Where Experience Meets Composition: A collection of research, reflection and practical plans for reaching the African American Student

By Sarah Armstrong

Literature 690/MA Portfolio

11 May 2014

Table of Contents

1. Statement of Focus………………………………………………………………………………………… 3
2. Abstract for "Ebonics: The Foundation of Understanding"………………………………….. 4
3. "Ebonics: The Foundation of Understanding"……………………………………………………… 5
4. Reflections for "Ebonics: The Foundation of Understanding"……………………………….. 24
5. Abstract for "Free Within Ourselves"…………………………………………………………………. 26
6. "Free Within Ourselves"…………………………………………………………………………………….. 27
7. Reflections/Lesson Plan for "Free Within Ourselves"………………………………………….. 41
8. Abstract for "To Be Continued"…………………………………………………………………………. 43
9. "To Be Continued"……………………………………………………………………………………………… 44
10. Reflections/Lesson Plan for "To Be Continued"…………………………………………………… 57
11. Abstract for "Write it Out"…………………………………………………………………………………… 59
12. "Write it Out"……………………………………………………………………………………………………… 60
13. Reflections/Lesson Plan for "Write it Out"………………………………………………………….. 80
14. Final Statement ………………………………………………………………………………………………… 82

Statement of Focus:

African American Vernacular or Ebonics has been a much debated topic within the educational world, both by scholars within and not within the African American community. Being a teacher of the English language, I have found that students often reach adulthood with the idea that the personal language that they use at home is wrong, and that I am there to teach them the "right" way; however, I believe that language is fluid and there is no right and wrong. I also believe that Ebonics has all the elements of language. When value is given to a person's native language and they are allowed to use that language when appropriate in the writing process and in order to help them understand the "power" language that I am hired to teach them, it leads to a stronger understanding and appreciation. In using a person's native language to teach them another language, teaching becomes more of a constructivist strategy. Also bringing in literature by people of color helps readers to make a connection to what they are reading because they seem themselves and why they should write within the texts. By using four different research papers composed during my course of study, I create plans to move past the research into creating practical applications for this knowledge in the college composition classroom. *This portfolio will focus on three key parts: the elements of Ebonics that make it a language and worthy of recognition in an educational setting; various representations of works by African Americans, including Modernist writers, that can be read in a composition course; and the healing or therapeutic qualities of writing that can be explored in various assignments for a first year college student.*

Abstract:

The first source "Ebonics: The Foundation of Understanding" was written for a Graduate Studies in English Language course, and it covers the history and current presence of African American Vernacular within the English language today. The purpose of the paper is to explain Ebonics with the hope that it can help lead to better understanding among educators, parents, and students and contribute to social and political change.

Ebonics: The Foundation of Understanding

Slang, Black English, Black Vernacular, Ebonics, African American Vernacular English, and a host of other titles are used to describe a language primarily spoken by Black Americans. Whether these terms are accurate or really capture the true essence of the language is not fully relevant because these terms, like the language itself, is fluid and ever changing. However, the need to define and identify is within human nature, so in order to understand Ebonics or African American Vernacular and the people who speak it, one must understand the history and the current presence of the language. This higher understanding of the language could lead to a change in the educational system, and ultimately social and political change, but one must first understand these facts about Ebonics: It is a language, not a dialect, directly influenced by several other languages, primarily the Niger Congo African language and English; it is a language with a rich history and its pronunciations, morphology, syntax, vocabulary and rhetorical devices are still in prevalent use today.

Ebonics is language, not slang or a dialect. At least, this is the general conscious among most black scholars. However, what Ebonics is exactly can be explained in different ways. One author speaks about the presence of African American Vernacular (AAV) and the criticism that surrounds its usage. Rosina Lippi-Green, author of the essay, "What We Talk about When We Talk about Ebonics: Why Definitions Matter," talks about how she is hesitant to call Ebonics the term used by most linguists, African American Vernacular, "Linguists call African American vernacular English 'a variety of English to avoid the ideological quagmire around terms like "language" and "dialect." We use "vernacular" with less uncertainty, because there is little pejorative value attached to it" (7). She says, she also rejects terms like "'slang' and 'jargon' as descriptively inaccurate and negative (7)." In her essay, Lippi Green attempts to provide her own view of what these words mean and what term would be most appropriate.

The author says, “African American Vernacular English is, in short, a functional spoken language which depends on structured variation to layer social meaning into discourse (8),” and “In linguistic terms, we can look at issues of pronunciation and intonation (phonetics and phonology), the ways in which words are constructed (morphology), sentence order (syntax), lexicon (vocabulary, which would include slang), and rhetorical devices (8). “ This vernacular has many characteristics that make it a language and not just a dialect or slang.

Lippi-Green also brings to our attention the negative atmosphere that surrounds the discussion of Ebonics usage in the classroom. However, she reminds us that this language is not used only in “poorer black communities”, but “on occasion, it is used by “prominent and successful African Americans in public forums” such as Oprah Winfrey, Clarence Thomas and Reverend Jesse Jackson (8). Even though, opponents such as Jesse Jackson have spoken against its usage (8). Ebonics is something that is deeply engrained within the subconscious of the culture, and is a distinct characteristic of “being Black” in America. She says that although, “The greater African American community seems to accept the inevitability of linguistic assimilation to mainstream U.S. English in certain settings…there is also deep unhappiness about this necessity in many quarters” (9). She reminds us that “to make two statements: *I acknowledge that my home language is viable and adequate, and I acknowledge that my home language will never be accepted*, is to set up an unresolved conflict” (9). Here is where the issue lies when debating about Ebonics. Although, it is recognized within the greater society, Blacks still have to recognize that it may never be accepted as a true or “correct” language, which poses possible identity and self-esteem problems for the youth, and adults, of this culture.

The author concludes her essay pinpointing the importance of defining Ebonics and coming to a consensus about its usage. She says that the definitions of African American Vernacular English are as fluid as language itself, serving purposes far beyond the ones on the surface….Opinions are formed by personal experiences outside the African American community which are often overtly negative” (10).

She points out that “It cannot be denied that some of the most scornful and negative criticism of African American Vernacular speakers comes from other African Americans.” (10)

So, the issue remains about changing the minds of not only those surrounding cultures, but also the minds of many of its users. Perhaps, the first step is to educate the naysayers about the nuances of the language and its relevancy. Then, we could more forward as a community in order to use Ebonics as a stepping stool to learning Standard English in the classroom.

Yet, there is still controversy on what term to use. Scholars debate the use of the term “Black English” itself and defend the argument that Ebonics is the more appropriate term of the African American language. Ernie Smith and Karen Crozier in the essay, “Ebonics is not Black English,” denounce the usage of the term based off certain facts. First, they inform us that, “The features of the language of Black or African Americans, i.e., United States slave descendants of West and Niger-Congo African origin, has been recognized, described and discussed for several decades” (109); however, they bring out this common assumption about the term Black English:

> Presuming, inherently, by the very use of the word “English” that the language of slave descendants of African origin is a variant of “English”, the inference is also made that, being a dialect of English, there is a genetic kinship between “Black English” and the Germanic language family to which English belongs. The fact is, from a comparative or diachronic, I.e. historical linguistic perspective, in terms of the “base” from which the grammatical features of Black English derives, nothing could be further from the truth.” (110)

This is where their exploration of the term Black English begins as they attempt to educate the reader about what they feel the language should really be called.

They recognize that there is “ample debate on the issue of whether “Black English” emerged as a result of a pidgin/creole hybridization process as opposed to being the result of African slaves being

taught Old English, 'baby talk.'" The authors explain that, "the pre-1950's conceptualization of Black English was that the base from which the features of 'Black English' derives is 'English'" (110). In order to begin to engage in this debate, the authors pose a question about the formation of language: "how is it known that English is a West Germanic language? That is, by what criteria was it discerned and decided that English is related to or akin to German and belongs to the West Germanic family of the Indo-European languages?," (110) and "was this determination based on grammar rules, vocabulary, historical origins or what?" (110).

To point to the answer, they quote L.R. Palmer who states in *Descriptive and Comparative Linguistics: A Critical introduction* (1978) that "in comparative and historical linguistics, languages are not considered to be related merely because they share vocabularies. 'What constitutes the most certain evidence of relationship is resemblance of grammatical structure'" (qtd. in Smith and Crozier 110). However, this answer leads the authors to ask yet another question, "what precisely is meant by the word 'grammar' or 'grammatical structure'" (qtd. in Smith and Crozier 110)?

In order to answer this question, they quote O'Grady, Dobrovosky and Arnoff who in the text *Contemporary Linguistics: An Introduction* (1993) offer their definition of grammar:

> Since all languages are spoken, they must have phonetic and phonological systems: since they all have words and sentences, they also must have a morphology and a syntax: and since these words and sentences have systematic meanings, there obviously must be semantic principles as well. As these are the very things that make up a grammar, it follows that all human languages have this type of system" (qtd. in Smith and Crozier 110).

This stands as a good definition of grammar by linguistics, according to the Smith and Crozier. The authors say, "clearly, if it is based on a criteria of continuity in the rules of 'grammar' that English is defined and classified as being a Germanic language" (110), and that it "stands to reason that 'Black

English' would be defined and classified as being a dialect of English because there is continuity in the grammar of 'Black English' and the English of non-Blacks" (110).

However, they argue this evidence does not "document the existence of a single Black dialect in the African diaspora [movement of people from Africa to predominately America, Europe and the Middle East] that has been formed on an English phonetic, phonological, morphological, syntactical and semantic base (i.e. grammar)" (110). Smith and Crozier advise us that a critical analysis of the "grammar of the so-called 'Black English' dialect and the English spoken by the Europeans and Euro-Americans" do not have similar grammar (111). They argue that the evidence shows the opposite and that throughout the diaspora there was a lot of borrowing from English, other European words, and the grammar of the Niger-Congo descendants; they say, "there is no empirical evidence that 'Black English' ever even existed." (111) So, the term Black English is problematic in this right because the facts show that grammatically it is not the same, but that there has been extensive borrowing. The plot thickens as Smith and Crozier continue to break down the elements of the language and argue for the term Ebonics.

Another hypothesis they must dispel is that, "it is not continuity in the rules of 'grammar' but rather the etymology and continuity of the 'lexicon' that is the relevant criteria and basis for defining and classifying languages as being related" (111). The authors state that, "Clearly, if it is the dominant lexicon and not the grammar of the hybrid dialect that is the criteria for establishing familial kinship, and the bulk of the vocabulary of 'Black English' has been borrowed or adopted from the English language stock, the 'Black English' is in fact a dialect of English" (111). In order to counter this argument the authors ask a simple question, why the double standard? They admonish this fact:

> It is universally accepted fact that the English language has borrowed the bulk of its lexicon from the Romance or Latin language family. Yet, the English language is not classified as being a Latin or Romance language. As shown in the dictionary definition above, English is classified as a Germanic language." (111)

This does bring up a good point about language and forms another solid reasoning for their argument. It also sets up the reader for the author's next claims, If "the use of 'vocabulary' to classify the language of African Americas as being a dialect of English is fundamentally incongruent…If the dominant lexifier of the English language is actually Latin and French…then the dominant lexicon of 'Black English" is Latin and French" (111). Smith and Crozier conclude that, "on the basis of grammar or the etymology of the lexicon African American speech cannot be classified as an English dialect at all" (111).

The issue posed by the phrase "Black English" is not connected to grammar or etymology, advise the authors, but on the use of the word "Black" in its definition, since there are differences in how "Black" is perceived and defined (Smith and Crozier 111). According to Harrison & Trabasso, "any definition of Black English is closely bound to the problem of defining "Blackness" (qtd. in Smith and Crozier 111). After this final point, the authors are able to move into the term, Ebonics.

The term Ebonics was coined in January 1973, by Dr. Robert L. Williams, a Professor of Psychology at Washington University in St. Louis Missouri. The etymology of the word "'Ebonics' is a compound of two words: 'Ebony' which means 'Black' and 'phonics' which means 'sounds.' The Term Ebonics means literally 'Black Sounds." (Smith and Crozier 112). According to Williams, Ebonics refers to the "linguistic and para-linguistic features, which on a concentric continuum, represent the language and communicative competence of West and Niger-Congo African , Caribbean, and United States slave descendants of Niger-Congo African origin" (qtd. in Smith and Crozier 112). It also includes the "non-verbal sounds, cues, and gestures etc., which are systematically used in the process of communication by African American people" (qtd. in Smith and Crozier 112). This gives new meaning to the term, a meaning not so heavily misconstrued with negative connotations, but more representative of the people who use the language.

Smith & Crozie teach us that "Ebonics does not follow the rules of English grammar…Black children recognize many English words but do not comprehend English grammar"(113). The authors

explain that segregation and poverty are not the "root cause" of this "limited English proficiency." Although, it does contribute to the limited exposure the child has with the language and its idioms, the origin of the grammar differences are from Africa (Smith and Crozier 113). Once the authors define the term Ebonics for us and explain the root causes for the language, we are brought to the this strong conclusion, "Ebonics is not a dialect of English" (114), nor is "Ebonics...'The Africanaization of American English.' [It] is an African based language with European words" (114), and although these two terms may be used interchangeably throughout this essay, "Ebonics is not 'Black English' and …the appellation 'Black English' is not a synonym for the word Ebonics" (115).

Other authors support the notion of the origins of Ebonics or African American English as being West African and not just American English. They also support the fact that it is indeed a language and not a dialect. One author, Wayne O'Neil, in the essay, "If Ebonics Isn't a Language, Then Tell Me, What Is? (*pace* James Baldwin, 1979)," uses the terms African-American English (AAE) in place of Ebonics. He says, "AAE is historically derived from certain West African languages as well as from English. West African grammatical structures are superficially masked by English words" (39).

O'Neil also supports the fact that AAE is indeed a language by providing this explanation, "Commonsense definition of language…lies in the quip that a language is a dialect with an army and a navy---or a school system. This definition suggests, correctly, that languages are defined politically not scientifically" (41). The conclusion "or a school system" adds an interesting focus:

> AAE is clearly a language since—though lacking an army or a navy—it does have one school system, or at least its school board, solidly behind it. Thus, a way of speaking becomes a language by declaration—as is usually the case: A way of speaking is a language if you say it is. It is a legitimate language if it has the force of community consensus behind it---a school board resolution, say" (41-42)

The school board he is referring to is the Oakland School district. In 1996, Oakland attempted to fix the problems they were having with failing working class, underclass background students. They came up with "nine recommendations, including new criteria to identify, assess and admit youngers to Special Education and Gifted and Talented Education classes; improved parental and community involvement; increased funding ; and stepped up efforts to hire African American teachers and staff members". The recommendations that dealt with recognizing Ebonics led to a media frenzy (Rickford and Rickford 164).

John Rickford, in an interview, "Holding on to a Langauge of Our Own: An Interview with Linguist John Rickford" responds when asked about the historical origins of Black dialect that, "One position argues…they essentially acquired the dialect of whites who were here at the time. The other position is that when slaves first came over here, they acquisition of English was not as straightforward" (61). He goes on to say that "In fact, slaves were often separated from models of English usage, and in the course of acquiring English, developed first a pidgin and then a creole language—a mixed, simplified variety of English strongly influenced by their own native languages" (61). His conclusion is that one, "can view the result as a language problem, or [one] can view it as language creativity, because it is a creative response to a language learning situation" (61). Rickford adds yet another level of support to the argument that the origins for the language are African mixed with English variations.

