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Black Lives Matter in Academic Spaces: Three Lessons for Critical Literacy

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This article analyzes several online performances from the Black Lives Matter movement for the ways they utilize and blend standard academic literacies and African American rhetoric. These performances are discussed as pedagogies of possibility that meet and exceed the common core standards. This talk also points up the crucial roles that racial dignity, ethics, and empathy should play in education.

KEYWORDS #BlackLivesMatter, African Americans, code-meshing, code-switching, literacy, violence

INTRODUCTION
In my 2004 essay, “Your Average Nigga,” I coined the term code-meshing—my neologism for what linguists refer to as metaphorical code-switching, using two or more dialects, discourses or languages in one speech or writing act. However, code-meshing was not the central theoretical point of that essay. In fact, I only used the term once in footnote 8 of that essay to clarify this major point: that educators misuse and misapply the linguistic concept of code-switching when they require African American students, in particular, to switch or turn off their African American Language according to context. In other words, educators often use what linguists call code-switching in a reductive and punitive sense, disallowing writers and speakers, particularly when they are students, from combining languages. I used code-meshing to illustrate what I believe linguists and literacy educators (of writing, reading, speaking, listening, and visually representing) should be more interested in—language of and in action, how language works among its users, not language of and in restriction or language that imposes limits.

Since that footnote, I have authored or coauthored numerous articles and books on code-meshing, such as the widely anthologized articles, “Nah, We
“Straight: An Argument Against Code-Switching” (Young, 2009) and “Should Writers Use They Own English?” (Young, 2010), and the widely taught books, *Code-meshing as World English: Policy, Pedagogy, Performance* (Young & Martínez, 2011) and *Other People’s English: Code-Meshing, Code-Switching, and African American Literacy* (Young, Barrett, Young-Rivera, & Lovejoy, 2018). I have also delivered a number of public talks and keynote addresses. Below is one them.

I present this transcribed talk here for two big reasons: to perform and illustrate the relationship between speech and writing, since so many educators perpetuate, teach under, and require their students to accept the myth that their speech and writing are mutually exclusive, bearing no significant relationship to one another. All lies and false alibis. The second, and perhaps more important reason, is to promote and demonstrate the discursive centering of African Americans’ daily experience, and to show how African Americans use language inside and outside the classroom to protest the negative educational attitudes that lead to racist action against them and their language—in schools and in the streets.

The talk presents three central ideas as lessons:

1. Be conscious of racial violence in literacy instruction
2. Black expression is an academic art of English language arts instruction
3. Educators should urge more meshing of languages and less switching

Each of these lessons is substantially informed by a survey and analysis of protest speeches from participants in the #BlackLivesMatter Movement, videos that present racialized and violent literacy instruction, and examples of code-meshing and code-switching. I urge you to view the links to the videos in the process of reading the talk. That is to say, when I introduce the link below, I urge you to go to it and view it in its entirety before continuing with the talk. Imagine that you are a participant in the audience, engaged, actively listening, and co-performing as audience with the presenter, me.

Imagining your reading as a co-performance is important because I am attempting to deliver an experience, an experience that helps us develop a literacy of social justice about how African American literacy is linguistically intertwined and inextricably linked to African Americans’ political and educational lives.

**The Presentation**

Today’s talk arises both out of the research that I have been doing for a while on the concept of code-meshing, which is blending dialects or blending Englishes from home and school and trying to abandon the idea that we have to leave our cultures and homes behind when it comes to academic and professional spaces. That may work for some people, but it does not work for a lot of people, and I am going to illustrate that today. My particular research focuses on Americans. It is undeniable in this country that African Americans have experienced a great deal of oppression and continue to do so. And sometimes liberal environments like universities and colleges have come to be—many times we may not realize, and
I include myself in that—complicit in unwitting oppression, and so I want to expose some of that for you tonight.

I’m working on a book tentatively titled *Toward the Literacy of Social Justice*. Literacy of social justice means, “How do we begin to think and feel and grow in ways in which we are literate about other people’s experiences?” It comes out of an intercultural context, which means that instead of waiting for a racial/racist or gender-phobic problem to arise, how do we prevent those problems from happening and how do we understand the experiences of those subjected to them? I will give you an example in which I might stumble a little bit in explaining to you, but I want to expose something that I’ve been feeling. I really appreciate how indigenous scholars and scholars of Native American culture and history offer introductions for the lands that have been taken away from them. I think that is amazing, particularly under the rubric of truth and reconciliation.

