced levels, but other texts can be substituted for these. Depending on the academic levels of students, the teacher can choose from among a number of novels, excerpts, or poems.

We might want to consider how to shape a discussion on the literary merits of dialect in texts. Students already will have formulated original thoughts on this in their discovery drafts. In my teaching experience, it is always best to build on the ideas your students give you and work from there. But here are some other things to consider:

The use of dialect evokes pre-literate traditions in literature. The rendering of dialect into text demands oral reading for comprehensibility, and in the transference from text to voice, many powerful elements of oral storytelling return. Walter J. Ong brilliantly illuminates these in a masterful small book called *Orality and*

Literacy. One very interesting study he examines by A.R. Luria ²² reveals that cultures that are not chirographic *think* differently. Individuals do not formulate logical syllogisms, but think more circumstantially. If I have once seen a black bear, than I cannot imagine a place where theoretically, “all bears are white.” Tools are not all in one category, but have particular purposeful uses. Perhaps a scythe might be retooled to say, cut meat, but it is not the same as a knife. Also, self-analysis is assessed only in context with others, with actions, and with the circumstantial environment. So too, characters in epics, folk tales and mythology worldwide present in a similar fashion: They are dynamic, improvisational, quick to transform, adaptive. Objects exist in the present, not in a symbolic or analytic abstraction. Reality and reckoning depend on setting. ²³ One’s merit depends on circumstance.

These ideas are useful to delineate between mere stereotypes and full-formed characters. While modern works often contain the presence of an interior monologue that shapes a character’s psychology, characters such as Jim in *The Adventures of Huckleberry Finn* , Maggie in Stephen Crane’s eponymous novel, the African Americans in Faulkner’s *The Sound and the Fury* , Tea Cake in *Their Eyes Were Watching God* , David’s father in *Call It Sleep* are shaped by their actions and reactions to the world around them. In this way, they are not “flat” characters, but simply ones shaped by a different culture. Also, in societies without writing, the narratives are internalized and improvisational. The plots are episodic, and episodes might contain elaborations or be forgotten in the retelling. Oral stories are somatic and participatory – the narrator’s presence draws the audience in. ²⁴

Consider how this might work in *Huck Finn* and *Their Eyes Were Watching God* , and in the individual narratives in *The Sound and the Fury*. Stories created in a world without writing also are visceral and close to the human bone, concerned with the physical realities of things. In such texts, violence and tenderness are raw, expressed in actions and imagery. Those raised in a non-literal world also needed to be consummately creative and virtuosic word spinners – especially when it came to verbal sparring: the technical word for this is “flyting”, although African Americans reference it as “playing the dozens”. Encomiums are also included in oral tradition, as are boasts, and these too carry expressions that are thick with references to life and action.

²⁵

The very act of telling a story orally also carries impressive stylistic beauty. Ong also points some of the psychodynamics of sound: It is an exterior and pluralistic sense, it unifies the community hearing the story. It is dynamic and shifting, and carries physical power. It is patterned, rhythmic, musical, additive and copious. It is also something sacred. He quotes a familiar passage from 2 Corinthians: “The letter kills, the spirit [breath] gives life.” ²⁶ For those familiar with epics, the invocation at the beginning is testimony to this understanding. Even something such as the untranslatable Anglo-Saxon word at the beginning of *Beowulf* “*Hwæt*”, is a call to attention for the listeners.

For students truly to understand the beauty and power of dialect, it is necessary to hear. You might turn down the lights and ask students to put their heads down, close their eyes and listen. Mark Twain, Zora Neale Hurston and William Faulkner are particularly expert at rendering dialect phonetically in text. Audio books are available online free for *The Adventures of Huckleberry Finn*, *Their Eyes Were Watching God* and *The Sound and the Fury* . (Audible®, a subsidiary of Amazon is one provider.) Perhaps you are capable of affectively reading the passages yourself that are spoken in dialect, but with the help of technology, you don’t need to be. Have students listen carefully at first without writing.

Creating Criteria Rubrics for Student Analysis of Dialect in Literature

This is all heady stuff. First, ask what your *students* think about how dialect and non-standard language adds a sense of reality, of presence, of earthiness, of passion and truth in a character. These are all supremely valid things.