The third supporter mentioned in this essay is James Baldwin. In his essay, "If Black English Isn't a Language, Then Tell Me, What Is?," he gives his view of Ebonics and its value as a language, "People evolve a language in order to describe and thus control their circumstances or in order not to be submerged by a reality that they cannot articulate" (67). He goes on to say to make this additional point:

> It goes without saying, then, that language is also a political instrument, means, and proof of power. It is the most vivid and crucial key to identity: It reveals the private identity, and connects one with, or divorces one from, the larger public, or communal identity. There have been, and are, times, and places, when to speak a certain language

> could be dangerous, even fatal. Or, one may speak the same language, but in such a way that one's antecedents are revealed, or (one hopes) hidden." (68)

Baldwin takes this explanation of language and ties it to his own conclusions about Black English and its origins. He informs us that there was danger and there was a need:

> Black English is the creation of the Black diaspora. Blacks came to the United States chained to each other, but from different tribes: Neither could speak the other's language. If two Black people at that bitter hour of the world's history, had been able to speak to each other, the institution of chattel slavery could never have lasted as long as it did. Subsequently, the slave was given, under the eye, and the gun, of his master, Congo Square, and the Bible—or, in other words, and under these conditions, the slave began the formation of the Black church, and it is within this unprecedented tabernacle that Black English began to be formed. This was not merely, as in the European example, the adoption of a foreign tongue, but an alchemy that transformed ancient elements into a new language: A language comes into existence by means of brutal necessity, and the rules of the language are dictated by what the language must convey" (qtd. in Perry and Delpit 69).

Baldwin eloquently merges the two and provides yet another example of how African American English or Ebonics was a language that sprung from something bigger than the people; it was a desperate necessity.

Finally, there is John R. Rickford, again, and Russell J. Rickford who further support this claim and who also brings forward a new term in their book *Spoken Soul*. The term, "'Spoken Soul' was the name that Claude Brown, author of *Manchild in the Promised Land,* coined for black talk" (3). Brown would say in a 1968 interview that "he waxed eloquent in its praise, declaring that the informal speech or vernacular of many African Americans 'possess a pronounced lyrical quality which is frequently

incompatible to any music other than that ceaselessly and relentlessly driving rhythm that flows from poignantly spent lives'" (3). Ten years later, Baldwin described black English as "'this passion, this skill…this incredible music" (3). This is very similar to the etymology of Ebonics, "Black sounds." The term "spoken soul" reiterates the unique characteristics of the language.

Rickford and Rickford add to the consensus in their book stating, "Argument that African American English shows creole influences are, like arguments that it shows African influences, made almost entirely in relation to its pronunciation and grammar rather than its vocabulary" (146). They point out that "There are some striking vocabulary parallels between Caribbean Creole English and African American English" (146). The idea that Ebonics or whatever one would choose to call it is a language closely related to Creole is a reoccurring theme in the attempt to define the language.

Rosina Lippi Green describes the atmosphere surrounding the use of Ebonics, and Ernie Smith and Karen Crozier redefine the term Ebonics and remind us that Ebonics is truly a language. In addition to Smith and Crozier, other scholars such as Wayne O'Neil, John and Russell Rickford, and James Baldwin further one's understanding of the origins, definitions and characteristics of Ebonics as well as coin a new term, "Spoken Soul." Most would agree that the existence of Ebonics is in prevalent usage, but to what degree? The question is how much influence does African American Vernacular have on the language of White Americans or on the vocabulary of English?

According to John and Russell Rickford, " the newest question, posed only over the past fifteen years, concerns whether African American English is currently diverging or veering farther from white vernacular and Standard English" (*Spoken Soul* 130). This book was published in 2000, so this idea is still fairly fresh and whether the language of White and Black Americans are changing and possibly moving away from likeness is still left unseen/unknown. The authors contribute part of this shift in the 20th century to one possible hypothesis.

This hypothesis was ""first presented in the mid-1980s by two Philadelphia-based researchers, William Labov and Wendell Harris, who began by noting that the black population in that city had become increasingly segregated between 1850 and 1970" (157). The numbers "reflect white flight to the suburbs and the increasing presence within inner cities of blacks and other people of color...and that the increasing segregation of blacks and whites was accompanied by increasing divergence of black and white vernaculars" (158). Rickford and Rickford say, if this is so, "the future portends an even greater rift between these varieties unless the separate continents of white and black America reverse their drift" (130). Although this may indicate some striking racial and language differences that may continue to grow, it does not mean that Ebonics has not had an effect on English.

Whether, the languages diverge or not, there was and is still a presence of Ebonics within the American language; However, finding these shared words may not be as easy as "looking them up" in the dictionary. Fern L. Johnson in the study "Unacknowledged African Origins of U.S. English Usage: 'Origin Unknown' and Other Peculiar Etymologies(2002)" finds that "Over the past 30 some years, the few extant and often obscure studies of African influence on U.S. English from earlier in the twentieth century became cornerstones for a growing interest in what has come to be known as Africanisms in U.S. English" (209). He attempts to take a "narrower focus than the more expansive project to connect patterns of African American discourse pragmatics to an African past (Asante, 1990)" (209). He says, the purpose of his research is "to ascertain the degree to which standard, highly regarded dictionaries of U.S. English recognize in their etymological entries the work that has been done to trace African origins for words in the U.S. linguistic currency" (209). This turns out to be an interesting feat and discovery for the author and his readers.

Johnson explains how he conducted his research and what material he used to make his conclusions. He chose 26 recognizable mainstream English "test" words. The 26th word he chose was *banana*, which originated in West Africa because of its well-known etymology. He also chose two

dictionaries, *The American Heritage Dictionary of the English Language* (AH) and *Merriam Webster's Collegiate Dictionary* (WEB). He chose them because they are "long standing and well-recognized" as well as commonly used reference sources for college students. Finally, he chose two editions of each dictionary: "(a) the edition issued most closely after the 1979 publication of Vass's book, and (b) the most recent edition." He assumed that it "would take several dictionary editions for the impact of etymological work on African language terms to become evident in the dictionaries" (210).

Johnson works his way through these sources and concludes that, "The etymological entries for the sample words were remarkably similar for both dictionaries in the two respective time periods, likely indicating that the etymologist who work on compiling this information do so from similar sources and training, and with similar criteria for both their evidence and purview of sources" (212). Overall he finds that, "The general pattern in these two major dictionaries of 'American' English shows lack of recognition for African word origins or—even more surprisingly—African word origin possibilities" (212).

This study shows the main issue with being able to pinpoint the recognized usage of certain words and their influences within the English language: it is poorly documented. However, according to Rickford and Rickford, there are dictionaries that document its usage and there is evidence of this shared vocabulary or speech. These authors claim that the claim that "Ebonics has no dictionary … is incorrect" (93). They highlight a few of the texts that have been in publication:

> Since 1994 there have been two authoritative guides: Clarence Major's 548 page *Juba to Jive: A Dictionary of African American Slang* (a revised, expanded version of his 1970 *Dictionary of Afro-American Slang*), and Geneva Smitherman's 243-page *Black Talk: Words and Phrases from the Hood to the Amen Corner* (a revised and expanded edition of which will appear in 2000). There has also been no dearth of shorter, more informal glossaries, from 'Introduction to Contemporary Harlemese' in Rudolph Fisher's 1928 novel *The Walls of Jerico*, through *The New Cab Calloway's Hep-ster's Dictionary* (1944),

> to more recent word and phrase books such as *A 2 Z: The Book of Rap and Hip Hop Slang* (1995). Add to this dozens of scholarly articles and a number of book-length studies, including J.L. Dillard's *Lexicon of Black English* (1970) and Edith Folb's *runnin' down some lines* (1980), and it's clear that there is substantial information on the vocabulary of Spoken Soul, past and present." (93)

Although, the avid reader may not be able to pick up the standard American Heritage or Merriam Webster Collegiate Dictionary and find recognition, Rickford and Rickford provide one with a pretty hefty list of sources to add to his/her library.

Lorenzo Dow Turner revealed in his research in 1949 that "after nearly two decades of research …that [Georgia] Gullah had approximately four thousand words with plausible African sources. Most of them were personal names (e.g., *Shiyama*, from a Kongo word meaning "strength," "security"), but more than two hundred fifty were words used in conversation (e.g., *goober*, or *guba*, from *ngguba*, a Kimbundu word meaning "peanut")" (qtd. in Rickford and Rickford 146).

Other scholars such as David Dalby, Joseph Holloway, and Winifred Vass, and others, "have extended Turner's work in regard to African American English and American English more generally," (qtd. in Rickford and Rickford 146). They argue "that even common expressions such as *jazz*, *tote* (carry), *okay*, and *do one's thing* have plausible African sources. Africanisms in vocabulary include not only direct retentions or borrowings from African languages (*goobe*/*guba*), but also loan translations into English of African compounds or concepts (cut-eye, bad-mouth)" (qtd. in Rickford and Rickford 146). They say that "because loan translations 'pass' as English words, they tend to survive longer than direct loans" (146).

There are many other words that Rickford and Rickford bring to our attention, but the point is well made that the borrowing between both languages have been and is great. Clarence Major reminds us that, "the process of diffusion is not just normal, but unavoidable: This evolution from private to public is not only essential to the vitality at the crux of slang, but inevitable" (qtd. in Rickford and

Rickford 98). Major clarifies by saying, "African American slang is not only a living language for black speakers but for the whole country, as evidenced by its popularity decade after decade since the beginning of American history" (qtd. in Rickford and Rickford 98).

We have defined Black English and Ebonics and have been made aware of the presence of Ebonics in all of our common vocabulary, not just poor African Americans as once believed; now, it is good to understand the specific variations of Ebonics both in pronunciation and grammar. First, let's look at the pronunciation and then, work through some of the grammatical features. Mary M. Clark in the textbook, *The Structure of English for Readers, Writers, and Teachers* gives the four main categories for pronunciation as substitution sounds, simplification of consonant clusters (*help* as *hep*), [r]-dropping, and pronunciation of [I] as [a]. When looking at the types of substitution of sounds, there is the substitution of [t] and [d] for initial [th] and [*th*]: For instance, *thing* as *ting* and *this* as *dis*. The other substitution of [f] and [v] for final [th] and [*th*]: For instance, *mouth* as *mouf* and *bathe* as *bav* (259-260).

Rickford and Rickford mention Claude Brown who paid homage to the "communicative and meaningful" sounds of Spoken Soul. Brown "insisted that it was such sounds ("Soul Vocalizations"), rather than slang, that represented the distinctive identity of the black vernacular" (98). Brown noted that "Spoken Soul is distinguished from slang primarily by the fact that the former lends itself easily to conventional English and the latter is diametrically opposed to adaptations within the realm of conventional English," and he provides this example, "Police (pronounced p$\bar{o}$lice) is a soul term, whereas 'The Man' is merely slang for the same thing." (98).

Claude Brown talks about how it allows any word to be converted to black vernacular; He says, "There are specific phonetic traits" and that "to the soulless ear, the vast majority of these sounds are dismissed as incorrect usage of the English language" (Rickford and Rickford 99). However, "to those blessed as to have had bestowed upon them at birth the lifetime gift of soul, these are the most

communicative and meaningful sounds ever to fall upon human ears: the familiar “mah” instead of “my,” “gonna” for “going to,” “yo” for “your” (Rickford and Rickfor 99).

In the book, *Spoken Soul*, the authors explain the difference in sounds that Brown referred to such as words like “mah” for “my,” “ah” for “I,” and “sahd” for “side”; They say, “linguists call a dipthong (a two-vowel sequence) involving a glide from an *ah*-like vowel to an *ee*-like vowel, is produced as a long monophthong (a single vowel) without the glide to ee…this monophthongal pronunciation is characteristic of southern white speech” (99). The latter is interesting because we see again the influence that both languages have on each other. In order to explain this and other similarities, they inform us that the features of southern white speech were influenced by black language because white plantation children would play with slave children, the owner and family often worked alongside slaves in the fields, and after the Civil War many worked alongside each other as tenant farmers (100). It would make sense that this would be the main reason for the likeness in the languages and also why some believe that the returning segregation is causing another distinct shift.

Now, let us look briefly at grammatical elements of Ebonics. Rickford and Rickford extensively outline twelve grammatical features: Plural *s* and *dem*; existential *it is*; absence of third-person singular present-tense *s*; absence of possessive ‘*s*; Invariant *be*; Zero copula (absence of *is* or *are*); been, BEEN; done, be *done*, *finna*, *had*, and other tense-aspect markers; negative forms and constructions; questions, direct and indirect; pronouns; and additional verbs. The ones covered here include absence of third-person singular present tense *s,* absence of possessive ‘*s*, and negative forms and constructions. Although this only scratches the surface of the overall grammatical structure, it provides some bases for the argument that the language does have grammar.

“Standard English is somewhat fickle because it requires adding an s (or *es*) to verbs with third-person singular subjects (*he goes*) but requires the bare verb (the form with *to*, as in “to go”) for all other subjects (“I go,” “you go,” “we go,” “they go”)” (111), Rickford and Rickford explain. However, “In

getting rid of third person *s*, you might think of AAVE [African American Vernacular English] as making rules of English more regular…; the verb doesn't have special endings with other subjects, so it shouldn't with third-person-singular subjects" (111). The authors provide context for its usage (or non-usage) by saying that "the tendency of soul speakers to drop the third-person singular *s* was evident in earlier studies of working-class folk in New York and Detroit, where *s* was absent from 56 to 76 percent of the time" (112).

Next is the "Absence of possessive ‘*s*". Ebonics or "AAVE indicates possession through the juxtaposition of the two nouns (*girl house*) rather than with an ‘*s* ending" (112). The author's connect this to "many pridgin and creole languages—produced by fusing and simplifying two or more languages when their speakers come in contact—the possessor comes immediately before the thing possessed" (112). This is a much more common omission than tossing out the plural *s* (Rickford and Rickford 112).

Finally, there is "Negative forms and constructions." *ain't* is one that can be used as the equivalent of Standard English *am not, isn't, aren't, don't, hasn't,* and *haven't*…contrary to white vernaculars, however, *ain't* can be used as the equivalent of "*didn't*" in the AAVE" (122-123). For example, "He *ain't* go no [=didn't go any] further than third or fourth grade" (123).

Another commonly discussed feature is "the double negative, in which a negative verb such as *ain't* or *don't* or *wasn't* is used with a negative noun or pronoun such as *no…lady, neither,* or *nothing* instead of Standard English equivalents "and…lady," either," or "anything." The author's argue that "contrary to what purists often allege, double negatives are virtually never interpreted as positives…,even by Standard English speakers….—any more than they thought this in Chaucer's or Shakespeare's time, when double negatives were used even in literary British English" (123). For example in Chaucer's, referring to the Friar, "Ther *nas no man nowher* so virtuous," and in Shakespeare, "I *cannot* go *no* further (Shakespeare, *As you Like it*, act 2 scene 4)" (Rickford and Rickford 123).