At the same time, I want to get to the point where we don’t have to have truth and reconciliation, where the domination and oppression and colonization will not happen. So that twenty years down the line, when we would usually feel remorse and an introduction would be necessary to acknowledge inherent rights that were denied or colonized away, it will no longer be necessary because we will be in a space where domination in all its forms has ended. And that is what I’m committed to, using the specific example of African American culture.

I’m going to go through three lessons here, and there will be a summary at the end of each lesson for the takeaway point. You may take away other points, but there are some main points that I have. These three lessons arise from the digital footprint or digital performances from the Black Lives Matter movement. I want to show just how literate and wonderful these performances are in the context of academic literacy. If these sorts of literate actions happened in a college classroom, they should be privileged and promoted.

**LESSON ONE: VIOLENCE IN LITERACY INSTRUCTION**

The first thing I want to show you is this video of a news clip about what happened at the Facebook headquarters and how I think Mark Zuckerberg, at least in this instance, was functioning as an ally. This news clip will help illustrate that for you: [https://www.cnbc.com/2016/02/26/facebook-slams-staff-for-defacing-black-lives-matter.html](https://www.cnbc.com/2016/02/26/facebook-slams-staff-for-defacing-black-lives-matter.html). Here is an excerpt from that clip:

> Black lives matter, and they matter a lot to Mark Zuckerberg. The Facebook CEO issuing a company-wide memo after some staff members messed with the Black Lives Matter slogan on the walls of the office. Some staffers at the San Francisco headquarters crossed out the word “Black” and replaced it with “All.” In the memo, Zuckerberg explains the slogan Black Lives Matter does not imply that others don’t. In fact, it’s to emphasize that those in the Black community should achieve the justice they deserve. The bottom line is Zuckerberg takes a stand. (Reid, 2016)

Most people here probably remember and have knowledge about the debate once Black Lives Matter surfaced, and there was some blowback to specifying “Black”
and putting “all” there. If you know what happens at the Facebook headquarters, the staff can write on the wall. They have a wall that they can write slogans, words, sayings, and messages. And when someone wrote #BlackLivesMatter, someone crossed it out and put “all.” What is interesting about that is that the person who crossed it out could have just put “All Lives Matter” on the board as an additional message instead of crossing out the “Black.” That’s the interesting thing that happened there, which Mark Zuckerberg rightfully addressed. Now it would’ve been bad enough probably to add “All Lives Matter,” but you can’t censor people. But the person who did the “X” on “Black” definitely was acting as a censor, and recognizing that is part of the point of my project, to recognize that there is a literacy to understanding that that action should not have happened and to understanding the results.

So, the first lesson here that arises from that is, “Be conscious of racial violence in literacy instruction.” I’m just going to repeat that because as educators, sometimes we don’t understand that some of our pedagogies may actually elicit violent reactions and might be complicit in violence.

The next example is from the spoken word poet Sara O’Neale from Black Lives Matter: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=FrFq-ok8w_4. Here is an excerpt from that clip:

To the girl on Facebook who commented #AllLivesMatter, after deeming the protests she attended “a hateful event Martin Luther King would have been ashamed of.” … I don’t know how to make you understand the occupation your ignorance has blinded you to. That Black bodies are stopped and frisked so often we might as well call our cities “war zones.” … Yet you still want to talk about looting. Want to police our protest tactics. You want me to know that you would have cared about the tombstones this nation is hoarding if we hadn’t blocked traffic . . . . You just don’t get it, do you? … All lives will matter when Black lives matter. (AJ+, 2015)

I tend to show the whole video because I’m talking specifically about Black people’s experiences. The poet highlights what is burned in the consciousness of Black people’s everyday experience and the kind of things that we have to deal with and think about and try to avoid that other people do not. And then she points out, she gives a rhetorical message (which I believe is very important) that to have that sort of thing burned in your consciousness, the kind of fear that Black people have to live with — and then when we encounter something that may appear to be racist and probably is, and we articulate it, that pain is going to come out and our expression is not going to be in an “academic” form. It’s not going to be a five-paragraph essay. But that literacy, the rhetorical style, must be evaluated and must be heard. So, she’s saying, “Don’t ask me to decorate my pain.” And the job of others is to listen, to lean in, and stop asking, “If you just change the way you said so-and-so, I can hear it,” when the trauma is clear.