For each analysis, students should use a rubric that they have helped shape for literary analysis of dialect. The main question of analysis is how the character portrayals are different from negative stereotypes. Other criteria should include: How does dialect shape the character and provide historical or cultural context for the conflict in the story? Who is telling the story, how is it framed, and how much of the dialect is purposefully constructed, and why? How does the dialect creatively use figurative expressions (simile, metaphor) and symbolism that is shaped by cultural experiences and reflects important aspects of the conflict of the story? Are there slang expressions, expletives or racist statements? Are they appropriate in context or not? If there is another language, students should translate that passage and consider why this particular expression might be more authentic, or more poignant in the other language. And, students should strongly consider the *spoken sound* aspects of dialogue as music: Consider the *sounds* of rhyming words, rhythm, cacophony, euphony and onomatopoeia. How do these add to the impact of the passage? This rubric might be used for any passage that contains dialect, from literary sources other than the ones listed below.

Mark Twain's *The Adventures of Huckleberry Finn* continues to raise controversy in some places where Twain's use of the n-word in the mouths of white people is causal and dehumanizing. The novel also received criticism for its use of dialect in portraying the slave, Jim, as it might seem to reinforce negative stereotypes of illiteracy and ignorance. If the novel is assigned for students to read, students could present assessments of the characters of both Huck and Jim and come to class prepared with excerpts that they have chosen that illustrate key character traits of both. However, the background of the story could be presented to the students along with excerpts that explore the use of dialect.

One particularly moving passage is in Chapter 15. When the novel begins, Huck introduces Jim as someone mysterious, an "other" who speaks differently and is part of a mystical world of witches and prophecy. Huck uses the word "nigger" indifferently, as one might reference a bird or snake. Huck does not yet realize that he and Jim are the same: Huck is struggling against white "sivilization" that is confining and filled with irrational rules; he struggles against a brutal, racist father whose possession of him and drunken violence mimic slavery. Huck plays childish games of empowerment with Tom Sawyer that disappoint him. He and Jim both seek freedom in the natural world, most importantly on the river – the place of transformation, of constant evolution, of apotheosis. When they meet, both are escaping the ruthless world that threatens their lives and they join up. Huck is initially bemused by Jim's logic in countering the Wisdom of Solomon, since Solomon condones cutting a child in half. Huck sneers at Jim's understanding that if a Frenchman is a man, surely he speaks English, the language of a man, and he dismisses Jim's account of gambling where at first it seems Jim has lost all his money, but in the end Jim says, "I owns myself." Indeed, freedom is something Huck cannot yet comprehend either for Jim or for himself. That Huck is in fact "free" at this point in the novel is something Jim shelters him from when he hides the dead body of Huck's father. But what is freedom?

One moment of transition happens at the end of Chapter 15. Huck and Jim are separated in a foggy night. In a separate boat, Huck floats through towheads on the opposite side of a river island. Huck is frightened and lost. Exhausted, he falls asleep and only when the stars are out again can he find Jim, who is holding his head between his legs, asleep, the raft almost swamped with leaves and branches. When Jim wakes, he is expressive with gratitude: "En you ain' dead – you ain' drowned – you's back agin? It's too good for true, honey, it's too good for true. Lemme look at you, chile, lemme feel o' you. No, you ain' dead! you's back agin, live en soun', jis de same ole Huck – de same ole Huck, thanks to goodness!"²⁷ But Huck decides to trick Jim

into thinking it was all a dream, insisting that he was there all along. Jim humors him, and retells his “dream” according to Huck, “with embellishments.” Jim interprets it as a warning: the towheads and their whoops calling to each other in the dark, and coming out of the fog represent their difficult passage into freedom. Huck then asks Jim to interpret the debris on the raft:

“What do dey stan’ for? I’s gwyne to tell you. When I got all wore out wid work, en wid de callin’ for you, en went to sleep, my heart wuz mos’ brok bekase you wuz los’, en I didn’ k’yer no mo’ what become er me en de raf’. En when I wake up en fine you back agin, all safe en soun’, de tears come en I could a got down on my knees en kiss’ yo’ foot I’s so thankful. En all you wuz thinkin’ ‘bout wuz how you could make a fool uv ole Jim wid a lie. Dat truck dah is *trash* ; en trash is what people is dat puts dirt on de head er dey fren’s en makes ‘em ashamed.”²⁸

Huck is stunned. He considers that it is he who should kiss Jim’s foot, and finds that it takes him fifteen minutes before he can work himself up to “go and humble” himself to “a nigger.” He tells us he is never sorry for doing so afterwards and vows he will never play mean tricks on Jim again. It is a stunning moment in the novel. What is freedom? What is wisdom? What is a person worth? What is love and humanity? Huck is awakened to find that white supremacy is a dream of white power, not proof of intelligence, but proof of inhumanity. If he wants freedom, he needs to first free himself from this dream.

