Your Average Nigga

"Your Average Nigga" contends that just as exaggerating the differences between black and white language leaves some black speakers, especially those from the ghetto, at an impasse, so exaggerating and reifying the differences between the races leaves blacks in the impossible position of either having to try to be white or forever struggling to prove they're black enough. In this essay I recount how I negotiated my own black ghetto-to-middle class identity conflict as I facilitated classroom interactions with a black male student from the ghetto.

In the wake of calls by literacy educators in the early-1990s urging colleges and universities to hire more black writing teachers—"teachers," in Thomas Fox's words, who understand "the connections between literacy and African American culture" ("Repositioning" 301)—I was hired to teach part-time at Columbia College, Chicago. I was the only black man teaching in a literacy program for underachieving freshmen, an unfortunate circumstance that worked in my favor in at least one respect: that year Columbia announced plans to increase its full-time minority faculty as part of efforts to retain minority students, especially blacks. Of the ethnic minorities enrolled, blacks consistently had the highest dropout rate, with black men faring worst of all: 2% of them graduated after four years and only 4% after five. Consequently, the following year, I was promoted to a full-time, nontenure-track position.
I was thrilled. But, evidently, some of the other (mostly white) hard working part-timers were not. In particular, one teacher repeatedly questioned my credentials in that sneaky, fake, nonconfrontational way that Momma taught me to be suspicious of as a child when it comes from whites. “What year of the PhD program are you completing?” she asked. “What literacy theorists do you know? And, how much more do you want to teach literature instead of composition?” She punctuated each of my responses with “humph,” followed closely by “how good for you.” I would be laughing to myself, dying to say: “Lady, just be glad you’re white.”

I mean, sure, my race and gender helped me get hired. But the real task was to prevent them from getting me fired. I was known, after all, for leaving jobs and losing jobs. “Good jobs!” Momma called them, as she shook her head, rolled her eyes, and complained that these were the teaching jobs she sent her “smart” son to college to get, not to quit. She asked the family and her friends to help her understand why it was that I’d gotten myself run out of Mount Vernon High School in Mt. Vernon, Illinois, where some of my white students, from that nearly all-white working class town, complained that the literature I taught was always pitting whites against blacks in ways that made them feel uncomfortable. And she wanted to know how it was that I couldn’t manage to stay at the all-black Westinghouse High School on Chicago’s West Side when I was just as black as they were. When I told her that I had been fagged and sissied out, that the black female principal had said, “Some of the students think you’re not masculine enough. You got to change that. You got to act like a man,” it puzzled Momma that I didn’t just grin and bear it.

Momma thought I had finally found my niche the following year at Hoffman Estates High School in Hoffman Estates, Illinois, where she thought at least those white, liberal, middle class suburbanites wouldn’t think I was gay and probably wouldn’t mind me teaching one or two black poems to white kids. But when I taught Countee Cullen’s “Incident” and found myself looking white administrators squarely in the face, telling them with my eyes to kiss my ass and ready to tell them for real if they’d pushed me, Momma knew I wouldn’t last long. She said that either I didn’t want to work or I lacked what it took to keep a good a job, which required, we both began to realize, something other, or at least more, than an education.

So when I told her about working part-time at Columbia, she said, “You should be glad that any place is taking a chance on you. Part-time is better than no time; at least you can eat.” And you can imagine her surprise when I told her about the promotion. She was happy but very cautious: “Don’t go
making them white folks feel uncomfortable by talking about race. It scares
them, challenges their power—something.”

But my response was the same. “Momma, my problems ain’t just with
white folks. And, even if they were, if I don’t talk about race, how will my stu-
dents ever know how their whiteness affects society before they leave their
suburban neighborhoods and rural homes, go off to college or into the
workforce, and carry on their lives as if slavery never happened, as if their fa-
thers, maybe even their mothers, never call me nigger?”

It’s not that I’ve ever been called a nigger, not to my face anyway. But I was
trying to make the point—that just as Momma herself still believes some dis-
tant cousin or strange uncle in all white
families still refers to blacks as niggers
when no blacks are around, that’s no dif-
ferent from her calling whites crackers,
peckerwoods, and honkies in private. In
other words, race is just as important now
as it ever was—even if both blacks and
whites agree to pretend in public that it isn’t. I told her that part of the
race problem today, perhaps the biggest part, is due to our complicity with this pretense.

Momma, of course, was only exercising her hard-earned right to express
concern, having successfully raised nine kids alone in the Governor Henry
Horner Homes, the Chicago housing projects that Alex Kotlowitz in his book
There Are No Children Here (1992) and later Oprah Winfrey with her movie
version helped make infamous. Momma was a momma (not portrayed in those
stories) who demanded nothing but excellence from her children—and got it.
All nine of Momma’s kids at the very least had graduated from high school,
completed some college, and worked professional jobs. Neither one of the four
boys nor any one of the five girls were teen parents. There are no drug addicts
among us nor any who have spent time in jail (except for me). This Momma
image is not the common ghetto stereotype of the momma who struggles but
ultimately fails to save her children from the tribulations of ghetto life, as is
unvaryingly presented in Kotlowitz’s book. Nope, Momma beat the hell out
the ghetto, and you better believe she was concerned about my success. She
didn’t want me to be like some other black men—many of those I was a boy
with—who were either dead, in jail, selling drugs, working for minimum wage
or not at all. But she said she didn’t know how I would keep myself from end-
ing up just like them, even with a PhD. And to be honest, I didn’t either.
Neither one of us understood at the time why an ambitious twenty-four year old, with two master's degrees and working toward a PhD, who had never done drugs nor ever been in a gang, was nonetheless experiencing some of the problems my education was supposed to help me avoid. Trying to figure out why I was having troubles doubled my purpose for teaching at Columbia. I was no longer aiming only to prove to Momma that I could keep a "good job"; I also wanted to understand why holding on to one was so difficult, particularly at a time when schools were vying for black male teachers. I knew understanding this was inseparable from understanding what was expected of me as a writing teacher. It was clear that the hiring committee wanted what everyone who wants to hire a black male professor from the ghetto wants, for me to make the connections they couldn't to students they didn't fully understand and were therefore unable to assist as much as they desired. What wasn't so clear was how they wanted me to do it or if I even could.