Ebonics has been defined, shown to be prevalent within the English language, and shown to have pronunciation and grammatical structure. The influence and its relevancy cannot be ignored and we must think about the implications this has for teachers and society. In essence, teachers are dealing with students who are bi-lingual. According to Arnetha F. Ball and Ted Lardner, authors of *African American Literacies Unleashed: Vernacular English and the Composition Classroom,* we need to change the status quo. We need to unlearn our own racism if that's what's involved. We need to remedy our knowledge deficits regarding AAVE. We need to transform attitudes in order to transform our practice"(xvii). It is a tall order, but it is also doable.

In order to begin doing so, they outline these specific steps for changing the face of education and approaching the diversity of the classroom: 1) Knowledge: This includes having a knowledge of the linguistics and rhetorical patterns for African American Vernacular English; of the culture and community of all students, particularly African Americans; of the student as a person and of race theory and power relations 2) Self-reflection: Once a teacher is more knowledgeable, he/she can reflect on their own prejudices, their teaching styles and its effects and their "relationship to those power relations." 3) Personal and professional/classroom change: Following self-reflection, the teacher will be able "to give attention to building a sense of efficacy and positive optimism and motivate them to create teaching practices that reflect these attitudes" (Ball and Lardner *xvii*).

Accepting Ebonics as a valid language and incorporating its usage in the classroom is not saying that one should ignore or reject Standard English. This is the power language and as Fredrick Douglass said, we must not only "master Standard English but also to learn it in its highest form... For in the academics and courthouses and legislatures and business places where policies are made and implemented, it is a graceful a weapon as can be found against injustice, poverty, and discrimination" (qtd. in Rickford and Rickford 227-228). And, yes, "we must learn to use it, too, for enjoyment and mastery of literature, philosophy, science, math, and the wide variety of subjects that are conducted

and taught in Standard English, in the United States, and increasingly, in the world," as well as "teach our children to do so" (qtd. in Rickford and Rickford 227-228). However, as Douglass entreats us, "treating Spoken Soul like a disease is no way to add Standard English to [African American student's] repertoire" (227-228). It is also no way to build the esteem and confidence of little African American boys and girls who are looking to find their place within the greater American culture.

The conclusions here are that we need to understand the nature and influences of Ebonics of African American Vernacular English in order to bring about change within the classroom, politically and socially. It will not come on its own accord. We must lay the foundation, by allowing there to be a continuous movement to explore, share, and discern the language and each other.

Works Cited

Baldwin, James. "If Black English Isn't a Language, Then Tell Me, What Is?" *The Real Ebonics Debate: Power, Language, and the Education of African American Children.* Eds. Theresa Perry and Lisa Delpit. Boston: Beacon Press,1998. 67-70. Print.

Ball, Arnetha, and Ted Lardner. *African American Literacies Unleashed: Vernacular English and the Composition Classroom.* Carbondale: Southern Illinois University Press, 2005. Print.

"Ethnic Dialects." *The Structure of English for Readers, Writers and Teachers*. Ed. Mary Clark. 2nd ed. Glen Allen, VA: College Publishing, 2010. 258-261. Print

"Holding on to a Language of Our Own: *An Interview with Linguist John Rickford*." *The Real Ebonics Debate: Power, Language, and the Education of African American Children.* Eds. Theresa Perry and Lisa Delpit. Boston: Beacon Press,1998. 59-65. Print.

Johnson, Fern C. "Unacknowledged African Origins of U.S. English Usage: "Origin Unknown" and Other Peculiar Etymologies." *Howard Journal of Communications* 13.3 (2002): 207-222. *Academic Search Complete.* Web. 31 Jan. 2013.

Lippi-Green, Rosina. "What We Talk About When We Talk About Ebonics: Why Definitions Matter." *Black Scholar* 27.2 (1997): 7-11. *Academic Search Complete*. Web. 31 Jan. 2013.

O'Neil, Wayne. "If Ebonics Isn't a Language, Then Tell Me, What Is? (*pace* James Baldwin, 1979)." *The Real Ebonics Debate: Power, Language, and the Education of African American Children.* Eds. Theresa Perry and Lisa Delpit. Boston: Beacon Press,1998. 38-47. Print.

Rickford, John R . and Russell J. Rickford. Spoken Soul: The Story of Black English. New York: John Wiley & Sons, Inc., 2000. Print.

Smith, Ernie and Karen Crozier. "Ebonics is not Black English." *Western Journal of Black Studies* 22.2 (1998): 109-116. *Academic Search Complete*. Web. 31 Jan. 2013.

Reflection (Research to Practice):

Understanding the elements of African American Vernacular English (AAVE) helps English Composition teachers to recognize code-switching and teach Standard English (SE) lessons directly related to it as well as look for ways to be more inclusive.

Practical ways to be inclusive:

- Do not refer to language as being either right or wrong
- Include various texts in readings that use AAVE and SE.
- Allow for low stake assignments that do not reduce points for grammar errors
- During grammar lessons show examples of informal language, including AAVE, and how they change to Standard English
- "Like other composition students, AAE [or AAVE] speakers need to read carefully , write frequently, address different audiences for meaningful purposes, study models of writing in progress and in print, collaborate with peers, confer with the teacher, and, of course, devote time to prewriting, drafting and revising" (Redd and Webb 73-74).
- Emphasize differences between AAVE and SE, especially if you are able to code-switch smoothly (Redd and Webb 83-84).
- "Teachers can start with their daily lesson planning, by making explicit for themselves their substantive goals, participation goals, and affective goals for each class session. Each of these aspects contributes substantially to classroom success for the students. Next, teachers must articulate for themselves their knowledge about their students' cultural practices and their thought s about their own sense of efficacy and reflective optimism concerning their students. These categories are interlinked" (Ball and Lardner 144).
- There are twelve categories that teachers can "initiate and monitor as they reflect on, analyze, and transform their classrooms and teaching practices" (Ball and Lardner174):
    - Affect:
        - Readjust attitudes: reimagine the possibilities for AAVE speaking in the classroom and realize prejudice and bias (146).
        - Confront racial insecurities and prejudices (149)
        - Create a space for affect in the classroom: create a place of feeling for students (150).
        - Hold high expectations and communicate them (153)
    - Participation
        - Create opportunities for students to play multiple roles in the classroom (155)
        - Reconceptualize the writing conference: address specific student issues by creating a "dynamic, free flowing exchange of ideas between students and teachers" (161).
        - Position students as informed interpreters (without trying to make them the "representative for black voice" (163).

- Recognize, accept, and incorporate varied oral and written discourse patterns (168).
- Reassess approaches to assessment (170).
- Seek nurturing professional collaborations that model and support effective teaching (173).

The most important thing I have learned is to be true to myself, and not try to overcompensate, but think about how I can be inclusive of all cultures. It becomes my personal responsibility to think about my teaching pedagogy and bias in order to create a more inclusive learning environment that is beneficial to all students, not just AAVE speakers.

Sources:

Ball, Arnetha F. and Ted Lardner. *African American Literacies Unlashed: Vernacular English and the Composition Classroom.* Carbondale: Southern Illinois University Press, 2005. Print.

Redd, Teresa M. and Karen Schuster Webb. *African American English: What a Writing Teacher Should Know*. Urbana, Illinois: National Council of Teachers of English, 2005. Print.

Abstract:

"Free Within Ourselves" was written for an American Modernism course and deals mostly with Jane Toomer's *Cane* and a few of Langston Hughes poems. Both men wrote during the African American literary Modernist period. Toomer was a man of mixed race who wrote about his black ancestry and experiences, and Hughes was a black man who wrote about his own experiences in both African American Vernacular English and Standard English. They both attempted to create a new image for African Americans, often referred to as the New Negro and depicted their experiences in order to interpret the world and to redefine the black experience. Through their personal accounts and literary talent, they displayed the complexities of race in a society that was largely uncaring; however, by creating these new images, they, especially Hughes, hoped to encourage pride and confidence in the African American community, which would allow them to be able to live "free within."

Free Within Ourselves

The New Negro concept was not an accident. It was as Darwin Turner stated it in the introduction of Jean Toomer's novel, *Cane*, "meticulously designed and promoted by Afro-American scholars" (*xviii*). During the 20th century, according to Turner, many scholars and historians such as W.E.B Dubois and Carter Woodson, "sought to encourage pride by researching Black history in the United States and in Africa to refute the allegations that the African American race had bred only slaves and savages incapable of contributing to civilization" (qtd. in Toomer *xviii*). This idea that African American needed to be redefined socially infiltrated many author's works such as Langston Hughes poetry and Jane Toomer's novel mentioned above. The African American literary modernist movement strove to interpret the world and redefine the black experience; writers of this movement would use their American experience to display the complexities of being black, or passing as white, in a largely uncaring and unseeing society.

Just before the inception of the Modernist movement, America had experienced some severe blows, including a World War. Also up until this point, African Americans had experienced multiple levels of discrimination and racism. According to The *Literature Network* website, the Modernist movement started shortly, "after the beginning of the twentieth century through roughly 1965. In broad terms, the period was marked by sudden and unexpected breaks with traditional ways of viewing and interacting with the world. Experimentation and individualism became virtues, where in the past they were often heartily discouraged." This new way of thinking spread throughout America as people struggled for peace and stability. The "American Literature 1914-1945" introduction to the *Norton Anthology* explains that people looked to the Soviet Union, the Communist movement, and even moved abroad or within the boundaries of the United States. African Americans would also begin to migrate to cities, particularly Harlem, New York (5, 7). Everyone was on a quest to find some sort of political or social change, including African Americans who began to ask questions such as "who, exactly, was truly

'American,'" and whether art should "engage itself in political and social struggle" (5, 6). These changes would eventually lead more and more contributors to the major ideas of the day and lend way to various discussions on issues of gender and race for all Americans.

Before, during, and ultimately, after this movement, experiences of racism and the struggle for equality would be prevalent in a society mostly concerned with its own issues; the larger society was not concerned with those seen to be inferior. Although, laws would change, hearts and beliefs remained unchanged:

> For centuries, the status of African Americans kept as inferior. In 1865, the United States government ended all forms of slavery; in 1954, segregated schools were dismantled; and in 1964, the Civil Rights Act guaranteed broad citizen protections that the legal underpinnings for treating African Americans as equal and acceptable were secured [6]. However, legal ending of slavery only terminated the economic aspects; the social facet of slavery could not be erased in the society just through the courts. Consequently, the focus of White society on maintaining rigid control over Blacks has continued [7]. ("American Literature 1914-1945")

This fact that African Americans still could not gain footing or recognition in their own home land would lead to many believing that something must be done to change not just laws, but hearts and minds.

From this void, up would spring various writers and artists who would leave their mark on the world. Besides Toomer and Hughes, artist like Aaron Douglas and writer Sarah Wright would become representations of black life and experience. Aaron Douglas an illustrator and painter would paint various works during the Harlem Renaissance that would become features in many African American periodicals such as *The New Negro*, *Crisis*, and *Opportunity: Journal of Negro Life* (Hartel). In Herbert Hartel's review of, *Aaron Douglas: African American Modernist*, a book by Susan Earle on his works, it becomes known to the reader that he was hailed as being a great modernist artist, whose style "applied

brilliantly to depicting the lives and history of African Americans" (Hartel). Douglas work was influenced by various styles such as Cubism and African tribal scripture, and his work would become for many a symbol of black identity.

Sarah Wright, the author of *This Child's Gonna Live* (1969) wrote, "The Lower East Side: A Rebirth of World Vision" on an experience that she had in New York in the 1960s. She speaks of how her and her colleagues in the Harlem Writers Guild met to read and discuss their works. She divulges that their goal was to seek truth, "justice, and a world open to love" (Wright) and that they created a type of Harlem Renaissance, "reverberating to the rising struggles of the Civil Rights and Black Liberation Movements around the country" (Wright). This author gives a personal account of how Fidel Castro, a symbol for his work with the Cuban revolution came to Harlem and how he sat with Malcolm. She felt this experience brought something very important to light about the issues of her community and increased her desire to influence change through her work:

> But what remained for me, what has always remained, as I see so many of our youth deprived of any chance of life, as I am confronted by the ugly swamp of poverty in our communities, the ever more insolent racism, the upsurge of murderous hate, the rampant and still growing unemployment and hopelessness, the death that increasingly comes too soon--what remains of Fidel's visit is a social vision immersed so deep in my heart it can never be dislodged (Wright).

Regular people dealing with insatiable problems created a movement to address these issues in full light. Whites and blacks created a movement to change hearts and minds.

The basic themes of human life are "the identity of self, the nature of reality, [and] the possibility of knowledge. Changes in philosophical paradigms often signal or reflect radical change in the way the human and the real are conceived," contends Andrea Nye in her article, "It's not Philosophy" (108). Nye goes on to point out that "virtual realities, possible worlds and artificial intelligences exercise

analytic philosophers to revise and expand their logistic and scientist assumptions" and that "more radial and more historically significant…are the revisions that the writers reviewed here envision from experiences as Asian, African American, or Hispanic women" (108). The various texts that she refers to are written by women authors such as Trinh T Minh-ha, Patricia Hill Collins, Gloria Anzaldea, Regina Harrison, Maria Lugones and Elizabeth Spellman. Each of the texts attempts to bring about new thought on the social experience for women and race.

Patricia Hill Collin's work *Black Feminist Thought* was among those texts reviewed by Nye. Collin's text was written concerning the black experience, but more closely the female black experience. She was concerned with how "African American women can understand their situation, express it in meaningful terms, and construct knowledge necessary for solving problems in the black community" (Nye 110). Collins agreed that knowledge of multiple cultures is necessary, but that the source of this knowledge should be questioned and altered. She "proposed other sources of knowledge: personal interviews, popular music and fiction, conversation, dialogue. Instead of constructing theory out of his or her own clear and distinct ideas" (Nye 110). This new method and new techniques would help to alleviate stereotypes and "bridge the distance between theory and concrete experience, and intimate dialogue between alternate and conflicting perspectives" (Nye 111). In this way, Collins brought up and reiterates the need to dialogue and to have accurate depictions of the African American experience.

Aaron Douglas, Sarah Wright, and Patrica Hill Collins are only a tiny part of the spectrum. They were not the only ones to think about and contribute in their own way to the thought of Modernist composition and art. Many more African Americans and whites would become known for their contributions. Among them would also be Jean Toomer and Langston Hughes. Brian Reed reviewed three texts by Geoffrey Jacques, Michal Golston and Walton Muyumba. Reed found that most of "today's African Americanists and modernists agree (1) that black literature and culture played a crucial role within the global story of modernism and (2) that literary modernism helped shape the course and

character of twentieth-century African American writing" (208), which is why analyzing such works becomes important to understanding the time period.

The text, "A Change in the Weather: Modernist Imagination, African American Imaginary" by Jacques would give his view of writers such as Toomer and Hughes, who he says have had the tendency to be rated as "second tier and marginal" (208). He argues that the results of their writing and the writings of others were profound to the movement:

> from 1875 to 1915, one can trace the development of an "African American Imaginary," a collocation of modes of cultural expression—including jazz, blues, dialect poetry, and black minstrelsy—that enabled white and nonwhite Americans to encounter one another and engage in complex acts of racialized self-fashioning. This Imaginary, he asserts, later becomes "constitutive of modernist identity" itself. (qtd. in Reed 208)

His beliefs in the connection between Modernist writing and the African American cultural images were not the only things explored in Reed's review. He also looked at Michael Golston's "Rhythmn and Race in Modernist Poetry and Science," where Golston delved into "racialized discourse" in the "poetics of canonical high modernism." He also wrote about "Rhythmics," which is "based on the postulate that rhythm is 'a fundamental and organic periodicity linking the human body, language, history, landscape, and culture" and "In this system, an individual's 'sense of rhythm . . . originates in the blood,' and it betrays the 'racial Metabolism' shared with his or her ancestors and recorded in the 'tempo' of their 'language and music'" (qtd. in Reed 209). Finally, he reviews Muyumba in his essay "The Shadow and the Act: Black Intellectual Practice" and how he would focus on "harmonizing Modernist and African American studies," including within his work beliefs such as "ideas and beliefs are tools for coping with social realities" and that philosophers should "navigate lived experience while acknowledging the contingency of all things" (qtd. in Reed 209). All three of these authors found that certain characteristics

of African American literature would greatly contribute to the common thought and dialogueof the time.

