

# **To Be or Not to Be, that Be the Question:**

## **Debunking the Myth of a “Pure” Standard English\***

\*Sub-title taken from John McWhorter’s Word on the Street

### **A Multimedia Thinking Unit for Middle School / High School English Students**

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#### **OVERVIEW**

We hope to enable students and teachers to recognize that the students have already mastered a complex and dignified native language. The language that students *already* speak is systematic and rule governed. There is no such thing as a “defective language.” Our goal is to challenge students and teachers to think differently about what they teach in the classroom. For those who teach Language Arts – what is the “Art” of Language? How can teachers help students view literature through a “linguistic lens”?

We recognize that there is very limited time in school to stray from the mandated curriculum. After taking this course in theoretical linguistics, language acquisition and language prejudice, we decided we wanted to work on a project in which we could apply what we have learned in the classroom in a practical way using literature. Our focus is on African American Vernacular English via literature and multi-media as the vehicles for discourse. We are addressing the idea that the notion of “bilingual English” is not far-fetched. We want students to think about language, what it is, where it comes from and what kinds of prejudices are associated with language. We hope to encourage students to respect the languages of others, to appreciate diverse literature and to recognize that all languages are valid, systematic and rule governed.

#### **OBJECTIVES**

##### **Super Objective:**

1. Introduce students to African American Vernacular English via the lens of African-American literature and multi-media
2. To discuss prejudices associated with language
3. Eradicate the veil of misperceptions attached to AAVE over the centuries
4. Recognize that AAVE is as systematic and rule-governed as all natural speech varieties

##### **Immediate Objectives:**

1. Explore student’s current attitudes regarding AAVE. What are their prejudices and misconceptions?



2. Provide articles / worksheets discussing the rules of AAVE – in particular, the verb “to be”
3. Dispel the myth that AAVE is sub-standard
4. Discuss the Oakland Resolution. What was the resolution trying to accomplish?
5. Explore history of AAVE – it’s origins and transitions
6. Explore the Harlem Renaissance – can the English Department and Social Studies/History department integrate this subject?
7. Provide practical, literature lessons written in AAVE (via poetry, drama, short-story, excerpts from novels, music, video, etc).
8. Offer practical, in-class assignments that explore diverse AAVE literature
9. Encourage reader response and assign activities / group work to encourage active learning and discussion of AAVE.
10. Revisit and reflect on student’s original idea of AAVE and ask: “What have you learned now?” “Has your attitude towards AAVE changed?”

## RECOMMENDED STUDENT READINGS:

### Literature and Poetry

- **Toni Morrison**
  - *Beloved*
  - *Paradise*
  - *Jazz*
  - *Sula*
  - *Tar Baby*
  - *Song of Solomon*
  - *The Bluest Eye*
  - <http://www.educeth.ch/english/readinglist/morrison/author.html#facts> this site contains a compilation of recordings of Toni Morrison’s lectures and readings.
- **Alice Walker**
  - *Once: Poems*
  - *The Third Life of Grange Copeland*
  - *Revolutionary Petunias & Other Poems*
  - *In Love & Trouble: Stories of Black Women*
  - *Langston Hughes, American Poet*
  - *Meridian*
  - *I Love Myself When I Am Laughing...*  
*A Zora Neale Hurston Reader (editor)*
  - *Good Night, Willie Lee, I'll See You in the Morning*
  - *You Can't Keep a Good Woman Down: Stories*
  - *The Color Purple*
  - *In Search of Our Mothers' Gardens: Womanist Prose*
  - *Horses Make a Landscape Look More Beautiful*
  - *To Hell With Dying* (Illustrations by Catherine Deeter)
  - *Living by the Word*