However, the hiring committee and I both thought that if anyone could make helpful connections, then someone like me should be able to. My class, gender, and racial characteristics mirrored those of the students they most wanted to save. And, as a college professor, I was an example of someone who had achieved an educational level to which it seems few black men from the ghetto aspire and that far less ever get close to. Of course the hiring committee and I would have been mistaken to believe that my presence alone would dissolve excuses for why it couldn't be done, why other black males from the ghetto can't do well in school. In fact, the connections I make between the school and the ghetto lead me to argue that my shaky ghetto-to-middle-class trajectory supports less why black males can do well in school and more why they don't, even perhaps why they can't.

Further, it isn't, I've come to see, making connections between literacy and black culture that offers the best solutions to the problem of student retention (or for my own retention as a faculty member for that matter). Instead, making those connections implicates the literacy classroom as a site that reproduces the retention problem it's designed to eliminate.
tended carefully to my teacher colleagues and from reflecting on the writing and self-presentation of my students, especially my black male students. In fact, it was one student in particular—his name is Cam—whose first essay written for me provoked this essay I’m writing for you. Cam attempted, as I’m doing here, to analyze the disconnection between literacy and black culture that hasn’t yet been successfully reversed.

In his paper, Cam writes that “your average nigga in the ghetto is given 5 words at birth” that he is fated to recite for the rest of his life. “These 5 words” constitute the ghetto newborn’s lifelong defense plan that is guaranteed to “get him or her through every problem they face. These five words are ‘I don’t give a fuck!’”

Cam’s words recalled for me Kermit Campbell’s study of papers by “black inner city” male students who were natural code meshers, mixing “popular street slang” with academic discourse in their essays. Campbell’s students’ language habits didn’t surprise him, nor did Cam’s trouble me. Black vernacular discourse, after all, is an inseparable part of my native dialect. And Campbell’s argument that writing teachers should include an understanding of that dialect “in our writing pedagogies [in order to] affirm the social and cultural identities of many African American students” seems only logical and right to me (“Real Niggaz’s” 76).

Hence Cam’s use of vernacular phrasing to construct his narrative thesis is not what disturbed me. It was his forceful, but false, assertion of indifference conveyed by those five words that bothered me. They were words I had often used to mask the fear and pain that I experienced while growing up as a rather bookish boy with a high-pitched voice in the ghetto—a boy often teased, called sissy and fag, because I liked performing in school plays instead of playing sports. It didn’t help that I had no “raunchy macho,” or couldn’t develop that “special [pimp] walk,” or that I was no good at the “distinctive handshakes and slang” that early childhood education researcher Janice E. Hale-Benson describes as the “common manhood rites” for black boys (170). Because of this, my gender performance was incompatible with what was required of black boys. So for psychological protection, I convinced myself that I didn’t give a fuck about the ghetto and longed only to get out.

Therefore when Momma nudged me to do well in school, I ran to it—straight into white cultural settings, where I was confused about whether my unexpected alienation was due to being seen as a faggot or a nigger. I wondered what it was that white folks didn’t like about me? Was it the way I walked or talked? Was it the color of my skin? Was I too angry? Too dangerous? Not
dangerous enough? What? Saying “I don’t give a fuck” was my only defense. And I wondered: what race wants me? This was a particularly tough question to answer since I imagined the whole world against me, as Cam obviously did too.

He continues: “Your average nigga is living in a hostile world that will chew you up and spit you out still whole.” These words echo Momma’s saying—“Ahma eat you up”—that she uttered right before she whipped her kids for disobeying her command. Being eaten up came to mean being punished by those demanding my compliance and fittingly figures the alienation I faced in the white schools I attended from high school on. The idiom also aptly characterizes the physical and verbal abuse I endured from my peers in the ghetto because to them I identified with school too much. And Cam’s (cum Momma’s) phrase is also an expression of the intraracial conflict that exists between some middle class blacks and their street-identified counterparts.

At least that was the case for Malcolm X who exclaims, “He was trying to eat me up!” in an account in his autobiography describing a black college professor’s reaction to him and his ideology. “He was ranting about what a ‘divisive demagogue’ and what a ‘reverse racist’ I was,” X says about the professor. And in an effort to defend himself, X writes that he “was racking [his] head, to spear that fool”—and thought of a way to do it. “Do you know what white racists call black PhD’s?” X sarcastically asked the professor, who responded: “I believe that I happen not to be aware of that.” So X “laid the word down on him, loud: ‘Nigger!’” (284). Calling that professor a nigger was a way for X to neutralize the racial perspectives between the professor and himself—perspectives that can be identified in X’s street language and ideology and in the professor’s contrasting beliefs and hyper-literate linguistic performance, what X calls “ultra proper talking.” X wanted the professor to understand that blacks shouldn’t have to talk or believe as the professor in order to be successful in school. For X, the professor’s speech and views not only represented identification with whites, wholesale assimilation into white culture, but was also a way for some middle class blacks to repudiate and distance themselves from other (ghetto) blacks.