One such author who would contribute his literary work to this discussion of race was Jean Toomer. Toomer never knew his father, Nathan Toomer, who was the son of a wealthy plantation owner in Georgia. His mother was Nina Pinchback, the daughter of a tyrannical and possessive father, who his father managed to court and impregnate before her father was able to end it (Turner *xi*). This union would produce in him mixed blood, but, perhaps due to the rejection by his father, Toomer would regularly associate with his white side and often remained neutral on issues of race (Turner *xi*). While living regularly with Afro Americans later in life, he began to "engross himself with racial matters" and "during these years from 1920 to 1922 Toomer probably immersed himself in Afro-American consciousness more deeply than he had during any earlier period, more in fact than he ever would again" (Turner *xv*). Toomer writes about his new point of view:

> From my own point of view I am naturally and inevitably an American. I have strived for a spiritual fustion analogous to the fact of racial intermingling. Without denying a single element in me, with no desire to subdue one to the other, I have sought to let them function as complements. I have tried to let them live in harmony. Within the last two or three years, however, my growing need for artistic expression has pulled me deeper and deeper into the Negro group. And as my powers of receptivity increased, I found myself loving it in a way that I could never love the other. It has stimulated and fertized whatever creative talent I may contain within me….Now, I cannot conceive of myself as aloof and separated. My point of view has not changed; it has been deepened, it has widened. (qtd. in Turner *xvi*)

Eventually, the fictional work *Cane* would be born and it would become a "literary masterpiece" of the Harlem or "New Negro" Renaissance. Toomer's work would help in the cause to awaken an interest and

understanding of Black culture and people. Toomer felt that in this way his “art [would] aid in giving the Negro to himself” (Turner *xix*). Basically, he wished to redefine the African American social image.

Toomer’s *Cane* includes multiple genres of writing including short stories, poems, and even a play at the very end and the work has three distinct parts. The first part, according to Toomer’s biography in *The Norton Anthology: American Literature*, is set in a rural part of Georgia and “depicts a black community based in the rhythms of cotton culture, charged with sexual desire, and menaced by white violence” (647) The second part depicts “black life in Washington D.C, and Chicago, the fast paced urban hives of money and ambition,” and the third part is autobiographical and describes “an African American intellectual [named Kabnis who is] teaching in the South, trying to put down roots in an unfamiliar setting that he struggles to recognize as the source of his own artistic ambition” (647). All three of these parts join together to give one encompassing view of black life in the South before desegregation, black life during the Harlem Renaissance, and black life for one who returns to the South, post desegregation.

There are two particular works that one can analyze in order to see the differences in the life of an African American during two different time periods: “Blood Burning Moon,” which is the last short story of the first part and “Seventh Street,” a poem that introduces the second part of Toomer’s work. Both stand adjacent to each other, yet they depict two very different images. The first work is “Blood Burning Moon.” This short story narrates the racial conflict between the two lovers of Louisa’s, a light skin woman: Tom Burwell, a black man who worked in the Georgia fields of her neighborhood in the segregated South, and Bob Stone, a young white man who she worked for. When Tom catches word that Bob is into his “gal” (Toomer 29), he goes into an immediate rage. Unfortunately, at the same time that Tom goes to confront Louisa about it and loses heart in accusing her, Bob makes his way to see her in the night, where he also hears from bystanders of Louisa having another lover. Both in a frenzy over their love for Louisa, end up in a fist fight which is finalized with Tom slashing Bob’s neck. Once word

makes it back to Bob's white friends, a mob hunts Tom down and burns him on a stake over a well, "two deaths for a godam nigger" (Toomer 34).

In contrast, is the poem, "Seventh Street," it starts out with the term "burn," but it refers to "money [burning] the pocket" (Toomer 39). Presumably, the pocket is that of the New Negro of the Harlem Renaissance. This poem starts and ends with the same poem about money burning pockets, bootleggers, and whizzing Cadillacs. It also depicts, in a very disjointed way different elements of the new way of life with jazz, Prohibition and busy city life the center of what happens on "Seventh Street" in Washington, D.C. The two varying forms and strikingly different themes are only held together by one singular word, "burn," and the fact that they are two sides to one race's life experience.

Equally important, is what these works represent of that life. First, with "Blood Burning Moon," there is the issue of race and race conflict particularly in the use of the word "nigger" which is used predominantly within the text even when Bob is speaking of his love interest, Louisa, and in the confrontation between Bob and Tom, which is the only clearly white and black confrontation in *Cane*. When the narrator is the guiding voice in the short story, the word "Negro" is used to indicate a person of color. It is not until the very end when the mob is hanging Tom does the narrator turn and use the word "nigger." Previous to that point, the word "nigger is used approximately 22 times, mostly in dialogue and in a short verse that repeats near the beginning, near the middle and at the end of the short story: "Red nigger moon. Sinner!/Blood-burning moon. Sinner! Come out that fact'ry door" (Toomer 29, 31, and 35). This word, although seemingly common speech between Tom, Bob and the white mob, also highlights some interesting complications regarding race. For instance, Bob's use of the word shows his struggle with being in love with a black woman. While thinking about Louisa, he says, "She was lovely—in her way. Nigger way. What way was that? Damned if he knew. Must know. He'd known her long enough to know. Was there something about niggers that you couldn't know?" (Toomer 32). In fact, the reader's presence in his private thought reveals that he is also the one who uses the

term “nigger” the most. He alone uses the term about 10 of the 22 times in a span of one paragraph, where he struggles with his understanding of the black race and his love of black woman.

Also, there is the obvious physical confrontation between the two race icons: the black male and the white male. For years, the conflict between these two races has clashed and led to deadly circumstances. Both males struggle with the issues of their day and now they both feel the need to fight over a woman, who really is neither white nor black, but both. Their characters are symbolic of some real problems that exist in society as a whole: The black man wishing to keep what he deems to be his (his “gal”), the white man having human feelings towards another human who happens to be of a different race and knowing his family just won’t understand, and the neither white nor black female who is largely silent within this text but who probably struggles with her own issues as a mixed girl living during that time. For a mixed race person, they know they are “black” by white terms, but they are often ostracized (sometimes overly idolized) in the black community for being half white. It can be hard for someone of mixed race to find their own identity within the larger picture of race; perhaps this is Toomer’s struggle as well depicted somehow within the context of this text. Toomer seems to use the term “nigger” and the obvious confrontation between the black and white males to highlight some very thought-provoking ideas on race.

“So I am ashamed for the black poet who says, ‘I want to be a poet, not a Negro poet,’ as though his own racial world were not as interesting as any other world,” criticizes Langston Hughes in his essay, “the Negro Artist and the Racial Mountain.” He continues, “I am ashamed, too, for the colored artist who runs from the painting of Negro faces to the painting of sunsets after the manner of the academicians because he fears the strange un-whiteness of his own features.” Finally, he contends that “an artist must be free to choose what he does, certainly, but he must also never be afraid to do what he might choose” (349). Langston Hughes did not bite his tongue when it came to black artist maintaining stereotypical views of African Americans in their art all in the name of entertainment. He

praised authors like Jean Toomer for writing *Cane* and Aaron Douglas for "drawing strange black fantasies caus[ing] the smug Negro middle class to turn from their white, respectable, ordinary books and papers to catch a glimmer of their own beauty" because by this way, "we build our temples for tomorrow, strong as we know how, and we stand on top of the mountain, free within ourselves" (349-350). This was the goal for the Modernist writer, and this was the goal for this African American Modernist writer.

Hughes had a several poems which illustrate how he wished to change the image of the black American and stir the hearts of whites and blacks alike. One of his many poems is called "I, Too" and another is "Mulatto." Both of these have their own distinct style and message. In "I, Too," Hughes describes the scene of a "darker brother" who has been sent to the "eat in the kitchen" (lines 2-3). The man does not get upset; he eats and grows "strong" because tomorrow, he says, he will "be at the table (Hughes 8, 10). He says, they wouldn't tell him to eat in the kitchen again because they would see his beauty and "be ashamed" because he is an American (Hughes 17-18). This simple plot is not showing a man who is dejected and incomplete, but a man who knows his worth and his beauty.

Also in this poem, the voice of the male narrator is prominent, direct and free from African American Vernacular. He is not angered, but full of confidence that later, "Nobody'll dare/say to me,/'Eat in the kitchen,'" (Hughes 11-13). The significant lines of the poem both precede and conclude this strong stand for equal rights and treatment: "I, too, sing America" and "I, too, am America." The shift from "sing" to "am" is metaphorical of the duality of the African American culture and a response to one of Walt Whitman's poems; Hughes "acknowledged finding inspiration for his writing in the work of white American poets who preceded him. Like Walt Whitman he heard America singing, and he asserted his right to sing America back" (Norton 870). During this time period, jazz and other forms of music were popular among many and blacks were becoming well known in the areas of music, but just as they were becoming more popular, the fact that they were also citizens becomes more necessary for

others to understand. After the Africans diaspora to this land and years of toil on it, this land was indeed their homes. Generation after generation had passed through it and many had been born on its soil. The time of "sending [blacks] to the kitchen" needed to be turned over to something new. When, Hughes said "Tomorrow,/ I'll be at the table" (Hughes 8-9), Tomorrow refers to the metaphorical tomorrow where injustices are eradicated and the table is the metaphorical place where everyone could sit together as equals, as Americans.

"Mulatto" is a poem that also illustrates the dilemma of a man, but not of the darker brother. The words, "I am your son, white man" start out the poem (Hughes line 1) and immediately defines the man's ethnicity, a "mulatto" or man of mixed race. With the backdrop of Georgia's nature, there is brief interruptions of dialogue as the white man responds, "You are my son!/Like hell!" (Hughes 5-6) and as others say, "Naw, you aint my brother/ Niggers ain't my brother/Not ever/Niggers ain't my brothers….Git on back there in the night/You ain't white" (Hughes 27-30,37-38). Their voices go unheeded and the "little yellow/bastard boy" (45-46) still claims at the end, "I am your son, white man!" The central plot of this poem deals more closely with the concerns and problems for those of mixed race and the issue of acceptance. There are shifting narrators all with strong, dominant voices within the poem. There is African American Vernacular and every day speech, which is also different from the previous poem, but common for many of Hughes poems during that time. These voices represent the many conflicting voices of the era, an era where it was hard to be black or even partially black.

There is much to say about the metaphors located in this poem as it relates to the African American experience for those of mixed blood. The backdrop of the Georgia landscape at night is significant to this. One metaphor seems to be with the reference "full of starts." There are a couple of places within the poem where Hughes uses this phrase "The Southern night/Full of stars/Great big yellow starts" (8-10, 31-32). The boy is also known as "a little yellow/Bastard boy" (44-45). Both the stars and the boy are the same color and what's more…there are many of them in the South. These

"bright stars" are "scatter[ed] everywhere" (39), yet, they seem to largely ignored by mainstream culture. These yellow boys, although plentiful, struggle to belong in the landscape of the night. Where all these "yellow bastard boys" come from is also prevalent in the poem: "O, sweet as earth/dusk dark bodies/give sweet birth/to little yellow bastard boys" (33-36). Black mother earth or just black mothers give birth to these boys in the South, only to find that they will not be accepted. In fact, even the scent of pine that Hughes keeps referencing seems significant in this "nigger night" (23) because on many a pine trees have hung dark bodies, often under the cloak of night. However, although this yellow boy is the white man's son, he will never be accepted as such. These reoccurring themes in his work are disjointed, which is common to the "break away" from tradition of Modernist texts, but the highly political and social stance of this poem can be seen with close analysis.

Cane, "I, Too," and "Mulatto" deal with various spectrums of race for those of dark or mixed race and deal with the painful issues of belonging, acceptance, conflict, and renaissance. Each work addresses these issues in its own style, unique from anything the general public was used to and then turns the reader's mind inside out. The reader is left with a distinct feeling that there is a message within the words, and in some cases, that the author is even speaking that message to him/her directly. These new images dance around in his/her mind; hopefully, leading to new ideas about race and leading to changed hearts. The Modernist writer would do this to their reader with the intent to promote social change and positive images starting with the individual, and the Modernist writer, in the case of the African American, would create new images of the black experience in America in order to construct "temples for tomorrow, strong as we know how" in order to "stand on top of the mountain, free within ourselves" (Hughes 349-350). The freedom of pride and confidence would now be able to stand out.

Works Cited

"American Literature 1914-1945." *The Norton Anthology of American Literature.* 8th ed. Eds. Nina Baym, et.al New York: W.W. Norton & Company, 2012. 3-22. Print.

Ergüner-Tekinalp, Bengü. "Daily Experiences Of Racism And Forgiving Historical Offenses: An African American Experience." *International Journal Of Social Sciences* 4.1 (2009): 1-9.*Academic Search Complete*. Web. 20 Oct. 2013.

Hartel, Herbert R. "Aaron Douglas: African American Modernist by Susan Earle (Ed.). "*Art Book*. 16.3 (2009): 50-52. *Academic Search Complete*. Web. 20 Oct. 2013.

Hughes, Langston. "From the Negro Artist and the Racial Mountain." *The Norton Anthology of American Literature.* 8th ed. Eds. Nina Baym, et.al New York: W.W. Norton & Company, 2012. 348-350. Print.

--- "I, too." *The Norton Anthology of American Literature.* 8th ed. Eds. Nina Baym, et.al New York: W.W. Norton & Company, 2012. 872. Print.

---"Mulatto." *The Norton Anthology of American Literature.* 8th ed. Eds. Nina Baym, et.al New York: W.W. Norton & Company, 2012. 873-874. Print.

"Langston Hughes 1902-1967." *The Norton Anthology of American Literature.* 8th ed. Eds. Nina Baym, et.al New York: W.W. Norton & Company, 2012. 873-874. Print.

"Modernism." *Online-literature.com*. The Literature Network, n.d. Web. 20 Oct. 2013.

Nye, Andrea. "It's not Philosophy." *Hypatia*, 1998: 107, *Academic Search Complete*. Web. 20 Oct. 2013.

Reed, Brian M. "A Change in the Weather: Modernist Imagination, African American Imaginary/Rhythm and Race in Modernist Poetry and Science/The Shadow and the Act: Black Intellectual Practice." *American Literature* 83.1 (2011): 208-210. *Academic Search Complete.* Web. 20 Oct. 2013.

Toomer, Jean. *Cane*. New York: Liverright, 1975. Print.

---."Jean Toomer 1894-1967." *The Norton Anthology of American Literature.* 8th ed. Eds. Nina Baym, et.al New York: W.W. Norton & Company, 2012. 646-647. Print.