Now let’s leave the out-of-school context. That was the public sphere. Let’s see what happens in a classroom. After I show the video, I’ll ask for some participation: https://study.com/academy/lesson/pronunciation-articulation-and-dialect.html. Here is an excerpt from that clip:
So you and your friends are sitting around the dining hall talking about your Poli Psych class. Each of you has a different instructor, but the subject is the same. Your friend ... says, “I really like Professor Bigelow. He tells us all kinds of interesting stuff, and his accent is so cool. British, you know.” Meanwhile you were like, “What? Really, dude? My professor is so boring. I can hardly understand her. She has an accent thicker than mud, and a personality to match.” Well, it really all comes down to vocal traits. (Kadian-Baumeyer, n.d.)

The question is, “What’s wrong with this lesson?” This is a lesson that mostly high school teachers and teachers who teach freshmen public speaking and composition at college can purchase from study.com. But what did you notice? Was there anything wrong there? What about the white accent—the British one—being highlighted as cool? But the female teacher—and there’s also male privilege here—her accent is “thicker than mud,” right? There’s some sort of accent prejudice here because everybody has an accent. You are not alive if you don’t have an accent. There is a line of prejudice in this lesson. Do you agree? Okay, I’m glad you agree, because it’s getting ready to get worse.

Here’s the next excerpt:

Katie Bobbins, [an African American] motivational speaker, should have practiced her pronunciation when she told the audience, “If you want to see the secrets to success, you will have to ask for it.” Ahh, pronunciation makes all the difference. This is how consonants and vowels are formed and even where syllables are accentuated. Imagine the horror when the speaker mispronounced one very small word. Had the speaker practiced, she would have avoided a terrifying situation. (Kadian-Baumeyer, n.d.)

On so many levels, this is wrong. That one would go from an image of this Black female pronouncing a word in her dialect to an image of a white man hitting her—supposedly justifiably—in the head, that's violence. That's murder. That's wrong. But the thing that I'm trying to underscore, and it's a very serious point, is that we don't realize that our ideologies about language—ideologies that believe that Blacks should not use Black English—immediately lead to violence—immediately. When police stop Black people and they have an African American accent, are the police justified in shooting, in killing Black people because of their accent, their language? Most reasonable people would say no. But doesn't the instructional video support otherwise? I argue that this video is an example of how people in our society are conditioned to be violent toward African Americans who speak African American language or even that speak so-called Standard English with an African American accent. This is why I would never show this in class to teach public speaking. I would teach it, as I am doing here, to show what NOT TO TEACH, to show an unacceptable attitude toward Black English, and in order to build a racial consciousness of literacy. So that's a very problematic video, and I'm stunned that the narrator is a woman and does not recognize this. But as I've been saying, we all have gaps, and the fact that she used an African American person in the illustration is extremely problematic. But think about it: would it work the same if this character was white? Really, if Katie
Bobbins were a white public speaker and pronounced ax for ask, would there be a swift violent and fatal response?

This is not always a Black-white issue because many African American educators feel the necessity to adopt these same problematic views in order to—wrongly—teach other African Americans to escape the violence that racism breeds. Lisa Delpit, a well-known educator—Harvard educated—had a very influential book published in the 1990s, Other People’s Children, and she does a lot of speaking engagements and teacher trainings. Her essay “No Kinda Sense,” has a depiction of her dialogue with her adopted daughter, Maya. Maya was at a predominantly white school and was failing. So, Lisa took Maya out of that school and put her in a predominantly African American charter school, and her daughter started excelling. But Lisa was concerned because her daughter had started to speak African American English. They are African American, but Lisa Delpit is a code-switcher. She thinks that you should not speak African American English in public and at school, but at home. This is interesting because I don’t even think she wants her daughter speaking it at home either. But let’s look at a dramatic rendering of that dialogue.