The racial politics that took place between X and that professor are emblematic of what happened between Cam and me. Only it wasn’t Cam who called me a nigger to neutralize our differences. I called him one to amplify them when he arrived to class on the first day about twenty minutes late, on what Momma used to call CPT (short for Colored People’s Time). He was wearing baggy jeans, Nike sneakers, and a bright yellow Tommy Hilfiger jacket that hung low, bobbing his head to music that pumped from headphones that he
YOUNG / YOUR AVERAGE NIGGA

didn’t remove until after he sat down in the very first seat to my left. That’s when I smelled the scent of fresh marijuana that I suspected he’d just smoked. And I thought, “Damn, why me!” And that’s when I profiled him as a ghetto black man, like the ones I had grown up with and was trying to leave behind. That’s when I thought of him—I’m sorry to say—as a nigger.

Obviously the term didn’t come to my mind as a way for me to identify with Cam, in the way that Campbell writes that blacks sometimes signify upon “the standard English pejorative label niggers,” by replacing “-ers” with “the black vernacular -az to affirm” their identity and community “in the face of anyone or anything that poses a threat to blackness” (“’Real Niggaz’s” 68). No, my thoughts about Cam came from the same racist view that prompts the vernacular term in the first place—a view of “black male identity” that Campbell says “society has defined or constructed . . . largely through negative images and exclusion.” And, according to Campbell, “this negative imaging and exclusivity is nowhere more evident than [‘in the academy,’] in the stance toward nonstandard language varieties” (71).

I wasn’t intentionally being classist or racist when I negatively profiled Cam. I was responding to my fear and envy of his self-assured performance of black masculine identity—an identity that, cultural critic Phillip Brian Harper says, personifies Black English Vernacular (at least the popularized street version). I felt endangered, not physically, but racially. I felt as if my blackness had been jeopardized because, unlike Cam, I am not equally able to speak and personify BEV, nor am I able to speak and embody the language I was called to teach—Standard English, which according to linguist Rosina Lippi-Green, is an English vernacular based on the language norms of middle- and upper-middle-class white people (English with an Accent 62).

I was worried that Cam would see me as a faggot and an Uncle Tom because in the ghetto where I grew up, school was construed as the ultimate site of middle class whiteness, likely because the mandated language variety for instruction was and still is a reified White English Vernacular. School was also viewed as a place best suited for girls, which according to Hale-Benson, makes both black and white boys “feel [as if] they are flirting with homosexuality if they give in to the pressures of the school to exhibit behaviors they consider feminine” (66). Because some boys see school as a site of effeminacy and school language (WEV) as a discourse for girls, white and black boys resist

That’s when I profiled him as a ghetto black man, like the ones I had grown up with and was trying to leave behind. That’s when I thought of him—I’m sorry to say—as a nigger.
Because some boys see school as a site of effeminacy and school language (WEV) as a discourse for girls, white and black boys resist some forms of language instruction, which, in turn, causes them to fail literacy classes. But the difference between black boys and white boys, however, is that black boys not only feel coerced to give up their masculinity if they do well in school, but they also feel forced to abandon their race—the ultimate impossibility. This feeling of racial and gender endangerment not only occurs in cases of black boys from the ghetto but is also experienced by black boys from middle class communities like the one compositionist Erec Smith describes in his literacy narrative.

Smith, who grew up in a middle class, predominantly white community on the East Coast at the same time that I was growing up in the ghetto, attended an all-white elementary school, where as he writes, “racial slurs were plenty and daily.” Because of racism, Smith says that he felt “pressured into trivializing [BEV].” His white teachers and peers compelled him to give up his black dialect and identity. This induced in him “a need to escape” whiteness—and high school, where he would encounter more black people, gave him his chance to do it. But when he “found fellow black freshmen, hung out [and] sat with them at lunch,” Smith says he “quickly became just as much of an outcast, if not more of one, than I was amongst my former, predominantly white student body. To my African American peers,” Smith says, “I was not really black.” “The way I spoke gave them even more reason to come down on me.” Smith’s “proper speech” that he embraced to fit in among his white peers in elementary school made him appear to his black peers in high school to be, in Smith’s words “some sort of phony male.”

As with me, speaking WEV put Smith’s blackness and masculinity at risk among other blacks. Citing William Labov’s research “in male linguistic dominance,” Smith writes: “It was discovered that in urban settings, standard pronunciation is associated with women more than men, making formal English a gender marker for women” (Smith et al. “CultureWise” 436–37). Because of this, some black men risk subjecting ourselves to homophobic antagonism if we speak and write Standard English. This is an experience corroborated by Phillip Brian Harper. While analyzing the homophobic discourse that sur-
rounded the AIDS diagnosis and death of prominent black newscaster Max Robinson, Harper concludes,

Within some African-American communities the "professional" or "intellectual" black male inevitably endangers his status both as black and as male whenever he evidences a facility with Received Standard English—a facility upon which his very identity as a professional or an intellectual in the larger society is founded in the first place. (11)

While Harper's point seems to suggest that every black male who speaks WEV will undergo racial attacks on his masculinity, it may be more accurate to say that if those black males do not exhibit other behaviors considered to be masculine, such as displaying a pimp walk, playing sports, or engaging in sexual banter with girls, then they will inevitably endanger their black maleness.5

I don't think from all this that all black boys who are actually gay or effeminate speak WEV or are guaranteed to do well in school. Many blacks regardless of sexual orientation or gender performance choose to identify with their race (or are forced to do so) over anything else. This leads me to believe that there is an understudied group of black boys who are gay and/or effeminate who don't do any better in school than their macho counterparts. I suspect that to them being black alone is enough to make school appear just as foreign as it does to some other black boys. I believe this because the choice that Smith and I were presented didn't seem to be the choice of choosing between school or being black as it might seem on the surface. We had to choose between being insufficiently masculine or insufficiently black.