Turner, Darwin T. "Introduction." *Crane*. New York: Liverright, 1975. Print.

Wright, Sarah. "'The Lower East Side.' A rebirth of World Vision." *African American Review* 27.4 (1993): 593. *Academic Search Complete*. Web. 20 Oct. 2013.

Reflection (From Research to Practice):

This essay allowed me to really understand a few works by Jane Toomer and Langston Hughes, and their placement within the larger context of the Harlem Renaissance movement. These works also demonstrate writing for identity, which is a useful concept to teach and a great writing strategy in a composition classroom.

Lesson Plan:

Title: Historical Modernist Texts and African American Identity

Objectives:

- First year college students will have the opportunity to read excerpts of texts and poetry in order to understand elements of the literary movement during the Modernist time period.
- Students will examine how Toomer, a mixed author, and Hughes, an African American author illustrate characteristics associated with their race and the race of others.
- Students will examine texts that use African American Vernacular English
- Students will write their own multi-genre narrative, which will incorporate Modernist strategies and personal experience.

Materials Needed:

- Teacher created description sheet for the Modernist Movement
- *Cane* by Jane Toomer
- Document camera or overhead copies of a section from *Cane*.
- "I, Too" and "Mulatto" by Langston Hughes

Lesson:
Day One:

- Define and provide characteristics of Modernist writing
- Show students copies of the section from Cane and discuss the structure (or lack thereof)
- Read pre-chosen excerpts of *Cane* and discuss terminology, how he illustrates racial conflict between blacks and whites, and how he illustrates his own intrepetation of race.

Day Two:

- Read the poems by Langston Hughes

- Have students break out into pairs with predetermined, teacher created discussion questions related to his use of AAVE, his portrayal of blacks and mulattos.
- In their pairs, have students discuss their own view of race. Have students answer questions such as where do they see themselves within their community? Do they feel represented in texts and in media?
- Have students share main discussion points from their small groups.
- Revisit characteristics of modernist texts and have students determine layout for their narrative essay.

Assessment:

- Formative: discussion responses
- Post: multi-genre narrative, which will incorporate Modernist strategies and personal experience.

Source:

N/A

Abstract:

The third work “To be Continued” was written for a Black Literary Traditions course and focuses on another writer, Paul L. Dunbar, and the idea that he used his poetry as propaganda or to further a cause. He spreads his ideas about slavery and the New Negro in an attempt to show the beauty of the African American Vernacular, which he used in many of his works; to show the humanity of the black individual; and to show the cruelty of oppression.

To be Continued

Propaganda: Ideas, facts, or allegations spread deliberately to further one's cause or to damage an opposing cause. This is the definition as presented by the online Merriam Webster Dictionary. It suggests that there was and is a movement of people who wish to further a cause. It suggests that there was and is an idea that through this method of deliberate spreading of “ideas, facts, or allegations,” a change can be made possible. Paul L. Dunbar was a man who followed his calling to write. It can argued that he wrote for many reasons; however, if one thing is certain his poetry spread ideas about the slave and the New Negro that live on to this day.

Paul Laurence Dunbar was born June 27, 1872 to free slaves from Kentucky (“Paul Laurence Dunbar”), so his knowledge of slavery may have been second hand, but his knowledge of racism and injustice still at the forefront. Dunbar would use his parent’s experiences to guide his writing, and he wasted no time in pursing and perfecting this art because by the age of 18, he had published various works and he was the editor for the *Dayton Tattler*, a short lived black newspaper, written by his classmate Orville Wright (“Paul Laurence Dunbar”). When Dunbar moved to Chicago looking for work, he met Frederick Douglass who would be noted as calling him “the most promising young man in America.” Dunbar wrote in both Standard English and dialect, however, it was the latter that would gain him the most literary attention and critique. As Douglass became ill, he would continue to write, and he would write all the way up to his death in February 9, 1906, at the age of thirty-three (“Paul Laurence Dunbar). This man knew the Black male experience. He lived for the purpose of writing and…spreading ideas, which is how he came to be dubbed as “the most promising young man in America.” The question remains, however: Why was Dunbar the most promising? How was his life’s work something of promise to others?

The idea of using art such as paintings, photographs and literature as a means of propaganda is not necessarily a new thing. It seems to be a cultural phenomenon that people have used through the

generations; however, it came to the forefront for African Americans during the Harlem Renaissance of the 1920s when scholars such as W.E.B Dubois and Alain Locke would discuss the purpose of African American art. Locke felt strongly about whether art should be used in this way and he proposed the following argument in 1928 against it:

> My chief objection to propaganda, apart from its besetting sin of monotony and disproportion, is that it perpetuates the position of group inferiority even in crying out against it. For it leaves and speaks under the shadow of a dominant majority whom it harangues, cajoles, threatens or supplicates. It is too extroverted for balance or poise or inner dignity and self-respect. Art in the best sense is rooted in self-expression and whether naive or sophisticated is self-contained. In our spiritual growth genius and talent must more and more choose the role of group expression, or even at times the role of free individualistic expression, – in a word must choose art and put aside propaganda. ("Art or Propaganda")

Locke felt that art should just be art,to be allowed to speak for itself and to be expressed in many ways, not just as a means to push forward a cause. He felt that art alone could not counter the injustices of the world in which they lived, and that what needed to replace propaganda was a free and open discussion (Locke).

However, Dubois felt that there was a common goal for most African Americans and that was to become a "full-fledged" American with equal rights and opportunities to pursuing the ideals of the American dream. He built on this idea in his speech, "Criteria of Negro Art," (1926) by defining this ideal of what African American want as this: to live " in a world where men know, where men create, where they realize themselves and where they enjoy life. It is that sort of a world we want to create for ourselves and for all America" (Dubois). He speaks of how this fuels the African American: "We black folk may help for we have within us as a race new stirrings; stirrings of the beginning of a new appreciation

of joy, of a new desire to create, of a new will to be" (Dubois), and he reminds the listeners that although this desire exists and has been largely ignored, it is gaining recognition, although not enough. He asks, "suppose the only Negro who survived some centuries hence was the Negro painted by white Americans in the novels and essays they have written. What would people in a hundred years say of black Americans?" and then his message becomes clearer:

> Thus it is the bounden duty of black America to begin this great work of the creation of Beauty, of the preservation of Beauty, of the realization of Beauty, and we must use in this work all the methods that men have used before. And what have been the tools of the artist in times gone by? First of all, he has used the Truth -- not for the sake of truth, not as a scientist seeking truth, but as one upon whom Truth eternally thrusts itself as the highest handmaid of imagination, as the one great vehicle of universal understanding. Again artists have used Goodness -- goodness in all its aspects of justice, honor and right -- not for sake of an ethical sanction but as the one true method of *gaining sympathy and human interest*. (emphasis added Dubois)

Seek art to further the cause of "gaining sympathy and human interest", to create a new vision of the African American. Ultimately, he says the two cannot be separated. You cannot have one without the other, "Thus all Art is propaganda and ever must be, despite the wailing of the purists. I stand in utter shamelessness and say that whatever art I have for writing has been used always for propaganda for gaining the right of black folk to love and enjoy" (Dubois). His ideas are clear, and if one follows in this thought that art cannot be separated from propaganda, and that the African American must rewrite his image for the world, then one can understand the objective of Paul L. Dunbar, whether Dunbar realized his work as a tool for propaganda or not.

Whether Dunbar realized it or not, his life work became and is a signifier of the African American. When one reads his work, they are inclined to believe the circumstances and the truths

behind the rhyme, the flow, and the language. So, every piece can be dissected to find its root, and its representation, and this representation, this "idea, fact or allegation" would further his cause, and eventually over time chip away a bit at the opposition. He had many poems that dealt with the slave situation, including "The Haunted Oak," (1903) "An Antebellum Sermon,"(1895) "Accountability," (1895) and "Sympathy" (1893). He also had works such as "The Miss Mary Britton" (1899) and "Harriet Beecher Stowe" (1899) which presented a woman figure and influence, "The Colored Soldier," (1895) which addressed the woes of soldiers who fought for freedom. Dunbar would not live to see the Harlem Renaissance during which time the term, "the New Negro," would be coined, but his work would set the stage for others such as Dubois to further the African American experience toward cultural development.

First, there is the "The Haunted Oak," which was published in 1903 in his book *Lyrics of Love and Laughter*. The poem is about the lynching of an innocent man for a crime unrevealed, "They'd charged him with the old, old crime,/ And set him fast in jail" (Dunbar lines 13-14); although, one can assume it was for rape, a crime for which many black males were hung during that time. The mob, which included a doctor, a judge and a minister, lied to have him removed from jail, and he ended up being hung from tree. The perspective of the poem seems to come from two sources: someone in the presence of the tree and from the tree itself:

> Pray why are you so bare, so bare,
>
> Oh, bough of the old oak-tree;
>
> And why, when I go through the shade you throw,
>
> Runs a shudder over me? (1-4)

Compared to later in the poem, when it the point of view seems to be from the tree:

> I feel the rope against my bark,
>
> And the weight of him in my grain,

I feel in the throe of his final woe

The touch of my own last pain.

And never more shall leaves come forth

On a bough that bears the ban;

I am burned with dread, I am dried and dead,

From the curse of a guiltless man. (49-56)

The dread and horror of a “guiltless man” being hung on something that usually represent life and growth and radiance is significant. What did this say about the slave experience? This spoke of the realities of injustice. This spoke of the perseverance of hatred that knew no economic or social lines. The poem presented the problem without any reserve and evokes strong emotion.

In “An Antebellum Sermon,” Dunbar takes on the voice of the people. In this poem, the voice is of a preacher living pre-Civil War. He is telling his congregation about the story of Moses from the Bible:

Now ole Pher'oh, down in Egypt,

Was de wuss man evah bo'n,

An' he had de Hebrew chillun

Down dah wukin' in his co'n;

'Twell de Lawd got tiahed o' his foolin',

An' sez he: "I'll let him know--

Look hyeah, Moses, go tell Pher'oh

Fu' to let dem chillun go." (9-16)

In thick dialect, he tells his congregation the story, being sure to emphasize that he is not referring to their current situation, but only to the story of the Bible: “But fu' feah some one mistakes me,/I will pause right hyeah to say,/Dat I'm still a-preachin' ancient,/I ain't talkin' 'bout to-day” (39-42). However,

when speaking to his listeners, he refers to their situation of being in the wilderness (2), he speaks about how the goodness of the Lord is never changing and was not just meant for the children of Israel (45-48), how the Lord's intention was for every one of his children to be free (67-70), how Moses is coming (75-76), and he finally even refers to them as children (92), just as the Biblical story refers the people of Israel as "Hebrew chillun" (11). The preacher being sure to point out along the way, he is still talking about the scripture, "Dat I'm talkin' 'bout ouah freedom/ In a Bibleistic way" (73-74) creates a clear connection between the slave experience to a Biblical story, which says volumes about what it means to be slave and a slave owner. The preacher asks his people to read between the lines. Who exactly is a slave but none other than God's chosen people and places the slave owner on the side of Pharaoh, a people destined to be destroyed by God for not allowing freedom. So, although this is not in the voice of Dunbar, it is indeed a reflection of an idea, an idea that upsets the current view of our historical knowledge.

Who is to be held accountable for the actions of slaves when things occur out of necessity? This is a question that is raised by Dunbar's poem "Accountability" (1895). Using dialect and the voice of a slave, he starts the poem with his narrator addressing his audience. The narrator tells the reader, "Folks ain't got no right to censuah othah folks about dey habits" (1). In other words, no one has a right to judge anyone. Then, he speaks of God and what He has created from mountains to alleys to individual people with similarities and differences and good and bad actions, "We cain't he'p ouah likes an' islikes, ef we'se bad we ain't to blame./Ef we'se good, we need n't show off, case you bet it ain't ouah doin'/ We gits into su'ttain channels dat we jes' cain't he'p pu'suin'" (7-9). Because of the structure of things, the narrator (gender unknown) tells us, "Nothin's done er evah happens, 'dout hit's somefin' dat's intended" (15). Everything happens for an intended reason, and thus he sets the stage for why he has taken one of his master's chickens, "Viney, go put on de kittle, I got one o' mastah's chickens" (17). When it is put into this context, who is accountable? God, the slave owner or the slave? The question

also arises for what is this person held accountable for? For creating a variety of people and circumstances, for perpetuating suffering or for stealing? The depths of this poem reveal the futility of not taking any accountability for one's actions (Is it more wrong to steal or hold slaves?), and the levels of ingrained injustice that lead to a man feeling the need to explain his actions in a way that leaves no one to blame, neither the slave nor his master. This creates a stark difference of view from a society that feels every individual is accountable for his actions.

Perhaps instead, Dunbar wishes to evoke, by influencing perception, a feeling of sympathy for his people. He wrote two separate poems called "Sympathy," one in 1893 and one in 1899, both equally compelling, but the latter may be the better known one because contemporary writer Maya Angelou based her own poem and of autobiography of the same name, *I Know Why the Caged Bird Sings* , off of it (*allpoetry.com*). The 1899 publication of "Sympathy" tells the story of a narrator who is sympathetic with the plight of a "caged bird." He describes the making of spring with "sun" on "the upland slopes," "wind stir[ing] soft through the springing grass," and "the first bird sings and the first bud opens" (2-3; 5), and he contrasts that with the lone bird that "beats his wing/ Till its blood is red on the cruel bars" (8-9). How can one not be sympathetic to the plight of something or someone helpless and caged? A being who has been caged for so long that his scars are old, "And a pain still throbs in the old, old scars/ And they pulse again with a keener sting" (12-13). The narrator's grief and suffering is so great that his own lament shows he is empathetic to the pain and suffering of the bird, "I know why the caged bird sings, ah me" (15).

The caged bird is a metaphor for the mentally or physically enslaved, the slave and the supposed free one who faces other restrictions and oppressions. The voice who illustrates the image of the bird does so with so much emphatic emotion, one can practically envision the bird as he is flung "upward to Heaven" (20), upward to change, improvement and opportunities, a much better vision of life.

Dunbar was not just concerned with the depiction of the slave and the improvement of life for African American males, but he was just as enthralled in understanding the position of the woman of his race. According to the Berea College Magazine, Dr. Mary E. Britton, class of 1874, "fought—as a teacher, journalist, civil rights activist, and as the first female African American physician to practice in Lexington, Kentucky" for the equality of opportunity for African Americans. Dunbar was moved by her and constructed a poem around her called "To Miss Mary Britton."

He precedes his poem with a quick explanation of the situation that arouse and for which Miss Britton was present: the passage of a separate coach bill. He admitted that "her action was heroic/ though it proved to be without avail" (4-5). Then, he switches to the colorful language of black soul to capture the essence of her ideas and her prayer:

> God of the right, arise
> And let thy pow'r prevail;
> Too long thy children mourn
> In labor and travail.
> Oh, speed the happy day
> When waiting ones may see
> The glory-bringing birth
> Of our real liberty! (1-8)

The desire for liberty is a noble and common cause for any activist, and Dunbar portrayed it within the layout of these lines, even likening her ideas to his own: "Give us to lead our cause/More noble souls like hers" (16-17). He did not say "they," he said "our." He also uses words like "us" because her cause was his cause as well, and he felt to write about how more women like her were needed:

> The memory of whose deed
> Each feeling bosom stirs;
> Whose fearless voice and strong
> Rose to defend her race,

Roused Justice from her sleep,

Drove Prejudice from place. (18-23)

Dunbar's intention was to also drive "prejudice from place" by writing in such a way to depict the life, love and essence of those his oppressors failed to fully understand, the lives of the unnamed and the named such as Miss Britton. He did not limit his poetry to only people of color, but his propaganda/his slogan was all the same: justice for all.