- *The Temple of My Familiar*
- *Her Blue Body Everything We Know: Earthling Poems 1965-1990 Complete*
- *Finding the Green Ston (Illustrations by Catherine Deeter)*
- *Possessing the Secret of Joy*
- *Warrior Marks (In collaboration with Pratibha Parmar)*
- *Banned*
- *The Same River Twice: Honoring the Difficult*
- *Anything We Love Can Be Saved: A Writer's Activism*
- *By the Light of My Father's Smile*
- *The Way Forward Is with a Broken Heart*
- *Sent by Earth: A Message from the Grandmother Spirit*
- *After the Bombing of the World Trade Center and the Pentagon*
- **Maya Angelou**
  - *Just Give Me a Cool Drink of Water 'Fore I Die* 1971 - Nominated for a Pulitzer Prize.
  - *Oh Pray My Wings are Gonna Fit Me Well*, 1975
  - *And Still I Rise*, 1978
  - *Shaker, Why Don't You Sing*, 1983
  - *Now Sheba Sings the Song*, 1987
  - *I Shall Not be Moved*, 1990
  - *On the Pulse of Morning*, Written at the request of William Jefferson Clinton for his Inauguration as the 42nd President of the United States, January 20, 1993. Published by Random House in March, 1993.
  - *The Complete Collected Poems of Maya Angelou*, 1994
  - *Phenomenal Woman: Four Poems for Women*, 1995
  - *A Brave and Startling Truth*, Recited at the celebration of the 50th anniversary of the United Nations, June 26, 1995; Published by Random House in October, 1995.
  - *From a Black Woman to a Black Man*, delivered at the Million Man March in Washington, DC, October 16, 1995.
  - *Extravagant Spirits*, delivered at the Million Man March in Washington, DC, October 16, 1995.

### **James Baldwin**

- *Go Tell It on the Mountain* (1953)
- *The Amen Corner* (play, 1965)
- *Notes of a Native Son* (1955)
- *Giovanni's Room* (1956)
- *Nobody Knows My Name* (1961)
- *Another Country* (1962)
- *The Fire Next Time* (1963)
- *Blues for Mister Charlie* (play, 1964)
- *Going to Meet the Man* (1965)



- *Tell Me How Long the Train's Been Gone* (1968)
- *No Name in the Street* (1972)
  
- **Amirir Baraka**
  - New Jersey poet laureate. He wrote the controversial poem “Somebody Blew Up America” which caused a debate as to whether he should resign as nobel laureate. This would be a great writer to study in order to discuss prejudisim in America.
  
- **Gwendolyn Brooks**
  - **Poetry**
  - *A Street in Bronzeville* (1945)
  - *Annie Allen* (1949)
  - *Bronzeville Boys and Girls* (1956)
  - *The Bean Eaters* (1960)
  - *Selected Poems* (1963)
  - *We Real Cool* (1966)
  - *The Wall* (1967)
  - *In the Mecca* (1968)
  - *Family Pictures* (1970)
  - *Riot* (1970)
  - *Black Steel: Joe Frazier and Muhammad Ali* (1971)
  - *The World of Gwendolyn Brooks* (1971)
  - *Aloneness* (1971)
  - *Aurora* (1972)
  - *Beckonings* (1975)
  - *Black Love* (1981)
  - *To Disembark* (1981)
  - *The Near-Johannesburg Boy and Other Poems* (1986)
  - *Blacks* (1987)
  - *Winnie* (1988)
  - *Children Coming Home* (1991)
  - **Prose**
  - *Report from Part One: An Autobiography* (1972)
  - *A Capsule Course in Black Poetry Writing* (1975)
  - *Primer for Blacks* (1981)
  - *Young Poet's Primer* (1981)
  - *Very Young Poets* (1983)
  - **Fiction**
  - *Maud Martha* (1953)



- **Sterling Brown**
  - **Poetry**
    - *Southern Road* (1932)
    - *The Last Ride of Wild Bill and Eleven Narrative Poems* (1975)
    - *The Collected Poems of Sterling Brown* (1980)
  - **Prose**
    - *Outline for the Study of Poetry of American Negroes* (1931)
    - *The Negro in American Fiction* (1937)
    - *Negro Poetry and Drama* (1937)
  