After reading and annotating a passage, students can use their rubrics for analysis: Does dialect help to convey Jim’s character realistically? In particular, how does use of dialect add depth to the character’s background and place in history? In what ways does Twain’s rendering of dialect work to go deeper into the heart of the character of Jim? Do you think it is a demeaning portrayal? How does it differ from some of the propaganda images? Students should include particular references from listening to the spoken text for analysis: listen for musical elements of pitch and dynamics and resonating sounds, euphony and cacophony. Why is it so important that Jim’s language is not stripped of his history and culture, and rendered in Standard English? Why is it also important, in this case, for Huck to use a hateful epithet in referencing Jim? *Huck’s* English, it should also be noted, is also dialect. Why?

Use of dialect gives characters indelible power, tenderness, grace and poignancy. Contrary to negative racial stereotyping, use of authentic African American dialect in excellent fiction validates the clout and autonomy of black culture in America, and reinforces its influence on American culture as a whole.

Huck tells us his own story, in a straight-up first person narrative. In Faulkner’s *The Sound and the Fury* , individual members of the Compson family narrate the first three sections of the novel. The last section is told in first person limited perspective, from the point of view of Dilsey, one of the Compsons’ African American servants. Why make this shift? The first three sections are wrenchingly introspective: Benjy is mentally disabled, Quentin is suicidal, and Jason perhaps is a sociopath. Dilsey however, is centered and rational, the only one who is strong enough to have enduring love for children who are not her own. She is defined by her actions and the pure truth of her statements. Her kindness is blood and heart, and the dialect of her language, and the language of all the African Americans in the novel, whose roots were just pulled out of slavery, is sacred and hallowed in its oral rendering. She is of the moral fiber of this world, not an introspective unit isolated from it. Many writers have examined her dialect and the dialect of the sermon by a black preacher at the end of the novel, but there are other parts where dialect and character emerge as meaningful challenges as America transitioned in the early 20th century from one that was ruled only by Anglo-Saxon whites to one that needed to become more inclusive.

background, Tea Cake and Janie tenderly express their love for each other in the earthly and simple language of dialect. Janie says, “We been tuhgether round two years. If you kin see de light at daybreak, you don’t keer if you die at dusk. It’s so many people never seen de light at all. Ah wuz fumblin’ round and God opened de door.”³⁴ It is a stunningly affective transition. In terms of Hurston’s observations of “acting” or performance, we find that overall when the characters speak, their language is deliberate, crafted and clever. Brilliant figurative expressions, patterns and rhythmic phrases abound. Have students use their rubrics to examine this passage, or another in Chapter 20 as Janie, the skilled griot, resolves her story:

“Now, Phoeby, don’t feel too mean wid de rest of ‘em ‘cause dey’s parched up from not knowin’ things. Dem meatskins is *got* tuh rattle tuh make out they’s alive. Let ‘em consulate theyselves wid talk. ‘Course, talkin’ don’t amount tuh uh hill uh beans when yuh can’t do nothin’ else. And listenin’ tuh dat kind uh talk is jus’ lak openin’ yo’ mouth and lettin’ de moon shine down yo’ throat.”³⁵

For writers, a character’s voice must be authentic. It isn’t what is said, but how. Often what is *not* said or cannot be said goes farther in revealing a character’s heart. In this way, dialogue illuminates character beyond what a character might be able to say eloquently, but says culturally, adding ineffable dimension.

Although not dialect, incorporating other languages into works written mainly in English is becoming more common. As America becomes more bilingual, Spanish is appearing more frequently in English language texts. If you have Spanish-speaking students in your class, these texts are perhaps easier to teach. But why not encourage all students to translate the passages, or to infer what is said from context? Let’s celebrate and embrace bilingualism! A really interesting example of a novel that flows seamlessly from English to Spanish is Cormac McCarthy’s *The Crossing*, the second novel in his Border Trilogy. When Boyd crosses into Mexico, people simply speak Spanish. No italics, no awkward rendering in broken English. It is an amazing read.