So, to come across a poem for Harriet Beecher Stowe, a white woman, may at first come as a surprise, especially if one is claiming that Dunbar writes about the plight of blacks in order to improve the status or image of blacks. However, what is more important is that Stowe was a civil rights activist and author of *Uncle Tom's Cabin*, a novel that made an "emotional portrayal of the impact of slavery, particularly on families and children, [and that] captured the nation's attention" ("Harriet Beecher Stowe"). Stowe held similar beliefs to Dunbar's own beliefs and just as the call to right wrongs and create justice has no gender barrier neither does the color line. This woman, as Dunbar knew was an asset to the cause, "She told the story, and the whole world wept/At wrongs and cruelties it had not known/But for this fearless woman's voice alone./She spoke to consciences that long had slept" (1-4). He recognized her "Command and prophecy" (7) and how at "At one stroke she gave/A race to freedom and herself to fame" (13-14). One can argue whether freedom has been truly won, but to him, at that time, this was probably another momentous breakthrough in reaching true equality. So, to capture it with the stroke of hisown pen, gave it immortal meaning to be passed from hand to hand and heart to heart.

The African American was not just to be seen as someone to be sympathetic for, but as someone who fought hard for his freedom and his or her opportunity. So, the slave's free spirit survived the "haunted oak," made a way through his or her own Egypt, and adjusted to the chains and cages of oppression while yearning to be let free…and when it was time to fight, the soldiers showed up, "I would sing a song heroic/Of those noble sons of Ham,/Of the gallant colored soldiers/Who fought for Uncle Sam!" ("The Colored Soldiers" 5-8). Dunbar patriotically and proudly pronounced the influence and participation of the African American soldiers in the Civil War. He does not bite his tongue when declaring their valiant acts as they had to fight alongside those who "scorned them" (9):

And like hounds unleashed and eager

For the life blood of the prey,

Sprung they forth and bore them bravely

In the thickest of the fray.

And where'er the fight was hottest,--

Where the bullets fastest fell,

There they pressed unblanched and fearless

At the very mouth of hell (25-32)

These men having already faced terror at home faced the equally disturbing devastations of war with fearlessness and resolve, "They were foremost in the fight/Of the battles of the free" (39-40). Dunbar illustrated this ambition in such a way as to remind his white readers, who he addresses directly, what they both fought and died for, and how "their blood with yours commingling/Has made rich the Southern soil" (67-68). Even going so far as to allude to the colored soldiers being likened to the religious beliefs of Jesus dying for sinners sin, "For their blood has cleansed completely/Every blot of Slavery's shame" (75-76). They, blacks and whites, fought and they died for the cause.

Dunbar knew he had to write for many audiences, so his poetry spanned a wide board of topics. As Trudier Harris, author of "African American Protest Poetry" wrote, "he was keenly aware of the poverty of blacks after slavery; indeed, he started a night school to assist some in developing reading skills, " and his own life was filled with the knowledge of what his parents endured and what he also had to live during the time of Jim Crow laws. Dunbar said that "some people…think Negroes should be maids and bootblacks, but I am determined that they shall not make menials out of all of us" (qtd. in Harris). So, why would he not depict the ideas and images of the slave and their decedents? He, presumably, felt that knowledge of and sympathy towards the African American would be the leading force in "inspiring

readers into better treatment of blacks after slavery" (Harris), and other great African American writers would follow this ideology.

Dunbar's literature would be among the voices of discourse on inequality and justice, and with his voice, he has opened eyes and ears to the music of Black language, the humanity of the Black soul, and the cruelty of oppression. During the 1980s, a literary theory called New Historicism showcased the ideas of a man named Michel Foucault. Foucault believed that our knowledge of ourselves and others is created through the powerful social structures that are set into place by those with power. He believes that "truth, morality, and meaning are created through discourse" (qtd. in Comer). Dunbar wished to redefine the truths that powerful structures were continuing to put into place about the African American, and he used his poetry to do so. One can debate whether his mission was achieved or is a success in today's century, but that would take on a new challenge better left for another day. What is certain is that Paul L. Dunbar was an artist, a literary genius who used his pen, his head and his heart to make a giant leap into the world of change and possibility, and he left a mark that can never be erased and that will continue into generations to come.

Works Cited

Angelou, Maya. “I Know Why the Caged Bird Sings.” *All Poetry*. All Poetry, n.d. Web. 21 July 2013.

Applegate, Emily. “Features: The Noble Soul of Mary E. Britton.” *Berea College Magazine*. Berea College, 2014. Web. 21 July 2013.

Comer, Todd. “Discourse or Poer/Knowledge (a rough definition).” *Msu.edu*. Michigan State University, n.d. Web. 21 July 2013.

Dubois, W.E.B. “Criteria of Negro Art.” *Web Dubois.org*. Robert W. Williams, 2008. Web. 21 July 2013.

Dunbar, Paul L. “Accountability.” *Paul Laurence Dunbar: Poetry Index*. Wright State University Libraries, nd. Web. 21 July 2013.

---“Antebellum Sermon*.” Paul Laurence Dunbar: Poetry Index*. Wright State University Libraries, nd. Web. 21 July 2013.

---“Harriet Beecher Stowe.” *Paul Laurence Dunbar: Poetry Index*. Wright State University Libraries, nd. Web. 21 July 2013.

---“Haunted Oak.” *Paul Laurence Dunbar: Poetry Index.* Wright State University Libraries, nd. Web. 21 July 2013.

---“The Colored Soldier.” *Paul Laurence Dunbar: Poetry Index*. Wright State University Libraries, nd. Web. 21 July 2013.

---“The Miss Mary Britton.” *Paul Laurence Dunbar: Poetry Index*. Wright State University Libraries, nd. Web. 21 July 2013.

“Harriet Beecher Stowe: Biography.” *Bio True Story*. A & E Television Network, n.d. Web. 21 July 2013.

Harris, Trudier. “African American Protest Poetry.” *Teacher Serve*. National Humanities Center, n.d. Web. 21 July 2013.

Locke, Alain. “Art or Propaganda.” *National humanities center. Org*. National Humanities Center, n.d. Web. 21 July 2013.

"Paul Laurence Dunbar." *Poets. Org*. Academy of American Poets, n.d. Web. 20 Aug. 2013.

"Propaganda." *Merrium-Webster*. Encyclopedia Britannica Company, n.d. Web. 20 Aug. 2013.

Reflection (From Research to Practice):

Paul L. Dunbar lived in Dayton, Ohio for some time, so he is a local writer, which will give students something to identify with because he is from Ohio, the "hometown" of my current schools. He was influential during the Harlem Renaissance literary movement and used AAVE and Standard English. His works also represent American literature which makes study of them relevant for an American Literature course.

Lesson Plan:

Title: The Harlem Renaissance and Writing for a Purpose

Objectives:

- First year college students will examine the argument of art being used as propaganda as debated between W.E.B Dubois and Alain Locke during the Harlem Renaissance
- Students will have the opportunity to read two of Paul L. Dunbar poems related to inequality and justice.
- Students will examine Dunbar use of African American Vernacular English and Standard English and how it relates to rhetorical situation, specifically audience and purpose.
- Students will write their own poem regarding an issue of inequality or injustice.

Materials Needed:

- "Haunted Oak," "Accountability" and "Sympathy" by Langston Hughes
- Power Point demonstration for background information

Lesson:

Day One:

- Present a mini lecture on the Harlem Renaissance's main objectives, the definition of propaganda, and the main points from Alain Locke's essay "Art or Propaganda" and W.E.B Dubois essay, "Criteria of Art"
- Read each of the three poems by Langston Hughes and discuss his use of language and the effects it creates, discuss the perceived purpose of switching back and forth between AAVE and SE, discuss why using one over the other may be more or less effective, and discuss audience.
- Each student drafts their own poem related to a social/political issue related to inequality and injustice.

Day Two (half of class):

- Have a few students read poems and discuss effective strategies for meeting purpose and appealing to audience
- Collect and provide individual comments.

Assessment:

- Formative: discussion responses
- Post: poem on an issue of inequality or injustice

Source:
N/A

Abstract:

The final work “Write it Out” was written for a Graduate Seminar in American Literature and delves into the idea of writing as therapy. I talk about how writing can be used to help a person define or redefine “the self.” Using research from various sources, including James Pennebaker, who studies writing therapy, I explored how therapeutic writing exhibits itself in many different writers’ works, especially in African American words. Pennebaker’s ideas about writers integrating feelings into their writing and Louis DeSalvo’s ideas that one should not allow our voices to be silenced or allow others to speak for our experiences are a part of the foundation that make this type of therapy effective. I cover topics such as the propaganda versus art movement of the Harlem Renaissance, black feminist thought and how literature influences thought.

Write it Out

Water therapy, art therapy, physical therapy…We live in a world where healing and therapy is necessary. One type of therapy is sometimes underrepresented: writing therapy. Yet, one can argue that this type of therapy is conducted every day as millions of people write in their journals, publish books and write poetry. The reasons for writing are numerous, but one such reason is to help “redefine the self.” In America, there are many different cultures, including the African American culture, which uses writing to try to find themselves and their identity within their culture and the larger society; In the end, this can bring healing to not only the writer(s), but the readers.

The Research of Writing Therapy:

Bob Sadowski, Public Relations and Social Media Manager of ACCO Brands, says in his blog, ”Journaling: Therapy for the Cluttered Mind” that many famous people kept journals, like Ralph Waldo Emerson, Ronald Reagan, and Kurt Cobain. He highlights the benefits as the de-cluttering the brain and allowing it to focus on a singular topic; providing clarity to your daily and long term goals, so you can adjust or adapt; retaining your ideas on paper, so you organize and/or develop them later; recording your log of activities, so you can reference later; expressing yourself in a constructive manner and not keeping it “bottled up” inside; and relaxing your mind and body because “putting your thoughts and ideas down on paper and keeping them organized simply makes you feel better and in return reduces stress levels.

Another proponent for this type of therapy, Mark Sisson, wrote a blog called, “What is Writing Therapy,” and defines it as ”expressive writing and its value in processing life experience, particularly trauma and transition…Writing therapy is used both in the clinical setting by trained professionals and in more personal forums. Participants are encouraged to write about their ‘deepest thoughts and feelings’ regarding a particular subject (e.g. their illness, recent loss, life transition).” He states, “Research results are nothing but impressive.”

Unlike Sadowski, Sisson delves into explaining more of the physical, not just practical, benefits of Writing Therapy. He lists that it has been shown to increase both the working memory connect, which is how we hold and connect information in our minds, and academic performance of college students ; has allowed for better lung function and diminished "disease activity" in asthma and rheumatoid arthritis patients; has shown lower cortisol levels and improved mood in individuals diagnosed with Post Traumatic Stress Disorder; has shown a decrease in symptom severity and enhanced sense of control over their condition in patients with IBS (irritable bowel syndrome) ; and has shown benefits for cancer patients in areas such as fewer physical symptoms, fewer medical visits and improved quality of life. He credits these benefits to "having given language to traumatic experiences, [which]… in a sense contained their potency. The chronic stress they've induced--and the corresponding physiological impact like weakened immune function, systemic inflammation, hormonal imbalance, and impaired cardiovascular function—diminishes."

Although his claims may seem farfetched to some, there is a Professor of Psychology at the University of Texas, who is well-known for his current research, James Pennebaker. He has authored and coauthored five books "and more than 100 articles focusing on the mind-body connection, including the long and short term effects of trauma on physical and mental health" (King and Holden). He receives an ongoing from the ongoing grant he receives from the National Institutes of Health and the National Science Foundation, which he used to "research the effect that expressing (and not expressing) one's reaction to trauma has on one's health subsequent to the trauma" (King and Holden). In an interview with Pennebaker, Dennis King and Janice Holden spoke with him about his research on writing therapy.

The interview was titled, "Disclosure of Trauma and Psychosomatic Health: an Interview with James W. Pennebaker," and King and Holden inquired about the conclusions he made after an initial experiment. Pennebaker found that participants in the experimental group "had a significant decrease in their visits to their physicians." Later, when he tried the same technique with college students, he

found that “simply writing about current emotionally charged topics of personal relevance had much the same effect. For example, when students were asked to write about getting adjusted to college, not only did their health improve, their grade point averages also improved in the following semester” (King and Holden). So, the influence of this type of therapy is far-reaching and well-documented.

Pennebaker also found that in order for the writing to be effective, one needed to “integrate their feelings,” into the experience. He recommended that “people write when they need to, and not necessarily every day.” He said, “When my life falls apart, which happens two or three times a year, then I write. I might write for one night, or for two or three nights in a row” (King and Holden). This is something that can be easily employed into someone’s schedule, especially for the person’s greater health.

Pennebaker shared with the interviewers how this created a specific interest in him as far as discovering why “writing and language” make a difference. He said that, “we have compared people who wrote about traumatic experiences with those who expressed their reactions through dance and found that language apparently plays a critical role in processing the trauma” (King and Holden). He speculates that, “One of the critical aspects may be that somehow in the process of writing down their deepest thoughts and feelings about the experience, people get to organize the experience in a very emotional way.” So, the intricate connection between language and physical and mental health has been created, a connection that cannot so easily be denied. King, also a counselor, had to agree with Pennebaker, saying that he found that “Some clients are good at expressing emotions, and then they integrate the experience in a cognitive way and move on toward resolution of the problem and progress toward a solution.” The latter of his comments are perhaps the most relevant and important. The writing in and of itself is helpful, but it is nothing without a progression towards action. Pennebaker reminds us that “writing may bring an individual personal insight and improved health, but it is not a

substitute for action…People should not use writing as a substitute for a change in their environment" (King and Holden).

Testimonies about Writing Therapy:

"Writing has helped me heal. Writing has changed my life. Writing has saved my life" (3) is how Louise DeSalvo, Ph.d. phrased using writing therapy on a more personal, less clinical level, in her book, *Writing as a Way of Healing*. She reflects on how often she has "stumbled upon an admission that, for this author, without writing, life just wouldn't be worth living, that writing has given purpose and meaning to life?" (4). She confesses that the "times [were] too numerous to remember.":

> while I've been reading the words of Alice Walker, James Baldwin, Virginia Woolf, Elizabeth Bishop, Anais Nin, Alice James, Charlotte Perkins Gilman, Henry Miller, D.H. Lawrence, Djuna Barnes, Toni Morrison, Isabel Allende, Alice James, Dorothy Allison, Kenzaburo $\overline{O}$ e , countless contemporary memoirists—the list goes on. These writers describe how they have consciously used the writing of their artistic works to help them heal from the thorny experiences of their lives, especially from dislocation, violence, racism, homophobia, anti-Semitism, rape, political persecution, incest, loss, illnesss." (4)

Her discovery led her to the exploration of the themes that she reiterates within her book, and she uses the voices of many authors, including the ones listed above, to show the importance of writing and the therapeutic benefits of it.