Even though Smith and I both experienced racial problems with whites in schools, because of the educational and middle class advantages we would gain and because we could maintain a sense of masculinity within a white context, we both chose to be insufficiently black. "I realized that I did not really want something as arbitrary as ethnicity" (Smith et al. 437), Smith declares, in an attempt to reject race and ethnicity altogether in response to his experiences. But more specifically for me, it wasn't race that I tried to reject. I just didn't want to be black. So I worked against developing ghetto masculine characteristics and learned to act and talk as a white man. It didn't take me

The choice that Smith and I were presented didn't seem to be the choice of choosing between school or being black as it might seem on the surface. We had to choose between being insufficiently masculine or insufficiently black.
long to discover that in the right environments, especially at school, that the more I acted white, the more I seemed to succeed. In fact, becoming a high school English teacher and getting a PhD was a way for me to validate my anomalous black identity. It was also my way of claiming to be effeminate not because I was or wanted to be gay but because I was smart. These reasons for becoming a teacher made my personal and professional conflicts even more pronounced because I also quite sincerely wanted to reach back, as the saying goes, and help those in the ghetto. But when I was unsuccessful, I admittedly used my school success not only to excuse my gender and racial inadequacies but also to avenge them. I wanted to vindicate myself for the way the ghetto had treated me. I used my facility with WEV and my apparent, though unstable, professional success as signs that I was better, as a way to confirm that the circumstances my peers faced was their punishment for ostracizing me.

This is why I initially wanted to eat Cam up—because he reminded me of what I loved but loathed even more. He reminded me of those students I’d taught in the ghetto, at Westinghouse High School, who speculated about my sexuality and called me a fag to my face, students who rarely went to college. But Cam was in college and in my classroom no less. And I had mentally classified him as a nigger in order to stabilize my own non-“nigga” masculinity. And after beginning to read his paper, I began to realize just how much my success hinged upon his failure. What had I really achieved if black boys like him were coming to college and being successful? And would not my validating his vernacular usage in order to affirm his black masculine identity demean my own?

To be sure, I was ready and willing to adhere to Campbell’s pedagogical call to privilege Black English Vernacular. But doing so for me meant patronizing the ghetto, resisting the imposition of white standardization, and fetishizing black masculinity all at once. This odd admixture of racial politics not only left me feeling racially suspect but fearful of being continually on bad terms with all social and professional groups to which I belonged. I believed (and still do) that Campbell’s argument is important for black linguistic inclusion because it makes space for more students like Cam to enter and do well in our classrooms. But I also know that it unavoidably reproduces the burden of racial performance—the burden of proving the kind of black person you are by how you act and talk—in a site where it was not as pronounced. The burden was
not so much of a problem in schools because students like Cam were ostracized from them and students like me were embraced by them. It was thought that one group belonged in the street and the other belonged in school. Now that we both are in school, I’m the one that is still forced to choose between being insufficiently black or insufficiently masculine. Campbell’s pedagogy gives Cam the advantage as it takes it away from me (and perhaps from Campbell himself as well). By privileging BEV, Cam can be both sufficiently black and sufficiently masculine in the ghetto and in school. And I’m left asking in school the questions that drove me out of the ghetto: Am I black enough? Am I man enough?

Thus privileging BEV simultaneously aggravates one problem even as it helps solve another. It helps integrate one type of black identity but ignores others. This is why in his critique of Campbell’s advice for teaching literacy to black students, David G. Holmes, like me, is left wondering,

How do [literacy educators] avoid explicitly or implicitly applying [the] experiences [of some black men] to all other African Americans? How do we get some of our African American students to remain proud of the ways that Black Dialect can be used to construct their personal and cultural identity without deprecating other African Americans who don’t bear the same relationship to it? (60)

And, “How do considerations of gender, class, or sexual orientation generate diverse interpretations of African American rhetoric?” (62).

These questions are apparently so frustrating that Holmes appeals to the status quo for answers and surrenders to linguistic discrimination just because it’s the way things flow. “If Black dialect were the language of the marketplace,” Holmes reasons, “then anyone would be rhetorically disadvantaged. But it isn’t.” As Holmes sees it, black students and their teachers must choose either to value BEV or value WEV. As a teacher, Holmes promotes the latter, saying, “if [a black student] cannot use the language of the marketplace [Standard English], for whatever reason, then she is rhetorically disadvantaged” (emphasis mine, 59). To say this is to ignore well-known “linguistic facts of life” (45) as linguist Rosina Lippi-Green has recently called them. One of these facts, Lippi-Green writes, is that “at some time in adolescence, the ability to acquire language with the same ease as young children atrophies” (46). This means that a student’s linguistic foundation is established in the first years of life and can rarely, if ever, be completely altered. For Holmes to say that there is no satisfactory reason why some black students don’t master Standard English, given that BEV may be what they have learned first and can’t be completely erased,
is so unreasonable that it’s fair to say that he should have known better. This is especially the case since it has been almost thirty years since Geneva Smitherman has argued against views like Holmes’s, writing in her highly acclaimed book *The Language of Black America* (1977) that language habits are “pretty firmly fixed by about age five or six” (199). And if those language habits are what we call BEV, then Holmes “for whatever reason” blatantly disregards the natural linguistic skill associated with one group of people in favor of that associated with another. This is a practice that we would call racist if Holmes were white.