Lisa: I asked her [Maya] if she knows why I critique her language.
Maya: You don’t have to worry about me … ‘Cause I know how to code-switch! …
I do listen to you sometimes.
Lisa: So when my child’s language reflects that of some of her [African American] peers, I feel the eyes of “the other” negatively assessing her intelligence, her competence, her potential, and yes, even her moral fiber. So I forgive myself for my perhaps overly emotional reaction, my painful ambivalence. (Delpit, 2002)

As a literary scholar, also, and as a rhetorical scholar, I don’t believe that Lisa Delpit forgives herself. The reason why I don’t believe that she forgives herself is because she talks about her emotional reaction, her painful ambivalence. I believe if she had forgiven herself, which I don’t think she should do, she would not be talking about her ambivalence. But the thing I want to point out here is that the eyes of “the other” are not assessing the communication act, the literacy. They are assessing everything else through the use of Black English—the moral fiber, her competence, her potential and her intelligence. That’s a problem. So you understand that language is not a pure thing. It is ideologically based, and we bring those ideological frameworks to our intercultural interactions. And what I’m trying to point out is to recognize the ideology that we have about Black English because it arises from a pervasive anti-Black sentiment in general. It’s not about the language; it’s really about the people. That’s why I started with violence at the beginning.

Another well-known African American educator is Patricia Edwards, who was the president a few years back of the International Reading Association. This is what Professor Edwards, et. al., said (with which I disagree): “Most teachers of African American children believe that their students’ life chances will be further hampered if they do not learn Standard English. In the stratified society in which
we live, they are absolutely right” (Edwards, McMillon, & Turner, 2010, pp. 73–74). I actually do agree with her in terms of our stratified society. But that is the problem, not Black people’s English. The stratified society is the problem. So when teachers ask Black students and others to change their language, they are asking them to assimilate into a culture that threatens them on the very basis of who they are. That’s the point that I get from what Professor Edwards is saying.

Here’s what she advises: “We have talked about double consciousness as being ‘the best of both worlds’ …. Know how to make it in the White world, but still know you are a Black Person” (Edwards et al., 2010, p. 55). There are a couple problems with this, because to me this world ain’t white. This world is at best multicultural, and America itself is highly influenced. The very foundation is Black. I mean, just listen. Open your ears and listen to the media, look at commercials, and see if you don’t hear Black English all over the place. It’s just there. I think for her to say that this is a white world is acceding to white supremacy. She’s acquiescing to white supremacy. But the other thing that she gets wrong is that double consciousness is never about “making it” being a double person. That is not what Du Bois said, to use double consciousness as a practice to succeed. Du Bois said in 1903, in his famous book The Souls of Black Folk, that the problem of the twentieth century is the problem of the color line (Du Bois, 1903/2019). He used double consciousness as an exemplification of the problem, not as a solution. So in 2010, for her to write that it is now a solution is just backwards. Du Bois said that double consciousness is a peculiar sensation. Does “peculiar” sound like a solution? He said it is always looking at yourself through the eyes of others. Just like what Lisa Delpit said was happening to Maya. Du Bois said to bring together the double selves into one better and true self. So Edwards is right that we live in a stratified society, but the solution is not to double yourself. The solution is to try to change the society so people can be who they are as one person.

Here’s Bill Cosby: https://www.americanrhetoric.com/speeches/billcosby-poundcakesspeech.htm. This arises from a context in 2004 and some of y’all was in diapers. You may not remember it, that Bill Cosby was doing the Jell-O commercials that everybody loved. In 2004, on the 50th anniversary of Brown vs. the Board of Education, which effectively ended segregation, he gave a talk to the NAACP and this is what he said, which also is a reiteration of violence related to literacy.

It’s standing on the corner. It can’t speak English. … “Why you ain’t where you is go, ra?” … And I blamed the kid until I heard the mother talk. Then I heard the father talk. This is all in the house. You used to talk a certain way on the corner and you got into the house and switched to English. (Cosby, 2004/2018)

Do you notice something here? What do you notice about his rhetorical choices? Say it loud. That’s right. It’s dehumanizing. He’s not using a personal pronoun. He is using a “dis-personal” pronoun, which is used to stand in for an object, not a human. We use “he,” “she,” “we,” “they,” and “I” as pronouns for people, not “it.” So he’s already dehumanizing people for the way that they speak. Let’s go further.
Everybody knows it’s important to speak English except these knuckleheads. You can’t land a plane with, “Why you ain’t...” You can’t be a doctor with that kind of crap coming out of your mouth. There is no Bible that has that kind of language. (Cosby, 2004/2018)