- **Rita Dove**
  - **On-line Projects**
    - *Lady Freedom Among Us* (poem). The University of Virginia Libraries, 1994.
  - **Books**
    - *The Best American Poetry 2000* (editor). Scribner, 2000.
    - *Breakfast of Champions* (selected poems in Hebrew translation). Keshev/Tel Aviv, 2000.
    - *On the Bus with Rosa Parks* (poems). W.W. Norton, 1999.
    - *Thomas et Beulah* (poems - bilingual edition, English-French), L'Harmattan, 1999.
    - *Evening Primrose* (poems). Tanheim-Santrizos, 1998.
    - *Det Rosa Er I Oss* (selected poems in Norwegian translation). Det Norske Samlaget, 1996.
    - *Mother Love* (poems). W. W. Norton, 1995.
    - *The Poet's World* (essays). Library of Congress, 1995.
    - *The Darker Face of the Earth* (verse drama). Story Line Press, 1994 and 1996. 3rd, expanded edition 2000.
    - *Lady Freedom Among Us* (poem). Janus Press, 1994 (commissioned by the University of Virginia Library as its four-millionth volume)
    - *Selected Poems*. Pantheon/Vintage, 1993.
    - *Selected Poems* (audio book). Random House, 1993.
    - *Through the Ivory Gate* (novel). Pantheon Books, 1992.
    - *Grace Notes* (poems). W.W. Norton, 1989.
    - *Die gläserne Stirn der Gegenwart* (selected poems in German translation). Heiderhoff Verlag, 1989.
    - *Die morgenländische Tänzerin* (selected poems in German translation). Rowohlt Verlag, 1988.
    - *Thomas and Beulah* (poems). Carnegie-Mellon, 1986.
    - *Fifth Sunday* (short stories). Callaloo Fiction Series, 1985.
    - *Museum* (poems). Carnegie-Mellon, 1983.
    - *The Yellow House on the Corner* (poems). Carnegie-Mellon, 1980.
    - **Plays**
      - *The Darker Face of the Earth*. Premiered at Oregon Shakespeare Festival, July, 1996. Productions at Crossroads Theatre, New Brunswick, NJ, and The Kennedy



Center, Washington, D.C., Oct./Nov. 1997, the Royal National Theatre, London, August 1999, the Guthrie Theater, Minneapolis, March 2000, the Fountain Theatre, Los Angeles, Sept. 2000, and numerous college & university theatres.

- **Major Musical Collaborations**

- *Umoja - Each One Of Us Counts*, music by Alvin Singleton, commissioned by the Atlanta Olympic Summer Games, July 1996, with Andrew Young as narrator. Also at Plymouth Music Series, Minneapolis Orchestra Hall, Feb. 1998, with the author as narrator. Also broadcast nationally on NPR.
- *Singin' Sepia*, music by Tania Leon, premiered by Ensemble Continuum at Merkin Concert Hall, New York, February 1996.
- *Grace Notes*, a song cycle for soprano, clarinet, vibraphone, cello, and piano, music by Bruce Adolph, premiered at Alice Tully Hall, Lincoln Center, January 1997.
- *The Pleasure's In Walking Through*, composition by Walter Ross to poems by Rita Dove, sung by Rita Dove, Oratorio Society, Charlottesville Performing Arts Center, March 1998.
- *Seven for Luck*, seven poems by Rita Dove with music by John Williams, The Boston Symphony, Cynthia Haymon, soprano, John Williams, conducting. Tanglewood, July 25, 1998. Also broadcast on select NPR stations.

- **Langston Hughes**

- **Poetry**

- *The Weary Blues* (1926)
  - *Fine Clothes to the Jew* (1927)
  - *Dear Lovely Death* (1931)
  - *The Dream Keeper and Other Poems* (1932)
  - *Scottsboro Limited* (1932)
  - *Shakespeare in Harlem* (1942)
  - *Freedom's Plow* (1943)
  - *Fields of Wonder* (1947)
  - *One-Way Ticket* (1949)
  - *Montage of a Dream Deferred* (1951)
  - *Selected Poems* (1959)
  - *Ask Your Mama: 12 Moods for Jazz* (1961)
  - *The Panther and the Lash: Poems of Our Times* (1967)
  - *Collected Poems of Langston Hughes* (1994) Edited by Arnold Rampersad and David Roessel.