Like Holmes, I’m frustrated with the questions that arise from Campbell’s pedagogy. But, unlike Holmes, my dissatisfaction doesn’t lead me to endorse the status quo. That’s what caused me to put Cam unconstructively into a racial profile. Instead, like Smith, I want to challenge “the concept of culture altogether” (Smith et al. 434), to investigate the problems that result from equating language with racial identity—because it’s that equation that seems to transform the effort to teach black students to speak and write differently into the effort to alter who and what they believe they are. In a certain sense, it converts the educational process into a form of assimilation and requires everyone—teacher and student both—either to accept or to refuse assimilation. This causes students and teachers both to suffer. Because many black students refuse assimilation, they are in effect refusing education, which, in turn, makes “many sensitive and well-meaning teachers,” writes famed educator Lisa Delpit, experience “a certain sense of powerlessness and paralysis.” These teachers think they’ve failed because their best strategies, including privileging BEV, don’t seem to be effective. They feel handicapped because it seems nothing they do works. They don’t know what to do, if to teach WEV is to be racist and to teach BEV is to inadequately educate their students. As a result, Delpit says, those who don’t give up completely respond to this dilemma by choosing “wrongly, but for ‘right’ reasons—not to educate black and poor children” (166). Rather than appear racist, they simply allow the students to keep using BEV, which won’t give them access to what Delpit calls “the codes of power” (42).

I believe that Delpit is right. But her solution is wrong. She proposes a pedagogy of “linguistic performance” where teachers are supposed teach students to be bidialectical or to code switch, to use BEV at home and in black
communities and WEV in school. “The students” in such a classroom, writes Delpit, can “take on the persona of some famous newscaster, keeping in character as they develop and read their news reports.” Afterwards, the teacher can center the discussion on “whether Walter Cronkite would have said [or written] it that way” (53). It’s unclear why Delpit believes this pedagogy is a way of “taking the focus [and stigma] off the child’s speech” and writing when telling them to imitate a white newscaster is to tell them that their language and identities are not welcome in school. What little black girl or boy (my example notwithstanding) is going to identify her- or himself with an aging white man? How will they know for instance, given the blurring of public and private spaces, when to talk and write like Cronkite and when to be themselves? In response to these questions, it seems that Delpit (like Holmes) appeals to the status quo. “We [teachers] can only provide them with the knowledge base and hope they will make appropriate choices” (54), Delpit says, sounding no different from the powerless teachers she’s trying to help. The problem that remains in this scenario and that will continue to stifle the success of any strategy is the problem of equating language with identity, which means that we must continue to exaggerate the differences not only between races but between languages in order to make the differences stick. Adhering to this practice, without critiquing it, has duped too many well-intentioned and bright scholars. Linguist Nancy Bonvillian, for instance, writes that black “children’s linguistic problems [in school] ... should be seen as resulting from their awareness of teachers’ negative judgements and their ensuing rejection of teachers’ demands” (174). Nevertheless, Bonvillian believes that code switching “is a reasonable compromise” (181) for educating black students.

But there’s nothing reasonable about this strategy—not to me and certainly not to noted compositionist Keith Gilyard. In his sociolinguistic self-study Voices of Self: A Study of Language Competence (1991), Gilyard calls approaches like the one Delpit and Bonvillian encourage “enforced educational schizophrenia” (163)—because black students are forced to see themselves as embodying two different racial, linguistic, and cultural identities. Gilyard rightly recognizes the problem that code switching presents and supports the notion of pluralism. Pluralism is a more democratic sociolinguistic theory than code switching. It holds that all dialects and languages are equal in terms of structure, even if they are unequal in terms of prestige. “To the pluralist,” Gilyard writes, “the crucial work involving language education is to develop a school system (and of course a society) in which language differences fail to have deleterious consequences for those whose language has been traditionally frowned
upon” (*Voices* 73). But in practice, pluralists have not yet obtained their goals. Were they to do so, Gilyard predicts, then “learning another dialect could not be a major problem [for black students]. In fact,” he reasons, “it would be extremely difficult to prevent them from learning Standard English” (74, emphasis in original).

The problem, of course, with Gilyard’s pluralistic framework is that black students would still have to identify one language as theirs and another as something more standard. The fact that Standard English is associated with a white racial profile wheels through the back door the code switching that pluralism kicks out the front. Pluralism can’t be considered any different from code switching if one dialect is seen as right for school (Standard English) and another only right at home. However, the difference Gilyard suggests between code switching and pluralism is that both dialects would be acceptable in school. That would make them equal in terms of social prestige, and black students won’t feel that learning Standard English is an assault on their identity. The only way I see to achieve that equal prestige is not by accepting pluralism but by undoing the erroneous assumption that the codes that compose BEV and the codes of WEV are so incompatible and unmixable because they’re so radically different. It’s almost as if the very people who would never accept the idea that black people and white people are radically different are happy to displace that acceptance onto a vision of white and black language. Hence, if we continue to reduce Standard English to being one dialect and BEV as something completely different, we not only won’t ever get to the crux of the problem of language discrimination but also will continue to generate fatuous remedies or not be able to offer any at all.