First of all, if you’re on a plane, and it’s going down, and somebody says, “Why you ain’t pulling the lever?” you’re not going to be concerned about them saying “Why you ain’t.” You can land a plane with “Why you ain’t.” The other thing is, “You can’t be a doctor with that kind of crap coming out of your mouth”? Well, I have a PhD, and I use “ain’t” all the time, and I ain’t kidding. Then he says, “There is no Bible that has that kind of language,” but I don’t know where he went to school. When the Bible was translated from Latin—first of all, it was originally written in Greek, Aramaic, and Hebrew, and then it was translated into Latin—when Gutenberg used the printing press to help disseminate the Bible, it became available in all kinds of languages, and the Church was trying to stop the Bible from being translated because it was thought that Latin was pure and the other languages were vernacular. The point here is this: all the Bibles we read now are in vernacular—all, yo.

Then Cosby gets more violent. “People getting shot in the back of the head over a piece of pound cake! Then we all run and are outraged: ‘The cops shouldn’t have shot him!’ What the hell was he doing with the pound cake in his hand?” (Cosby, 2004/2018). Well, our judicial system does not mete out capital punishment for stealing a piece of pound cake. That is just not the way it works. But he, unwittingly I hope, is encouraging a hyper-violent response to minor, minor offenses. I don’t know who here—maybe someone here grew up with an angel embodied in them and they didn’t do anything wrong, but I know I slipped a couple of Now and Laters and other candy bars in my pocket, and I might have expected to get spanked when I got home when my Mama found out, but I did not expect to be dead. So the outrage that we experience when something happens, like with Michael Brown—when they tried to say it was because he was stealing something that he got shot—and people were up in arms, it’s right to be up in arms. Because that is not what we do. That is not how the system works. But maybe it works that way for minority people, which is one of the things that we have to understand.

I want to show you now how there’s a gender performance with African American literacy, and how there can be violence in there too, especially when it comes to Black men. In this Key and Peele video (https://www.dailymotion.com/video/x4bn77k), Key is talking on the corner. Then Key changes his voice when he comes in contact with Peele. As Peele stands near him, they start talking in the sort of thuggish, hyper-masculine version of Black English. And then as Peele walks away, he says into his phone, “Oh my God, Kristin, I almost totally just got mugged right now” (Key and Peele, 2015). We can talk about the ways in which Peele, when he walks away, is using a white, feminized version of his language to fit into one culture but when he stands deliberately where Key can overhear his speech patterns, he uses a masculinized version of African American language. This skit illustrates what education and code-switching instructional ideologies require of Black men. And we wonder why Black men don’t do as well as others
in literacy classrooms. The skit allows me to suggest that in the classroom Black men sometimes question whether or not the literacy instruction is requiring that they not be men or at least act as if they are not men. Traditional literacy instruction has that kind of effect. I mean standard literacy that we teach in schools. And this is why you have to be mindful of that. We always say we want Black men to succeed; well—let them be Black men in school.

Here’s the summary of Lesson One. Be conscious, as we would say, be “woke:” ideologies of literacy can produce violence. What do I suggest? We need to change and center experiences of people of color. It’s beneficial for all. Center the experiences of people of color instead of centering the experiences of white Europeans all the time. I’m not saying white Europeans aren’t smart, or they aren’t valuable. But if you’re teaching theory in your class you need to get down with some vernacular theory. You need to get some Amiri Baraka, some Houston Baker, some Charlotte Baker, some Maya Angelou, instead of always leaning on Foucault. I think Foucault’s wonderful, but you have to center experiences of minority people. Plus, I think that Maya Angelou is easier to read.