- **Prose**

- *Not Without Laughter* (1930)
  - *The Ways of White Folks* (1934)
  - *The Big Sea* (1940)
  - *Simple Speaks His Mind* (1950)
  - *Laughing to Keep From Crying* (1952)
  - *Simple Takes a Wife* (1953)



- *I Wonder as I Wander* (1956)
- *Simple Stakes a Claim* (1957)
- *The Langston Hughes Reader* (1958)
- *Tambourines to Glory* (1958)
- *Something in Common and Other Stories* (1963)
- *Simple's Uncle Sam* (1965)
- *Good Morning, Revolution: Uncollected Social Protest Writings by Langston Hughes* (1973) Edited by Faith Berry.
- *The Arna Bontemps-Langston Hughes Letters* (1980) Edited by Charles Nichols.
- *Remember Me to Harlem: The Letters of Langston Hughes and Carl Van Vechten, 1925-1964* (2001) Edited by Emily Bernard.
- **Drama**
- *Mule Bone* (1930) With Zora Neale Hurston.
- *Little Ham* (1935)
- *Mulatto* (1935)
- *Soul Gone Home* (1937)
- *Don't You Want to Be Free?* (1938)
- *Simply Heavenly* (1957)
- *Black Nativity* (1961)
- *Five Plays by Langston Hughes* (1963) Edited by Webster Smalley.
- *The Political Plays of Langston Hughes* (2000) Introduction by Susan Duffy.
- *Collected Works of Langston Hughes, vol. 5: The Plays to 1942: Mulatto to The Sun Do Move* (2000) Edited by Leslie Catherine Sanders.

- **Zora Neale Hurston**

- 1934 *Jonah's Gourd Vine*. Philadelphia: J.B. Lippincott Company
- 1937 *Their Eyes Were Watching God*. Philadelphia: J.B. Lippincott Company
- 1938 *Tell My Horse*. Philadelphia: J.B. Lippincott Company
- 1942 *Dust Tracks on a Road*. Philadelphia: J.B. Lippincott Company
- **Selected works about Zora**
- Hemenway, Robert E. 1977 *Zora Neale Hurston: A Literary Biography*. Urbana: University of Illinois Press.
- Plant, Deborah G. 1995 *Every Tub Must Sit on its Own Bottom: The Philosophy and Politics of Zora Neale Hurston*. Urbana: University of Illinois Press.
- Walker, Alice 1979 *I Love Myself When I Am Laughing...& Then Again When I Am Looking Mean and Impressive: A Zora Neale Hurston Reader*. Old Westbury, New York: The Feminist Press.

### **OTHER AFRICAN-AMERICAN WRITERS TO CONSIDER:**

- **Ishmael Reed**
- **Paul Laurence Dunbar**
- **Sonia Sanchez**
- **Audre Lorde**



- **John Edgar Wideman**
- **Ralph Ellison**
- **Henry Louis Gates, Jr.**
- **Nikki Giovanni**
- **Robert Hayden**

## **Drama**

- **August Wilson**
  - Jitney
  - Fences (1987 Pulitzer Prize)
  - Joe Turner's Come and Gone
  - The Piano Lesson (1990 Pulitzer Prize)
  - Two Trains Running
  - Seven Guitars
  - King Hedly II
  - Gem of the Ocean
  - How I Learned What I Learned (autobiography that August starred in)
- **Ntozake Shange**
  - *For Colored Girls Who Have Considered Suicide/when the Rainbow Is Enuf: A Choreopoem*
- **Maya Angelou**
  - *Cabaret for Freedom*, 1960 - Produced off-Broadway (in collaboration with Godfrey Cambridge).
  - *The Least of These*, 1966 - Produced in Los Angeles.
  - *Getting' Up Stayed on My Mind*, 1967.
  - *Ajax*, 1974 - Produced in Los Angeles (Mark Taper Forum).
  - *And Still I Rise*, 1976 - Produced in Oakland, California (Oakland Ensemble Theater).
  - *Moon on a Rainbow Shawl*, 1988 - Produced in London (Author Errol John).

## **Sound Recordings**

- "Raw" by Eddie Murphy
- Music of M&M & Elvis (success of white Americans using African-American music)
- Rap music in General
- Sprituals/ Gospel influences
- Blues – in particular, "Ma Rainey's Black Bottom Blues"
- Oral / Storytelling traditions
- Audio cassettes of African-American Broadway productions
- Comedy of Richard Pryor
- Movie *The Color Purple*
- [www.poets.org](http://www.poets.org) – to hear poets read their work aloud