This is the fundamental problem with Smith’s concept of race switching that borrows from the sociolinguistic theory of code switching to form a pedagogical theory that allows students to represent more than one race in their writing. Although Smith believes that he’s critiquing the concepts of culture and race, he is only challenging the idea that black students have to be only black—which leads him to suggest that they can belong to any race or to many races. Because “ethnicity is not natural,” Smith writes, “but a manmade construct,” students should learn to develop multiple ways of being, “be as neotonal as the coyote of Native American trickster mythology, for ’[h]aving no way,
trickster can have many ways.” (Smith et al. 437–38). I know the personal pain that Smith experienced in school, which is why I also understand his motivation for wanting to problematize the ideas of ethnicity and identity. We both realize that our world is committed to these ideas, but we differ in that he believes that “freedom” from them “is not having [one] way (read ‘ethnicity’) [but] adopting a particular way [read ethnicity or race] for every given situation” (Smith et al. 438). As a result, he converts Delpit’s code-switching pedagogy of linguistic performance, what Gilyard calls “enforced educational schizophrenia,” into a Sybil-syndrome, where students must develop multiple personalities.

In the end Smith fails to make sound educational policy out of the strategies that he used to confront the hurt he experienced as a boy. “If one is to understand me,” Smith writes, “or feel more comfortable around me if I comply to a certain ideology of being, so be it. There is no deception here. The only deception is to think that ethnicity is a rigid, natural, and vital truth” (Smith et al. 438). But why does making ethnicity less rigid count as a solution when the only effect of the kind performing Smith promotes will be to require that students demonstrate an amazing racial agility? This, of course, is a skill that Smith himself couldn’t achieve, not in elementary school or in high school. So what makes him think that anybody else will be good at it? If black students can’t or won’t perform two racial identities, what makes Smith think they’ll perform more? And why would they be better off if they could?

I’m not so pessimistic to think that the problem is hopeless. What I do think is that the problem is worse for those of us who not only experience the problem as teachers but who were also born into the problem as black men. Because of this, we have developed an acute sense of urgency for solutions. But not all of the solutions work. In fact, some produce more problems than they help rectify. That’s why with all these questions and conflicting strategies about what is presently an insoluble problem, it’s no wonder that Cam writes:

My ‘friends’ feel I am stupid for trying to get my money from books. I was told by one of these so-called friends that the only book I need is a pocket book, preferably stolen. He told me white America does not care how smart I am, as long as I’m black I’m not going no where.

The rhetorical distance Cam places between himself and his peers (his “so-called friends”) mirrors the academic gap growing between them. Cam’s thoughts about his friends don’t seem so much different from what I initially thought about him. He doesn’t refer to his friends directly as niggers, but he
doesn't need to. The implication is there. And when school precipitates this kind of division among people, it's no wonder there's black on black crime. I'm certainly not suggesting that snatching purses is the best way to resolve the educational conflicts that black students from the hood experience, but I do understand Cam's friend's disillusion. For Cam's friend, school just can't offer a sufficient remedy for what he rightly sees as a problem much larger than the classroom can solve. And it's not because the problem is too big and the classroom is too small and limited. Rather his point, I believe, one I argue here, is that everything we do in the classroom—whether it involves devaluing BEV or valorizing it, allowing students to act white or act black—is a function of—the continuing racialization of our society. And as we continue to race society, we simultaneously class it, gender it, and sex it.

Everything we do in the classroom—whether it involves devaluing BEV or valorizing it, allowing students to act white or act black—is a function of—in fact, a contribution to—the continuing racialization of our society. And as we continue to race society, we simultaneously class it, gender it, and sex it.

This is also the root of why I believe I couldn't keep a job—because I was no good at race switching, maintaining the racial identities and living up to the racial fantasies that people expected of me and that I expected of myself. Both the working-class and middle-class white high schools where I taught were confronting an influx of black students from big cities, like St. Louis (into Mt. Vernon) and from the inner city of Chicago (into Hoffman Estates). I was hired to show the black students how to be like me or, to be more exact, to show them how those who hired me thought I should have been. I was supposed to show them how not to be so black, that is, so ghetto-black. I was supposed to teach WEV. But I was paralyzed. I didn't know whether to validate the black racial performances of the students or playa-hate on them. What's more, I was less interested in helping black students and more interested in teaching white kids out of the racism I saw in them. I wanted to draw attention to the language habits they thought were right and standard but were just colloquial white language, not really standard at all. But since other white teachers talked as the students did and sometimes couldn't tell the difference between standard WEV and its vernacular nonstandard, just as I sometimes can't distinguish BEV from anything else, I was seen as incompetent.

I believe I had a much harder time than some other blacks because I was trying to reconcile some major societal issues in schools dedicated to reinforcing them. Some other blacks play it smarter, however. They choose. They nego-
tiate for the sake of the job. And I understand that. After all, as Momma always says, “you gotta eat.” Other blacks play the game by the rules, within the system, instead of bucking it. But I’m a black who says you only get more of what you already got if you don’t buck it. Cam, however, believed the opposite. He knew that college would show him how to succeed in the world and positioned himself to learn what it had to teach. And he was in the prime position to learn. What?! With his race and masculinity intact, there was only one thing left for him to realize:

When I come to school, I see a whole generation of scholars getting ready to take on the new challenges of the world. Then I come home and I know there are no scholars here. The only scholars in the streets are dead. The only thing you are taught in the streets is pain, how to give it, how to take it, and if your lucky, how to avoid it. Since the only thing you really learn on the streets is pain, it is safe to assume the last test of the streets would be cheating death. If you win, you live to try again, if you lose, you die.