A selection from Chapter 1 of *Under the Feet of Jesus*, by Helena Maria Viramontes deals with linguistic discrimination, and in this context, students should examine how incorporating Spanish is meaningful thematically.

The section begins shortly after Estrella’s father leaves and she is struggling to accept Perfecto Flores as the new man in her mother’s life.³⁶ The paragraph starts with Estrella’s question: “So what is this?” and continues to describe her anger at discovering Perfecto’s tool box by the door. They remind her of the alphabet that she doesn’t understand in the class where migrant students have to sit in the back of the room. She is enraged that the teacher thinks she is dirty and has no time for her questions. But Perfecto teaches her the names of the tools and how to use them: “aqui, pergarle, aqui” he says. The section ends with, “That was when she began to read.” Why are the words in Spanish so significant? (Not to mention the man’s name.) Later in the section, Estrella’s mother, Petra, is whispering a song: “Te vengo a decir adiós, No quiero verte llorando.”³⁷ The song is in the background of a scene where Petra is mourning the loss of innocence of her daughter. At the end of this passage she says twice to Estrella, “Diós lo permita, Pa’ estrechate entre mis brazos.”

Students should use their rubrics for analysis, and explain why the author would choose to use Spanish. How does it add to the tenderness and meaning of the scene? Another good story to examine would be *No Speak English* from Sandra Cisneros’ *The House on Mango Street*, and many of the other stories in this collection as well.

Other recommendations for examining how dialect and non-standard English add to the power and meaning of works include Stephen Crane's *Maggie: A Girl of the Streets*, which utilizes mostly Irish-immigrant dialect in lower Manhattan at the turn of the century. Another novel is Henry Roth's magnificent *Call it Sleep*, which depicts Jewish immigrants who speak Yiddish in New York slums during the Depression. Roth incorporates code-switching to illustrate cultural bias: He expresses a character's broken and struggling English in dialect, and extraordinary eloquence and intelligence, written in English, when the characters switch to Yiddish. The readers experience *English* as the foreign language! Also consider: Esmeralda Santiago's *When I Was Puerto Rican*, Junot Diaz' *The Brief and Wondrous Life of Oscar Wao*, and *Christ in Concrete*, which incorporates Italian and dialect, by Pietro di Donato. Also, short stories of Hurston, Frank Chin, Maxine Hong Kingston, Amy Tan, Isaac Bashevis Singer, Toni Cade Bambara, Alice Walker, Milton Murayama and N. Scott Momaday, who incorporates Kiowa into some of his stories. Selections should also include a variety of poems for students to analyze: Langston Hughes, Paul Laurence Dunbar, Nikki Giovanni, Gwendolyn Brooks, Maya Angelou, Angela De Hoyos, Gwendolyn Bennett, Sterling Brown, Claude McCay, Jean Toomer, even Robert Burns – are all good sources.

4) Use of Dialect in Song

Students will find their own depictions of artistic use of language variances in song and spoken word. They will present the work to the class with an analysis of its artistic strengths or weaknesses. Other students in the class will use their rubrics to provide commentary.

An introduction to this section might include a historical dimension, with listening to excerpts from *Porgy and Bess* and songs from Gospel and blues artists. The list here could be endless, but some of my choices would include Robert Johnson, Memphis Minnie, Mahalia Jackson, Muddy Waters, B.B. King, Marion Anderson, Billy Holiday, Etta James and Nina Simone. Students could discuss how dialect is used effectively. A short lesson on the development of lyrics as code words during slave times might also be included. ³⁸

5-6) Finding Strength and Power in Language Variance: Final Synthesis Paper and Student Videos to Counter Racism

The synthesis paper will ask student to take a stand on use of language as an artistic means of expressing culture. The paper should incorporate many of the unit discussions, and the critical assessment of exploitation of cultural expressions in images and film. It should also cite poetry, song and literary excerpts that depict use of dialect and language variations that they will analyze as purposeful and expressive. Should there be limits on expression? When does artistic expression become a negative stereotype? Where is the line between art and exploitation? Does such artistic stereotyping harm individuals? Why does the use of non-standard English convey something that Standard English cannot?

And finally, students will create videos of their own works – either song or spoken word – to express their own sense of pride and identity. The goal of these presentations is to counter racism, build pride and present a celebration of language variations that express students' individual culture in a positive and powerful light. Students will provide feedback on how this particular unit has affected their understanding of use of language, dialect, and code-switching in literature and in their own lives.