LESSON TWO: BLACK EXPRESSION AS ART IN LANGUAGE ARTS

This spoken word essay by Moise Morancy begins with the words, “Dear President Obama. ‘Nigga, you ain’t shit.’ That’s how some people feel. But for us, it’s the opposite” (https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=7o6hoDhRgMk). The rest of the performance illustrates an engaged political analysis. An excerpt from that clip:

Ever since a college kid, they ignored your accomplishments. But you inspire Black youth, so fuck all of the politics . . . . Yo, we from the same place: misunderstood and targeted . . . . We will never be silent. Our pride always screams louder. Man, it’s hard to come to grips that these are your final hours, and I ain’t gonna lie, when you leave, Imma cry . . . . When I see you, I see me. Full of dignity, a strong Black figure all up on my TV. You got some degrees, promoting equality like the LGBT and other communities. Please. You ain’t a gimmick. You extremely authentic. A Black president, from Chicago? . . . . We see you standing strong in a White House full of racists . . . . I don’t care what they say. We gonna always have your back. One day I tell my children about how my president was Black. (FUSION, 2017)

I teach freshman writing. If I asked my colleagues—some of them—whether or not this would pass a freshman writing class, they probably would say no. But I want to point out how in this expression, he is meeting all of the academic conventions. First of all, he is replying to arguments. He states the argument, he has a thesis, he’s collaborating with others. He develops his thesis. He changes the tone and register. Even though he uses some profanity and does some colloquial repetitions, then he says, “Let’s get serious.” He recognizes the moves that he’s making. This type of performance should pass a freshman writing class.
I have shown this video all over the country and internationally, and every time I look at their state standards, both the common core standards and the state standards, it says all the things that I just mentioned to you. I illustrate it most often by showing them their own state standards and how this meets them. So there should be no debate. It meets the common core standards—all you have to do is look them up yourself. But just trust me that it does. But this is also what a longtime linguist has said. Thomas Kochman, who wrote a really famous book called *Black and White Styles and Conflict*, was a linguist from Chicago. In one of his essays he says this: “It is inconceivable to me that an intelligent Black student who can demonstrate the entire range of oral skills should not pass the introductory course in college English” (Kochman, 2003). To me, this is where the mic gets dropped because he has already said this many, many years ago: that if a student can demonstrate that, they should pass the college writing course.

Lesson Two summary: Black expressive culture and language are compatible and exceed national and state standards for language arts. It’s not that Black language is incompatible—it actually exceeds it. Sometimes I wonder if some people are unwittingly saying, “You can’t exceed, you just must meet the standard.” Well, I mean when you come from a culture that’s highly expressive, you’re going to exceed. We shouldn’t ask students to downplay their excellence to pass.

**LESSON THREE: LESS SWITCHING, MORE MESHING**

I told you that my work earlier was on code-switching. However, I want to now tell you about code-meshing and code-meshing. Code-switching, as we understand, is the alternation or combination of languages. That is the linguistic definition: two or more dialects operating in one speech act. But educators have taken code-meshing to mean only one thing, and it is a reductive understanding of code-switching. Educators have said that code-switching is the use of alternating languages in different settings. That is not the linguistic definition. That is what educators have used to compromise with people like me, to say, “We will allow Black students to have their culture and language, just not in school. They have it outside, on the quad if I’m not listening, maybe at home. But not here.” That is a compromise, but it is an unfortunate one because it’s not what code-switching is.

In order for me to avoid debating with educators on the terminology, I just created my own to say that code-meshing is the combination of two dialects operating in one speech act. But it actually is the real definition of code-switching.

Let me give you some examples. This is intra-sentential code-switching, or alternation within a single sentence: “I’m not going to school porque no me siento bien.” Inter-sentential code-switching, on the other hand, refers to alternation between two sentences: “I’m not going to school today. No me siento bien.” The first sentence is in standard English, and the second is in Spanish. Those are the two versions of code-switching in one speech act—one in the sentence and one alternating between sentences.
Here is another visual example: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Ekc2U-JydnuM. Here is an excerpt from that clip:

People think that just ‘cause you’re a Latina you have to have a big butt . . . . If every Latina woman has to have a big butt, then every Latino man has to have a big pingo. (Malinche, 1984, 2009)

I love it at this point when I show this video and I get the laugh and the reactions to the video, because it is undeniable that you don’t have to understand everything to get the point. We teach something in literacy called context clues, and sometimes they’re just obvious. When students write in a code-meshed way, we don’t have to always be trying to tame the language if we understand the point. We don’t have to understand the exact nuances of the other language. Some people would say, “Well, Black dialect or African American English isn’t my home language.” Okay. But do you understand what’s happening in the communicative act overall?