This way of thinking has taken years of wrong people and wrong experiences. This way of thinking keeps our jails filled and our libraries empty. This way of thinking is killing off a breed that could take this world over if lead right. Unfortunately this way of thinking is all the ghetto has that is truly theirs. This way of thinking kept me alive in those streets. This way of thinking has taken me to different levels in my life. But most importantly, this way of thinking separates those who play the game, from those who stand on the sidelines and hope.

Cam may be ambivalent about the ghetto, seeing it on the one hand as having “taken [him] to different levels in [his] life” and on the other as “keep[ing] our jails filled and our libraries empty;” but he’s not ambivalent about his desire to get out of it. For him, that’s the whole point of school. What’s interesting is that he has invested high hopes in his college education. And there’s no ambivalence about it. College for him is where “a whole generation of scholars [are] getting ready to take on the new challenges of the world” in contrast to the ghetto where “scholars” only end up “dead.”

I read this as Cam’s critique of the idea that the problem for black students in our schools is the problem of black identity. The problem, as Cam sees it, is the problem of escaping poverty and that problem (as he’s helped me to see) is only made worse—in fact, insoluble—when we redescribe the tools for escaping poverty as tools for escaping identity or as ways to protect it.
I’m not saying, as so many often do, that black students shouldn’t see WEV as a threat to their identity. I think they have every right to, especially given who they are—that they come to the classroom as black people rather than poor people, given that they and we both are the products of a system of racialization that got started long before we were born and that looks like it will continue long after we’re gone. In light of this fact, it can’t make any more sense for me to say that we should ask students to ignore their identities than it does to ask them to ignore their poverty. They’re bound together. I get that. But getting it doesn’t make it right. And just because it’s the way things are doesn’t mean to me it’s the way things have to be.

That’s why I argue that the schools are a symptom of the problem and that what we do in them cannot function as a solution to the problem. I mean this particularly for elementary and high schools, not per se for colleges. However, composition programs are institutionalized in colleges as service programs and function similarly to high schools, which presents a host of restrictions that must be overcome before those classrooms can really become sites of change. In short, as long as the only debate we can imagine ourselves having is the debate between BEV and WEV, it doesn’t matter who wins, because no one wins—a few Cams will make it, a few Erec Smiths, and a few Keith Gilyards. But millions will continue to lose, particularly “those who,” Cam writes, “stand on the sidelines and hope.”

**Postscript**

I had all students in that writing class where Cam was a student share the papers they wrote with the entire class—workshop fashion. Hands down all the students thought Cam’s papers were the best (probably because I publicly praised them and because Cam always bragged about his high grades). During class workshops when I wanted to illustrate some strong rhetorical technique or flow of language, I asked Cam to read from his papers. He was always eager. Afterwards, several white students wrote personal notes and e-mailed me, telling me that they couldn’t write as fluently as Cam did. And although none of them thought of the way they wrote as white, some of them did say, “I can’t write black.” I explained to them that it wasn’t that they couldn’t write black. It was just that the social and cultural forces and school training that had influenced their rhetorical style was different from those that had shaped Cam’s. I assured them that I understood WEV and would view their writing through that lens when I graded it. In the end, however, I not only worried whether or not Cam would pass his second semester writing course, I was also extremely
nervous about my reputation as a writing teacher, and my job. Would I get to keep my good job if other teachers knew that it was I who had given Cam an A?

After that class, it was two years before I saw Cam again. I showed up unexpectedly in one of his classes, dressed in a blue business suit. It was a class on human sexuality, and Cam was sitting in the back, laughing along with the rest of the class at some joke the teacher had just told. I waved for him to come in the hall. He hesitated a moment. In the hall he told me that he thought I was a detective and that he was thinking to himself, “Damn, they gettin’ bogus as hell comin’ to school to get you.” We both laughed at that.

After class, we met for lunch. I gave him an earlier draft of this essay and asked if he would help me write about the problems I pose here. He took the paper; we exchanged numbers and e-mail addresses. A year went by—and nothing. No phone calls, no e-mails, and no responses to mine. I finished the essay alone, knowing full well that I’ve raised far more questions than I’ve answered, than, truthfully, I intended and am able to answer alone. I’m sure had Cam and I written together, we could have provided much more insight but certainly not nearly enough.

Lastly, I recently checked on Cam’s student status. And six years after we met, he’s finally a senior. I hope he graduates.

Acknowledgments
I would like to thank all those who provided helpful comments and suggestions on earlier drafts of this manuscript: Walter Benn Michaels, Gerald Graff, Ralph Cintron, Keith Gilyard, Bridget Harris Tsemo, and Marilyn Cooper, editor of CCC, as well as its referees Scott Lyons and Victor Villanueva.

Notes
1. In his essay, “The Signifying Monkey Revisited: Vernacular Discourse and African American Personal Narratives” (1994), Kermit Campbell uses the conflict between the black professor and Malcolm X to illustrate how X’s response to the professor was X’s attempt to signify “not explicitly on school learning” but on “the elitism (not to mention what the black vernacular community calls Uncle Tomming) of certain black representatives of the academic community” (470). I was led back to X’s autobiography by Campbell’s reading of this scene and wanted to enlarge his interpretation, not only by explaining how the racial, social, and class dynamics that took place between X and that professor were also present in my interaction with Cam but also to point out that language is often the touchstone for the larger conflict between the black underclass represented by Black English Vernacular
and the black middle class represented by what is considered to be school English. For me, this scene points up a disturbing fact—that instead of closing the gap between the black underclass and the black middle class, education in general and literacy instruction specifically aggravates it.