Conclusion

Language is learned in the heart, outside of text. Throughout almost all of human history storytelling and poetry existed exclusively in spoken word as performance. The best stories feel like home because they retain the variations of language that imbue our souls. Language, especially the living, artistic language that is the vernacular is often best expressed in an oral form. And without being written down, Standard English is set free again in storytelling, which can be effectively used to include students who have learning disabilities. Students will understand that writing and reading are simply the encoding of a living art, and that without these, the art still thrives.

Resources for Students and Teachers

"11 Disney Movies You Didn't Know Were Racist - Page 6 of 6 - Atlanta Blackstar." Atlanta Blackstar. September 26, 2014. Accessed June 30, 2015. <http://atlantablackstar.com/2014/09/26/11-disney-movies-you-didnt-know-were-racist/6/>. A good source for choosing popular racist cartoon images.

Anti-Defamation League. *PYRAMID OF HATE*, 2005. Accessed July 2, 2014.

<http://www.adl.org/assets/pdf/education-outreach/Pyramid-of-Hate.pdf>. A graphic illustration useful to teach many lessons against prejudice.

"Black Lives Matter: The Schott 50 State Report on Public Education and Black Males." The Schott Foundation for Public Education. Accessed June 30, 2015. <http://www.schottfoundation.org/>. Good source for many statistics important for educators.

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"English Language Arts Standards » Reading: Literature » Grade 9-10." English Language Arts Standards » Reading: Literature » Grade 9-10. 2015. Accessed May 25, 2015. <http://www.corestandards.org/ELA-Literacy/RL/9-10/>. New Haven Curriculum.

"FFF: Hispanic Heritage Month 2014: Sept. 15–Oct. 15." FFF: Hispanic Heritage Month 2014: Sept. 15–Oct. 15. October 15, 2014. Accessed July 20, 2015. <http://www.census.gov/newsroom/facts-for-features/2014/cb14-ff22.html>. Census Bureau information.

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https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=C3m3t_PxiUI. Recommended video that will elicit good discussions on racism and misogyny in hip-hop.

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Gullason, Thomas A., and Stephen Crane. *Stephen Crane: Maggie, a Girl of the Streets: (A Story of New York) (1893). An Authoritative Text. Backgrounds and Sources. The Author and the Novel. Reviews and Criticism* . New York: Norton, 1979. Highly recommended short Naturalist novel.

Hip-Hop: Beyond Beats and Rhymes . Directed by Byron Hurt. Performed by Carmen Ashurt-Watson, Yasiin Bey, William Jellani. Media Education Foundation, 2006. PBS. Highly recommended video that might change students' views on negative portrayals in rap music.

Hotchkiss, Craig. "Rewriting Huckleberry Finn Twists Twain's Intentions." *The Huffington Post*. May 25, 2011. Accessed April 04, 2015. http://www.huffingtonpost.com/craig-hotchkiss/finn-rewrite-twists-twain_b_805776.html. Teacher resource.

Hurston, Zora Neale. *Their Eyes Were Watching God* . New York: HarperCollins, 2000. Hurston is brilliant in evoking culture through language. A lovely and uplifting story.

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Kingston, Maxine Hong., and Maxine Hong. Kingston. *The Woman Warrior; China Men* . New York: Everyman's Library, 2005. Perennial favorite. Contains the "Mulan" story.

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Preston, Mark, Dana Bash, and Rebecca Sinderbrand. "Reid Apologizes for Racial Remarks about Obama during Campaign." *CNN*. January 09, 2010. Accessed July 21, 2015. <http://www.cnn.com/2010/POLITICS/01/09/obama.reid/>.

Even Harry Reid.

"The Racy Appeal of the Minstrel." In *Popular Culture in American History*, edited by Jim Cullen. Hoboken, NJ: Wiley-Blackwell, 2013. Excellent source for information on the minstrel. Read the rest, too!

Rose, Tricia. *The Hip-Hop Wars: What We Talk about When We Talk about Hip-Hop--and Why It Matters*. New York: Basic Civitas, 2008. Excellent source for teachers. Many good selections for students to read as well.