Metaphorical code-switching is the same as code-meshing: using more than one language in a single piece of writing. Code-meshing, my neologism, is the term for metaphorical code-switching used in literacy research because I’m a literacy scholar. Wheeler and Swords (2006) wrote a book, published by NCTE, called *Code-Switching: Teaching Standard English in Urban Classrooms*. What they really mean is “Teaching Standard English to Black Students,” because on the cover is only Black people, but they use urban as a stand-in, and they must know that not all Black people come from urban environments. This is what they say: Hughes and Morrison are able to switch between their vernacular and a standard dialect as their literary goals demand. They want to use this example to say that because Morrison and Hughes could do this, that other Blacks should be able to do this. But as I pointed out directly to Wheeler and Swords, they got that wrong.

Here’s part of Hughes’ famous poem, “Mother to Son.”

Well, son, I’ll tell you:
Life for me ain’t been no crystal stair.
It’s had tacks in it,
And splinters,
And boards torn up,
And places with no carpet on the floor— (Hughes, 1922/1994)

There you see that Langston Hughes is using inter-sentential code-switching, which is what I illustrated earlier.

Let me say what sociolinguist and code-meshing supreme Geneva Smitherman has said. Geneva Smitherman says that style and language are inextricable, but sometimes we separate them for the purposes of study. So when Toni Morrison gives a speech like her Nobel Prize speech in Switzerland, she uses African American rhetoric. Her dialect may not be a hyper-performance of African American dialect, but she is drawing on African American style and African American rhetoric, and as many of you know, the central figure is a Black female Griot. The Griot lives on the edge of town
(Morrison, 2009). Now, I don’t know how rhetorically Black you can get. When they talk about Toni Morrison as being able to code-switch, they’re getting that wrong, because she is drawing on and carrying forth and combining her African American heritage and culture in her writing.

So, what do I suggest? I suggest that we reframe code-switching as code-meshing, and that we adopt and allow the full range of code-switching, not just that version where it’s situational code-switching, where you do something over there, and speak that way, and then speak another way in here, but adopt the full range of code-switching.

The summary for Lesson Three is “always view language as a resource, never as a barrier.” Some of you may be acquainted with the recent apology issued by Duke University because the assistant dean of the business college told the Chinese students that they couldn’t speak Chinese with their Chinese peers because they needed to learn English. She used a violent metaphor to say that they may not be able to get jobs. But I believe that the Chinese students know that when they go on a job interview, if the person speaks English, that they’re not going to be using Chinese with the English-speaker. There’s no reason to foreclose the opportunities that they have to speak with their peers in their native language. That is unwitting racial prejudice. I don’t think she really meant to be prejudiced, but the effect was prejudicial. This is why we should always view language as a resource, and never to say that your language is a barrier that you have to overcome. It becomes a tool in the kit that’s always available to be used in any rhetorical practice as the rhetor-writer-speaker chooses. Not as their teacher chooses, not as their mother chooses, but as the writer-speaker chooses.

CONCLUSION

While I have summarized the main points of each of the three lessons throughout this talk and provided summaries, I want to briefly underscore implications for practice.

First, as practitioners we should not—in fact, no one else should—teach literacy to African Americans through threats. That is, we must not tell African Americans that if they don’t change their native language habits then they will be killed or won’t get a job or won’t succeed in school. And yes, we threaten and in fact enact violence upon African Americans, no matter our good intentions or how well-meaning we believe we are, when we do this. We become the very personification of the threat, the very violence we think we are teaching students to avoid in the future. What we should do instead is to allow students to use the full range of their rhetorical skills for their purposes and audiences and help them revise, reason, and review their—and not our—rhetorical choices.

Second, we practitioners must begin to recognize how students can use African American rhetoric and African American language to good effect not only to meet but exceed (and even challenge, if need be) national and local literacy standards. Instead of accepting and perpetuating racist ideologies about African American communication, we practitioners must do our own assessments

And last, but not least, each of the above practical suggestions must be facilitated through a translingual framework—which urges that language must always be seen as a resource and never as a barrier. This means that the code-switching instruction that requires students to switch according to context is a deficit model framework, requiring students to view their African American language as a detriment or barrier first in school and professional contexts. The translingual and code-meshing frameworks urge the opposite—see African American language as a resource—and never a barrier—in any and all contexts.

DISCLOSURE STATEMENT

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