2. For an extended discussion of how Black English Vernacular is exemplified by black masculine street personalities and how using school English appears to endanger a black man's masculinity, see Phillip Brian Harper's discussion of the homophobia that is present in African American discourse in Part 1, pp. 3–38, of his book Are We Not Men? Masculine Anxiety and the Problem of African-American Identity.

3. Rosina Lippi-Green calls the language of Standard English “MUSE” as an acronym for mainstream U.S. Standard English. But given the regional and racial dimensions she claims it bears, MUSE seems to keep those dimensions hidden and appears to me to be an inadequate acronym to foreground and discuss the racialization of language. Therefore, to highlight the racial dimension of Standard English Vernacular (MUSE) I refer to it as WEV for the remainder of this essay in order to contrast it to the raced acronym for Black English Vernacular—BEV.

4. Janice Hale-Benson claims that “the hierarchy of comfort in traditional classrooms is as follows: white females, Black females, white males, and Black males” (170–71).

5. In her ethnographic study of “high-achieving” and “underachieving” black males, Signithia Fordham reports in Blacked Out: Dilemmas of Race, Identity, and Success at Capital High (1996) that in order to prove to her “that they were real men,” the high-achieving males alleged that they frequented “sex shops” as part of their regular after-school routine (27). In contrast to the high-achieving males, Fordham writes that “no underachieving male indicated that going to the sex shop or pornography store was a typical part of his after-school routine” (348). This suggests to me that there is a compelling need in some black communities for black men who want to achieve academic success to prove their masculinity through sexual and many times demeaning, chauvinistic, and patriarchal encounters with women.

6. For an extended discussion of the burden of racial performance and its relationship to literacy and the phenomenon of racial passing, see my essay “So Black I’m Blue” in the minnesota review: a journal of committed writing, n.s. 58–60, 2003, pp. 207–218. This essay is also accessible through the journal’s Web site <http://theminnesotareview.org>.

7. To be fair to Keith Gilyard whose written work and organizational work for both CCCC and NCTE has done much for black students and race studies in composition, I should point out that the edited volume where he includes Holmes's piece was originally envisioned as a volume to challenge the concept of race, which, of
course, is one of my aims here. Gilyard writes: “I was inclined initially to demand that the contributors to this volume take a hard materialist turn and link race explicitly to historical formations of racism and economic exploitation. The book then would represent a clearly focused rhetorical assault on the idea of race” (Race ix). Gilyard’s volume both enlarges discussions of race in composition studies and depicts the difficulty of those conversations. Holmes’s piece in particular illustrates the seemingly no-win situation that black and white teachers seem to be in when teaching literacy to black students. His essay begs for more research on and theorizing of the relationship of literacy to race and class in black communities and in schools.

8. As an alternative to code switching, I argue, in my doctoral dissertation “Your Average Nigga: Language, Literacy, and the Rhetoric of Blackness,” that true linguistic and identity integration would mean allowing students to do what some linguists have called code mixing, to combine dialects, styles, and registers. Code mixing, or what I call code meshing, means allowing black students to mix a black English style with an academic register (much as I do in this essay). This technique not only links literacy to black culture, it meshes them together in a way that’s more in line with how people actually speak and write anyway. As linguist Ronald Wardhaugh writes, demonstrating “command of only one variety of language” is so unusual that doing so “would appear to be an extremely rare phenomenon.” “Most speakers,” Wardhaugh argues, “command several varieties of any language they speak” (100). From this point of view, code meshing is more natural. Writing in a form other than code meshing creates artificiality, which might explain why some teachers can’t get some of their black students to write lucid, vivid academic prose in the same way those teachers observe those same students communicating with each other. (For examples of teachers not understanding how their teaching strategies, which mainly consists of code switching, promote black student failure in literacy classes, see A. Suresh Canagarajah’s “Safe Houses in the Contact Zone: Coping Strategies of African-American Students in the Academy” and Kay Harley and Sally Cannon’s “Failure: The Student’s or the Assessment’s?”) Those teachers, whether they are aware of it or not, are guilty of reinforcing sociolinguistic barriers that are impossible for students to cross. For in the name of academic policy and norms, they make black students extract the most expressive parts from their academic essays—the black talk that gives their papers verve and zest in hopes that what will remain is something they perceive to be academic discourse. This is why I argue for code meshing. However, like other strategies for teaching literacy, code meshing is not an absolute solution to an abiding educational and racial crisis facing black students. This is not to say that code meshing has no potential to help increase literacy rates and in turn retention rates for black students. It is to say that treating code meshing as if it were the solution to a racial problem that
extends beyond the boundaries of the classroom, however, will only exacerbate the predicament we’re trying to eradicate.

Works Cited


Campbell, Kermit. “‘Real Niggaz Don’t Die’: African American Students Speaking Themselves into Their Writing.” *Writing in Multicultural Settings.* Ed. Carol Severino, Juan C. Guerra, and Johnnella E. Butler. MLA, New York, 1997. 67–78.


Vershawn Ashanti Young

Vershawn Ashanti Young is assistant professor of rhetoric and African American world studies at the University of Iowa. He is currently working on two book manuscripts. The first, a revision of his doctoral dissertation, “Your Average Nigga: Language, Literacy, and the Rhetoric of Blackness,” from which this essay is taken, seeks to answer why education aggravates the gap between the black underclass and the black middle class. His second project looks at how the class division in black communities is predicated upon what he calls the burden of racial performance. He examines this burden—how it is predicted and fulfilled—in twentieth-century African American literature, including drama and nonfiction.