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Wright, Richard. "Between Laughter and Tears. Review of Their Eyes Were Watching God. The New Masses, Tuesday, October 5th,

1937." UNZ.org. Accessed July 02, 2015. <http://www.unz.org/Pub/NewMasses-1937oct05-00022a02>. Interesting place to start conversation on controversial use of African American dialect in literature.

Appendix: Implementing District and Common Core Standards

The unit would complement New Haven School District's curriculum unit for grade 9, identification of self. It could also complement curriculum units for grade 10, which ask students to evaluate the individual and society. Lessons include assignments that meet Common Core Standards for Reading Literature in gathering evidence and analyzing text and in determining purpose or theme, in analyzing character through use of dialect and in understanding shifts in cultural expression. Analysis will include a variety of media, including literary narratives, poetry, visual images, film and music. Lessons also present opportunities to practice Common Core Writing Standards in writing about personal opinions and experiences and gathering examples for research. The lessons incorporate graded discussions and ask students to create video PSA's to build self-esteem and counter racism, both of which give students opportunities to practice Common Core Standards in Language, Speaking and Listening. In this unit as well, students will assess how formal or informal language can be powerfully crafted to convey purpose or meaning, an important Standard in Language.

Notes

1. "FFF: Hispanic Heritage Month 2014: Sept. 15–Oct. 15," FFF: Hispanic Heritage Month 2014: Sept. 15–Oct. 15, October 15, 2014.
2. Craig Hotchkiss, "Rewriting Huckleberry Finn Twists Twain's Intentions."
3. Geneva Smitherman, *Talkin That Talk: Language, Culture, and Education in African America* , 19-116.
4. James Standifer, "The Tumultuous Life of Porgy and Bess."
5. John T. Matthews, "Whose America? Faulkner, Modernism, and National Identity," in *Faulkner at 100: Retrospect and Prospect* , 73.
6. Richard Wright, "Between Laughter and Tears," review of *Their Eyes Were Watching God* .
7. Tricia Rose, *The Hip-Hop Wars: What We Talk about When We Talk about Hip-Hop--and Why It Matters*. 25.
8. Eldridge Cleaver, "We Need to Rescue Kids from Ebonics."
9. "Wilbur Cross High School Student Body," US News.
10. "SDE: Portals & Publications," Connecticut State Department of Education.
11. "Black Lives Matter: The Schott 50 State Report on Public Education and Black Males," The Schott Foundation for Public Education.
12. Lisa Cohen Minnick, *Dialect and Dichotomy: Literary Representations of African American Speech* , xvii.
13. Barbara Sasso, "Power Point: History of English."
14. Jay Wright, "The Albuquerque Graveyard."
15. Lupe Fiasco, "Lupe Fiasco - Bitch Bad."
16. "The Racy Appeal of the Minstrel," in *Popular Culture in American History* , ed. Jim Cullen, 67-89.
17. *Hip-Hop: Beyond Beats and Rhymes* , dir. Byron Hurt.
18. "MoMA | One Way Ticket: Jacob Lawrence's Migration Series," MoMA | One Way Ticket: Jacob Lawrence's Migration Series,

2015.

19. Mark Preston, Dana Bash, and Rebecca Sinderbrand, "Reid Apologizes for Racial Remarks about Obama during Campaign," CNN, January 09, 2010.
20. Oprah Winfrey and Jay-Z, "Jay-Z on the N-word."
21. Richard Wright, "Between Laughter and Tears," review of *Their Eyes Were Watching God* .
22. Walter J. Ong, *Orality and Literacy: The Technologizing of the Word*, 49-57.
23. *Ibid.*
24. *Ibid.*
25. *Ibid.*, 44.
26. *Ibid.*, 75.
27. Mark Twain and Barry Moser, *Adventures of Huckleberry Finn*, 115.
28. *Ibid.*, 118.
29. William Faulkner, *The Sound and the Fury: The Corrected Text* , 114.
30. *Ibid.*, 115.
31. Michael North, *The Dialect of Modernism: Race, Language, and Twentieth-century Literature*, 181.
32. Zora Neale Hurston, *Their Eyes Were Watching God* , 7.
33. *Ibid.* , 184-187.
34. *Ibid.* , 186.
35. *Ibid.* , 226.
36. Helena María Viramontes, *Under the Feet of Jesus* , 24-26.
37. *Ibid.* , 40-42.
38. Megan Sullivan, "African-American Music as Rebellion: From Slavesong to Hip-Hop," Cornell University John S. Knight Institute, Spring 2001.

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