Henry Miller, an author, once admitted in a published letter in the *Art and Outrage* that, "The more I wrote. The more I became a human being" (qtd. in DeSalvo 4). Jamaica Kincaid in *My Brother* stated, "I became a writer out of desperation…When I was young, younger than I am now, I started to write about my own life and I came to see that this act saved my life" (qtd. in DeSalvo 17). Both authors found some sort of refuge and self-discovery in writing. After DeSalvo shares Kenzaburo Oe's experiences during the writing of his memoir, *A Healing Family*, in which he talks about his mentally ill

son Hikari, she concludes that through writing, one develops an “ethical stance that acceptance is the most critical and crucial value in life” (65), and that “It is necessary for us to ‘trust and acknowledge and coexist with other people despite difficult circumstances.’ For we can accept ourselves only if we have learned to accept others, we can empathize with others and treat them well only if we confront our anguish” (65). She says, “This, then, is the foundation of living an ethical life” (DeSalvo 65). So, the process of writing has yet another effect. It also provides the writer with the ability to build empathy and trust.

Susan Gordon Lydon, author of *The Knitting Sutra* adds this to the discussion, “We write, not to create works of art, but to build character, develop integrity, discipline, judgment, balance, order, restraint, and other valued inner attributes. Through writing, we develop self-mastery, which contributes to our emotional and spiritual growth. Writing,” she says, “then, becomes the teacher “(DeSalvo 72) . From practical, to physical, to ethical, to emotional and to spiritual, writing therapy provides the writer with an added benefit. He/she is able to redefine themselves and build character and good health, but how are they able to define themselves in the eyes of others who read their works? How does this type of “writing therapy” literature influence the reader?

Literatures Influence on the Reader:

Henry Miller in his essay, “They were Alive and They Spoke to Me” speaks about his own love of reading. He says, “Reading...connects us to others; we learn we’re not alone in our experiences or suffering. And because we tell others about our reading, we forge links with other people. ‘A book is not only a friend,’” he says, “‘it makes friends for you.’” Reading, according to Miller, “offers us opportunities to connect to others, to engage in deeply meaningful conversations. This breaks down our sense of isolation; it gives us meaning and purpose” (qtd. in DeSalvo 120). Just as the writing of a piece is therapeutic for the writer, it imparts something to the reader as well. DeSalvo adds, “We [the reader] can experience appreciation, humility, gratitude, and a sense of community…. We learn that we are not

alone" (120, 125). A book, a favorite poem, a memoir of someone else's experiences can become our companion and be the best friend we cuddle up next to at our loneliest moments; the friend who reminds us that as difficult as life may be, we are never alone in our struggle.

In turn, this can encourage the reader to write his own stories. By finding other writers who can become one's mentors or models for writing, Alice Walker, an African American author, states, one is provided with certain unmistakable benefits:

> Finding mentors and models…provides a 'historical underpinning' for our experience. By finding them, we ensure our connection with the past, we provide ourselves with self-chosen forebears, and we see our lives as a continuation of their experience. If we ourselves feel unparented, if we feel we are outsiders or adrift in the world, if we are experiencing special challenges in our life, finding appropriate mentors and models can be a comforting emotional experience. As Walker remarks, it can enable us to save our lives" (qtd. in DeSalvo 124-125).

These are profound and well-known experiences for some. Many writers can point to some person, author or book that initiated their love for writing. They can attest to finding comfort in their writing and some level of necessity in getting their ink and heartfelt expression on the page.

Mark Sisson in his blog, also talks about this added value to writing that can come through reading. He says, "Just as we learn through the lens of others' tales, we gain insight by composing our own," and that "In the course of a lifetime, however, telling our stories can help us discover our passion, navigate complicated patches and ultimately define our legacy" (Sisson). The words, "we define our legacy" are important here because this is a part of the writer's identity. This is how the writer will be remembered and how the writer will be known to all. But first, the writer must read and learn from others to determine his position within the whole schematic and build his legacy.

"Writing testimony, to be sure, means that we tell our stories," says Louise DeSalvo," But it also means that we no longer allow ourselves to be silenced or allow others to speak for our experience. Writing to heal, then, and making that writing public, as I see it, is the most important emotional, psychological, artistic, and political project of our time" (216). A political project? Yes, this is not so unbelievable. Literature changes outlook and builds a forum for discussion and understanding. The political realm would indeed be influenced by the majority views of humanity.

In an interview by Melissa Hart called, "Entering the dream of a Memoir: Iconic Writer-Teacher Natalie Goldberg Finds Value in Fascinating Writing about Ordinary Lives", Goldberg refers to how literature is political. She says, "I think everything is political. Writing moves people; it influences them. When two people get together, it's about power. Writing is sometimes about playing against people. What I mean is that you write something, people read it, they're impacted by it. So right there, we have politics." She adds, "We suffer because of our politics, and it's important for writers to be aware of it" (qtd. in Hart). There was once a movement to ban books and even today, we can see that censorship is a big deal in many political arenas. To control the flow of information, to control the influences of literature is not a new idea. So, of course, when the channels are flooded with different voices, the more information will flow between people and the more ideas will be "played against" the reader. And with knowledge, can come political and social change.

Reading a writer's story is not always a pleasant experience. Pennebaker talks about the initial "burden" effect (my phrasing, not his) that traumatic writing has on the listener, in his observations, the counselor. He said that when one learns to deal with what they are hearing, they can move past it, "my experience is that coping with upsetting experiences is a learned art. When I first began to read the essays in our study groups, I was shocked and got miserably depressed. Now, after thousands of those essays, I feel empathetic about them, but I do not think about them after reading them" (King and Holden). He explains that in his mind, he has "seen them before" and "developed certain kinds of

structures to deal with them and have thought about them and talked and written about them" (King and Holden). The key to what he is saying is the latter. The experiences he hears become a part of his knowledge base, he is empathetic and he can talk and write about them without feeling depressed. Relating this to the whole of society, we can conclude that after the initial shock, discussion and communication can follow. In the future, the experiences of those who wrote about them will be remembered for its horror and can be avoided, so that "history does not repeat himself."

Pennebaker would probably agree because he remarks in the interview that "we all need to understand our world. It is the thing that underlies reality more than anything else. It is not really confession we are dealing with; it is our need to understand and to be a coherent person" (King and Holden). Pennebaker's further elaborates on his definition of being coherent:

> By coherent, I mean that you act, think, and feel in a coherent manner. Stress results from thinking one way and acting another. In humans, there seems to be a need for a unified self. I believe that this need for coherence or cohesiveness touches more than clinical or counseling situations; it involves psychology, the immune system, brain wave activity, brain structure and cognitive dynamics. It is related to social dynamics, social psychology, developmental psychology and personality. You could almost view it as a field. Language plays an important role in building coherence. (King and Holen)

The situations that he mentions such as social dynamics and personality are key to producing change. Once this "building" of coherence and sharing of language occurs, then there can be healing for conflicted race relations and other social issues.

"Importance of Literature" is an article by Manali Oak, and he quotes C.S. Lewis, a British scholar and novelist as saying, "Literature adds to reality, it does not simply describe it. It enriches the necessary competencies that daily life requires and provides; and in this respect, it irrigates the deserts that our lives have already become." Oak expands on this, "Yes, literature is not merely a depiction of reality; it is

rather a value-addition. Literary works are portrayals of the thinking patterns and social norms prevalent in society. They are a depiction of the different facets of common man's life." Again, we are reminded of the significance of literature and the value it adds to life. We can also see how literature both shows the "thinking patterns and social norms" of the time period and how through each individual's depiction of what "common" life is to him/her, we can influence those same norms.

Manali Oak suggests that "through reading such great literary and poetic works, that one understands life. They help a person take a closer look at the different facets of life. In many ways, it can change one's perspective towards life," and that the "lives of brilliant achievers and individuals, who have made a valuable contribution to society, are sketched in their biographies. These works give the readers an insight into the lives of these eminent people, while also serving as a bible of ideals." These books, poems, and memoirs become the guidepost to and "mentors and models" for our lives. They become the windows to our understanding. He puts it perfectly when he says, "Literature, is definitely, much more than its literary meaning, which defines it as 'an acquaintance to letters'. It, in fact, lays the foundation of an enriched life; it adds 'life' to 'living.'"

African American Writing-- The Harlem Renaissance (Propaganda versus Art):

During the Harlem Renaissance of the 1920s, many began to contribute to the debate of whether African American literature should focus on political propaganda -- "information, ideas, or rumors deliberately spread widely to help or harm a person, group, movement, institution, nation, etc.," as defined by the online resource, *dictionary.com*.--or should focus on just being another form of art. Three major scholars have contributed to this debate, Richard Wright, Alain Locke and W.E.B. Dubois. In the essay, "Blueprint for Negro Literature" by Richard Wright, he states that "Negro writing on the whole has been the voice of the educated Negro pleading with white America," and that "Rarely has the best of this writing been addressed to the Negro himself, his needs, his sufferings, and aspirations" (Wright). He says that "through misdirection Negro writers have been far better to others that [*sic*] they

have been to themselves" (Wright). This encouraged him to call on writers during the Harlem Renaissance period to pursue a different goal, a proposed agenda that mirrors the argument for propaganda over art:

> One of the great tasks of Negro writers of the future will be to show the Negro to himself…Every short story, novel, poem and play should carry within its lines, implied or explicit, a sense of the oppression of the Negro people, the danger of war, of fascism, of the threatened destruction of culture and civilization; and, too, the faith and necessity to build a new world….they are being called upon to do no less than create values by which their race is to struggle, live and dive. They are being called upon to furnish moral sanctions for action, to give a meaning to blighted lives, and to supply motives for mass movements of millions of people." (Wright)

He argues for the deliberate spreading of values and morals. He calls for a search to identity and healing for the African American.

Wright believes that if writers mix their feelings and their experiences in their prose, elements of writing therapy, they can ignite meaningful change for the life of the African American. Wright says, "It means that in the lives of Negro writers must be found those materials and experiences which will create in them a meaningful and significant picture of the world today." He advises us that the "theme for Negro writers will emerge when they have begun to feel the meaning of the history of their race as though they in one lifetime had lived it themselves throughout all the long centuries" (Wright). He proposes that African American writing explore the African American experience and problems, so that a plan of action can be determined from the criticism.

However, he says, the "Negro writers should never feel that their goal has been reached; always ahead should be the sense of areas of experience to be conquered; problems to be framed, pondered and solved; always in them should reside the sense of becoming. And out of this sense will, should, grow the

need for criticism" (Wright). He, like most readers and writers, understood the effects of literature and proposed it be used for the promotion of black identity.

Alain Locke, author of "Art or Propaganda" does not agree with the idea of using literature as art, but his opinions are just as noteworthy:

> Apart from [propaganda's] besetting sin of monotony and disproportion, is that it perpetuates the position of group inferiority even in crying out against it. For it leaves and speaks under the shadow of a dominant majority whom it harangues, cajoles, threatens or supplicates. It is too extroverted for balance or poise or inner dignity and self-respect. Art in the best sense is rooted in self-expression and whether naïve or sophisticated is self-contained. In our spiritual growth genius and talent must more and more choose the role of group expression, or even at times the role of free individualistic expression, --in a word must choose art and put aside propaganda" (1).

It is true that to some degree taking on a stance against something acknowledges the existence of the other. For instance, to be an atheist, does it not assume that there is indeed a God or something to which the person would not believe in? So here, he seems to propose that by using literature as propaganda, one is still setting up a dichotomy between the superior and the inferior, which takes away from true expression and limits "dignity and self-respect."

Instead Locke says, "The sense of inferiority must be innerly compensated, self-conviction must supplant self-justification and in the dignity of this attitude a convinced minority must confront a condescending majority. Art cannot completely accomplish this, but I believe it can lead the way" (1). So, he shifts the focus from the focus of propaganda to the focus of crafting one's art or self-expression. What the author chooses to "express" can then be used to challenge the majority's attitudes and beliefs. Either way, the use of writing is still for organizing thought, for infusing emotions into the life story and for presenting it to the broader audience.

In the essay, “Criteria of Negro Art” by W.E.B. Du Bois, he seems to want to roll art and propaganda together in order to show the way the two agendas work with each other. Locke says, “I am one who tells the truth and exposes evil and seeks with Beauty and for Beauty to set the world right. That somehow, somewhere eternal and perfect Beauty sits above Truth and Right I can conceive, but here and now and the world in which I work they are for me unseparated and inseparable” (par.11). Instead of arguing for one purpose over another, he argues that they are intricately attached. The beauty of art for art’s sake balances perfectly with truth and value.

DuBois also speaks of the experiences that surround the African American individual and how this shame turned to pride can be integrated into stories. He says, “There has come to us …a realization of that past, of which for long years we have been ashamed, for which we have apologized. We thought nothing could come out of that past which we wanted to remember; which we wanted to hand down to our children” (par. 12). Then, “Suddenly, this same past is taking on form, color, and reality, and in a half shamefaced way we are beginning to be proud of it. We are remembering that the romance of the world did not die and lie forgotten in the Middle Age [*sic*]; that is you want romance to deal with you must have it here and now and in your own hands” (par. 12). He pronounces that, “today there is coming to both the realization that the work of the black man is not always inferior. Interesting stories come to us” (par. 17). These stories of an ancient past are not forgotten, but become literature or works of art that in turn become beacons of hope, understanding and identity for the writer and readers. They become the African American’s story.

DuBois tells us that the “bouden duty of black America to begin this great work of the creation of Beauty, of the preservation of Beauty, of the realization of Beauty,” and one must use the tools of artists before him such as truth, goodness, right and justice (par. 27-28). He advises us that the writer is free, “but his freedom is ever bounded by Truth and Justice; and slavery only dogs him when he is denied the right to tell the Truth or recognize an ideal of Justice” (par 28). There is always the human

need to seek justice and when one is not allowed to speak that truth, then there is not and cannot be freedom. His final conclusion is that “Art is propaganda and ever must be, despite the wailing of the purists” (par. 28).

Whatever the agenda, whether propaganda or art, Richard Wright, Alain Locke and W.E.B. Dubois would all agree with the basis of writing and how some form of writing redefines the identities of African Americans in both the eyes of the oppressive majority and the eyes of others within the minority culture.

Black Feminist Thought

African American women, although of the same race, have their own experiences, which are only known through the eyes of a minority woman. In the essay, “Defining Black Feminist Thought” by Patricia Hill Collins, she proposes that “The legacy of struggle constitutes one of several core themes of a Black women’s standpoint.” She speaks of women like Maria W. Stewart, who wish to replace “denigrated images of Black womanhood with self-defined images” (Collins). The motivation behind this movement being an obvious one:

> Many African American women have grasped this connection between what one does and how one thinks….Ruth Shays, a Black inner-city resident, points out how variations in men’s and women’s experiences lead to differences in perspective, “the mind of the man and the mind of the woman is the same” she notes, “but this business of living makes women use their minds in ways that men don’ even have to think about.” (qtd. in Collins)

Who can speak for women, but women? No one group, race, gender or individual is called to speak for everyone, but it is important for all the voices of the world be heard. In order to influence the thoughts and actions of others, women’s ideas need to be represented and understood. Perhaps this is why the “connection between experience and consciousness that shapes the everyday lives of all African

American women pervades the works of Black women activists and scholars" (Collins). As every man and woman have a need carve their identity out of the landscape of competing cultures.

Hannah Nelson notes, "I have grown to womanhood in a world where the saner you are, the madder you are made to appear" (qtd. in Collins). Nelson "realizes that those who control the schools, media, and other cultural institutions of society prevail in establishing their viewpoint as superior to others" (Collins). To counter this view, black women wish to redefine themselves in the minds of others and create a more unified vision, "Taken together, the ideas of Anna Julia Cooper, Pauli Murray, Bell Hooks, Alice Walker, Fannie Lou Hamer, and other Black women intellectuals" in order to answer the question "What is Black feminism?," and when their works are read, the reader finds "inherent in their words and deeds is a definition of Black feminism as a process of self-conscious struggle that empowers women and men to actualize a humanist vision of community" (Collins).

In "The Mark of Zora: Reading Between the Lines of Legend and Legacy" by Ann duCille, the author reexamines the phenomenon called "Hurstonism" or the belief that Zora Neale Hurston initiated the African American women's literary tradition. She informs us that "Decades before Oprah's Book club, black women were not only reading, they were reading each other" (duCille). The poet and novelist Sherley Anne Williams speaks of her first encounter with Hurston's work, especially when she read *Their Eyes Were Watching God*. She says, she "became Zora Neale's for life'; for, 'in the speech of her characters,' she writes, 'I heard my own country voice and saw in the heroine something of my own country self.'" (qtd. in duCille). The ultimate goal of literature: to connect with the reader and establish a sense of ethos between the two. The effects of literature continues to reverberate among us.

African Americans Writers (Alice Walker, James Baldwin, Toni Morrison, and Ralph Ellison):

Writing therapy is silently prominent in the works of writers, whether they write for the purpose of propaganda, art, or to display women's experiences. Literature influences thought and how one is viewed in the world. Writers such as Alice Walker, James Baldwin, Toni Morrison, and Ralph Ellison have

been writing for years with these thoughts in their subconscious. In the "Biography of Alice Walker (1944-), the unknown author enlightens us with how Walker used writing as therapy, "By her senior year, Walker was suffering from extreme depression, most likely related to her having become pregnant. She considered committing suicide and at times kept a razor blade under her pillow." It continues saying, "she also wrote several volumes of poetry in efforts to explain her feelings. With a friend's help, she procured a safe abortion. While recovering, Walker wrote a short story aptly title "To Hell with Dying." A direct link is made here.

Later, according to the biography, Walker "became more politically active in her writings. Her nonfiction book *Anything We Love Can Be Saved: A Writer's Activism* (1997) contains many essays inspired by her political activism," which included "activities in the civil rights movement, the anti-nuclear movement, the environment movement, the women's movement, and the movement to protect indigenous peoples." These elements characteristic of the themes within this essay: for instance, the African American pervasive agenda of art as propaganda. Her writing eloquently houses her ideas that call out for change and action. The biography says, "Her work still powerfully articulates many contemporary issues involving gender and race relations in the United States." Then, there is the theme of writing therapy. "A significant feature of Alice Walker's writing is her openness to exposing personal experiences," claims the biography, and "many connections can be made between Walker's own life and her characters, and her emotional intimacy with her creations breathes life into her work for each new reader." This is a benefit to the reader, but at the time of her stitching the pieces together, a benefit to herself and her sanity.

Of course, as mentioned above, there is the theme of the women's movement that Alice Walker also fits into nicely. In her essay, "In Search of Our Mother's Gardens: The Creativity of Black Women in the South (1974)" she agonizes over the lost talent and freedom of expression of the women that came before her, our mothers and grandmothers, but she calls the woman writer to action saying, "But this is

not the end of the story, for all the young women-our mothers and grandmothers, ourselves-have not perished in the wilderness," she says, "And if we ask ourselves why, and search for and find the answer, we will know beyond all efforts to erase it from our minds, just exactly who, and of what, we Black American women are" (Walker). She reminds her readers that "our mothers and grandmothers have, more often than not anonymously, handed on the creative spark, the seed of the flower they themselves never hoped to see: or like a sealed letter they could not plainly read" and she feels, "Guided by my heritage of a love of beauty and a respect for strength-in search of my mother's garden, I found my own" (Walker). Again, as if by design, she pays tribute to the benefits of creativity and finding one's identity.

"James Baldwin Wrote about Race and Identity in America" is an informative article by Shirley Griffith and Steve Ember. The writers give us insight into his work by explaining that he too wrote about his experiences in his collections. For instance, the difficulty he had with his own step-father shows up in his book, *Go tell it on the Mountain*. There was also the theme of Christianity and the church which was familiar to him. *Giovanni's Room* was published in 1956 about a white man in Parish who loved an Italian man and an American woman. Baldwin was a homosexual and his former religion and society did not accept this. It was difficult for him to accept himself and he wrote about it through is fictional storytelling. Griffith and Ember say, "His expert storytelling brings history to life." His expert storytelling also brings realism, empathy, understanding and healing.

In 1955, Baldwin's essays and commentary were published in the book *Notes of a Native Son*. The commentators say, "He wrote about social, political and cultural issues facing black people in America. He also told of his experience as a black man in Europe. Critics praised the book for clearly dealing with one of the most troubling issues of that time: racism" (Griffith and Ember). Baldwin said his agenda was to show that "love is the only way for America not to destroy itself" (Griffith and Ember), and "Critics say his urgent warning that we must learn to accept one another's differences is still

important today." They "praised him for honestly and bravely examining race relations and identity in the United States" (Griffith and Ember). Through art, he sought political and social change.

The evidence of this theory are presented in multiple places by multiple writers. Cecil Brown in his,"Interview with Toni Morrison," quotes Morrison as saying, "Black writing has to carry that burden of other people's desires, not artistic desires but social desires; it's always perceived as working out somebody's else's agenda. No other literature has that weight." In addition, she adds her own views on writing by saying, "There are several ways to write. There're lots of ways to write. There's sabotage, agent-provocateur. There are lots of ways to destabilize racism, and protest novels are only one way. Maybe they're the best way, and maybe they aren't. I'm not interested in that" (qtd. in Brown). She instead says she is interested in "black readers and me." Adding that, she thinks that "when you constantly focus on the Nazi, you give him more power than he should have. That's what confrontation in art sometimes does. It's like asking a jazz musician to play his music so white people will like it." (qtd. in Brown). Her words sounding strikingly similar to that of Alain Locke's, recognizing that too much focus on propaganda skews the boundaries of power and inferiority.

Ralph Ellison's Biography highlights his most well-known work the "*Invisible Man* [which] surfaced as a piece of art that cut across racial boundaries to speak to a truth deeper than skin color." His desire to not be "known as a black writer, but simply as a great writer," also sounded a lot like the stance of Alain Locke's art over propaganda piece. However, this would be a stance that would alienate "many black Americans, who had hoped that Ellison would use his status to further the cause of civil rights." The biography expresses that "Other critics believe that his position was a correct one—that *Invisible Man* is a great work precisely because it reaches beyond the parameters of ideology to grasp at universal truths." Ellison is quoted as saying "Too much has been written about racial identity instead of what kind of literature is produced. Literature is colorblind, and it should be read and judged in a larger framework." However it is read, the main element of finding identity, purpose and truth still plagues the

writing of his works and others. Ellison even said it was “not an autobiographical novel; it was a novel about the search for identity. He was also clear that it was not a so-called “black” novel (or Negro, the term he preferred); it was a novel about humanity.” Time magazine wrote after his death in 1994, that this novel “sought to break past the racial boundaries that Americans were so obsessed with, to speak to universal truths instead. ‘This is not a self-help or self-hate book; it is a plea for common survival” (“Ralph Ellison”).

His biography reports that “Critics praised the narrative voice, which broke away from the drumbeat of racial politics and ideology that many expected from minority writers.” Then, the biography points to this man’s comments: “I was keenly aware, as I read this book, of a significant kind of independence in the writing,” wrote Saul Bellow, the Jewish writer who also wrestled with questions of racial identity in his work. “For there is a way for Negro novelists to go at their problems, just as there are Jewish or Italian ways. Mr. Ellison has not adopted a minority tone. If he had done so, he would have failed to establish a true-middle of consciousness for everyone.” Ellison’s work, like many other writers, extends past the racial lines and connects to people of all backgrounds and experiences. Ultimately, writing therapy is not for one, but for all.

Perhaps Bellow’s words are the thought that one should end this paper on. For although the writings of African Americans have been therapeutic and purpose driven in exploring identity through art and propaganda, the interpretation of this literature is for everyone. For everyone to understand, empathize and connect with, so that each individual can write out a small place for oneself within the American world of literature and art.

Works Cited

"Biography of Alice Walker (1944-)." *Gradesaver.com*. Grade Saver, n.d. Web. 21 Feb. 2013.

Brown, Cecil. "Interview with Toni Morrison." Massachusetts Review 36.3 (1995): 455. *Academic Search Complete.* Web. 7 Feb. 2013.

Collins, Patricia Hill. "Defining Black Feminist Thought." *Feministezine.com*. The Feminist eZine, n.d.Web. 7 Feb 2013.

DeSalvo, Louse. *Writing as a Way of Healing: How Telling Our Stories Transforms Our Lives.* San Francisco: Harper San Francisco, 1999. Print.

Du Bois, W.E.B. "Criteria of Negro Art." *Webdubois.org.* Robert W. Williams, n.d. Web. 29 Jan. 2013.

DuCille, Ann. "The Mark of Zora: Reading between the lines of Legend and Legacy." *Sfonline.barnard.edu.* The Barnard Center for Research on Women, n.d. Web. 8 Feb. 2013.

Ember, Steve and Shirley Griffith. "James Baldwin Wrote about Race and Identity in America." *Learningenglish.voanews.com*. Voice of America, 30 Sept. 2006. Web. 21 Feb. 2013.

Hart, Melissa. "Entering the Dream of a Memoir: Iconic Writer-Teacher Natalie Goldberg Finds Value In Fascinating Writing about Ordinary Lives." *Writer* 121.8 (2008): 26-28. *Academic Search Complete.* Web. 7 Feb. 2013.

King, Dennis J., and Janice Miner Holden. "Disclosure of Trauma and Psychosomatic Health: An interview with James W. Pennebaker." *Journal of Counseling and Development* 76.3 (1998): 358-363. *Biography Reference Bank (H.W. Wilson).* Web. 19 March 2013.

Locke, Alain. "Art or Propaganda?" *National Humanitites Center Resource Toolbox: The Making of African American Identity* 3 (2007): 1-2. Web. 8 Feb. 2013.

Oak, Manali. "Importance of Literature." *Buzzle.com.*Buzzle, n.d. Web. 7 Feb. 2013.

Sadowski, Bob. "Journaling: Therapy for the Cluttered Mind." *Ataglanceblog.wordpress.com*. At-A-Glance Blog, 21 Feb. 2013. Web. 26 Feb. 2013.

"Ralph Ellison Biography." Eds. Shmoop Editorial Team. *Shmoop.com.* Shmoop University, Inc., 11 Nov. 2008. Web. 21 Feb. 2013.

Sisson, Mark. "What is Writing Therapy." *Marksdailyapple.com.* Mark's Daily Apple, 2011. Web. 21 Feb. 2013.

Walker, Alice. "In Search of Our Mother's Gardens: The Creativity of Black Women in the South (1974)." *Msmagazine.com.* Ms. Magazine, 2002. Web. 7 Feb. 2013.

Wright, Richard. "ChickenBones: A Journal: for Literary & Artistic African American Themes: Blueprint for Negro Literature." *Nathanielturner.com.* ChickenBones, 24 Feb. 2006. Web. 8 Feb. 2013.

Reflection (From Research to Practice):

Writing as therapy is a newly emerging, yet compelling idea. It recognizes a connection between language/writing and health. Many ideas presented within this paper led me to understand how mini writing assignments or how topics created for larger writing projects within a course, whether it be a General Education or American Literature course, could be beneficial to student's health and provide opportunities for problem solving. Addressing these types of real world issues for a student, may even lead to better student retention.

Lesson Plan:

Title: Writing to Problem Solve Real Situations

Objectives:

- First year college students will keep journals in order to understand the connection between writing, thinking and healing.
- Students will hear various excerpts of texts where authors of various backgrounds write about their feelings and issues.
- Students will think critically about ways to solve problems and write out solutions.

Materials Needed:

- Preselected excerpts such as *A Healing Family* by Kenzaburo Oe, *Go Tell it on the Mountain* and *Giovanni's Room* by James Baldwin, or *Invisible Man* by Ralph Ellison.
- Computer lab with Word

Lesson:

Day One (near the beginning of the semester):

- Have students write for 15 minutes about an issue that is going on in their personal lives. Ensure them this will not be collected, but students should date it and keep it in a folder or notebook.
- Read two or three excerpts from various texts. Discuss what feelings the authors' wrote about and what feelings were stirred up in his/her listeners.
- Verbally present information about the power and influence of language, including its healing qualities; the importance of reading how others deal with personal issues; the importance of engaging in meaningful discussion with someone we can trust and who can remain somewhat nonbiased like a close friend, family member or counselor; and the "burden effect" as outlined by James Pennebaker.

- Advise students they are to write 4 additional journal entries between now and mid-semester. They should write out about the problem(s) they are having and write out possible solutions.
- Advise students they will type up one of the entries. The submission will not include a heading/name, will not include possible solutions, and must be typed on a half sheet of paper single spaced.

Day Two (mid-semester):

- Prior to this class, remind students to type up entry. Students will fold and place entries into a box. Credit will be given to each student who is seen placing their entry into the box.
- Arrange class chairs into a circle and pull out one entry at a time. As a class, discuss possible solutions to each.
- When finished, have students write a one-two page reflection on the entire process, either within or outside of class.

Assessment:

- Formative: discussion responses
- Post: one-two page reflection

Source:

N/A

Final Statement:

The understanding of Ebonics by the classroom teacher, the integration of African American texts in a meaningful way, and the recognition that writing is also therapeutic has its place within the composition classroom. This type of progressive, yet much needed way of thinking, allows students, particularly African American students who are leading in school dropout rates to see their experiences in academic writing and see positive representation of their culture through the writings of others. Although there is much research to help support this point, I will point to one article by Vanessa Hunn, "African American Student Retention, and Team Based Learning: A Review of the Literature and Recommendation for Retention at Predominately White Institutions," which she published in the *Journal of Black Studies*. She explains that at certain Kentucky schools, African Americans comprised of approximately 12% of the school population, but only 6% of the students received bachelors and masters/specialist degrees and 8% of doctoral degrees conferred by Kentucky Universities (Hunn 302). She goes on to review the data associated with this retention statistic. She found that many students did not feel like they belonged. Her research is compelling, but the main point here is to show that there is a direct correlation between feelings of belonging and retention. Students will become more engaged if there is a feeling of acceptance and community within their classrooms, even on a college campus. The students need for these feelings is not diminished because they are adults. They will be encouraged to think about their own identity because of the reinforcement from their education.

Using the plethora of research that was conducted over the course of my study, new ideas about lesson planning have come to fruition and in time, the hope is that more of the same will subconsciously and consciously fuse itself within my own teaching.

Sources:

Hunn, Vanessa. "African American Students, Retention, and Team Based Learning: A Review of the Literature and Recommendations for Retention at Predominately White Institutions." *Journal of Black Studies*. 45.4 (2014): 301-314. *ProQuest Education Journals*. Web. 7 June 2014. Doi 10.1177/0021934714529594