## TEACHER'S REFERENCES

- Orlando TAYLOR 1973, "Teachers' attitudes toward Black and non-standard English as measured by the language attitude scale." In Roger W. Shuy and Ralph W. Fasold, eds. *Language attitudes: Current Trends and Prospects*, 174-201. Washington, DC: Georgetown U Press.
- Mary Rhodes HOOVER 1978. "Community Attitudes toward Black English." *Language in Society* 7:65-87.
- June JORDAN. 1985. "Nobody mean more to me than you and the future life of William Jordan." In *On Call: Political Essays*, 123-139. [Despite its enigmatic title, this deals with the negative reactions of univ students--presumably at UC Berkeley--to the "Black English" in *The Color Purple*, and how Jordan and the class confronted the issue head on. J's rules/guidelines for Black English (pp. 130-132) are not all reliable or accurate or valid, but her exposition of the class discussion of whether the students should use AAVE or SE to write the media to protest the killing of the brother of one of the students by police is one of the most powerful contributions to the study of lg attitudes I've read.]
- Signithia FORDHAM and John U. OGBU. 1986. "Black students' school success: Coping with the 'burden of 'Acting White'." *The Urban Review* 18.3:176--206. [Deals with language in passing, as part of a larger discussion of oppositional social identities and cultural frames of reference among African American high school students. You might want to follow up with more recent, separate work--books, articles--by both authors, including Fordham's recent book, *Blacked Out*.]
- Barbara L. SPEICHER and Seane M. McMAHON. 1992. "Some African American perspectives on Black English Vernacular." *Language in Society* 21:383-407.
- John R. RICKFORD 1992. "Grammatical variation and divergence in Vernacular Black English." In Marinel Gerritsen and Dieter Stein, eds. *Internal and External Factors in Syntactic Change*, 175-200. Berlin and New York, Mouton. [Attitudes of Af Am teenagers to AAVE are covered briefly--pp 190-191--but they are interesting, because they are all positive to AAVE and negative to SE, as reported by Fordham and Ogbu 1986, and in contrast to the oldest Af Am generation.]
- John R. RICKFORD and Angela E. RICKFORD 1995. "Dialect readers revisited." *Linguistics and Education* 7.2: 107-128. [Includes, reports of attitudes of 6th, 7th, and 8th grade students and their teachers to AAVE, especially in "Bridge" reader narratives.]
- John Baugh "Perception within a variable paradigm: Black and white detection and identification based on speech" in Edgar W. Schneider, ed., *Focus on the USA. (Varieties of English around the World, General Series 16)*. Amsterdam: Benjamins, 1996.
- <http://www.stanford.edu/~rickford/papers/EbonicsInMyBackyard.html> The Ebonics Controversy in My Backyard: A Sociolinguist's Experiences and Reflections. John R. Rickford, Department of Linguistics, Stanford University
- <http://www.stanford.edu/~rickford/papers/SuiteForEbonyAndPhonics.html> Suite for Ebony and Phonics by John R. Rickford
- <http://www.stanford.edu/~rickford/ebonics/EbonicsExamples.html> Ebonics Notes and Discussion by John R. Rickford



- Rickford, . [http://www. Things](http://www.Things). Lansing, Michigan: Society for Historical Archeology, 1977.
- Hoebel, E. Adamson. *Anthropology: The Study of Man*. Minneapolis, Minn.: University of Minnesota Press, 1974.
- Klemm, Friedrich. *A History of Western Technology*. Cambridge, Mass.: MIT Press, 1964.
- Kubler, George. *The Shape of Time: Remarks on the History of Things*. New Haven: Yale University Press, 1962.
- Mumford, Lewis. *The Myth of the Machine*. London: Secker and Warburg, 1967.
- Rae, John B. *Climb to Greatness: the American Aircraft Industry*. Cambridge, Mass.: MIT Press, 1968.
- Stern, Bernhard. *The Family: Past and Present*. New York: Harcourt, Brace, Javanovich, 1979.
- Susman, Warren. *Culture and Commitment*. New York: George Braziller, 1973.
- White, Lynn, Jr. *Medieval Technology and Social Change*. Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1962.

### **Student Readings on African American Dialect and Ebonics:**

- 1) McWhorter, John, *Word on the Street: Debunking the Myth of a "Pure" Standard English*, Perseus Publishing, Cambridge, Massachusetts (1998) (especially introduction and Chapter 6, "Black English, Is you Is or Is You Ain't a Language?")(emphasis on "The Incredible Lightness of Being: Sentence Structure of Black English");
- 2) Steven Pinker, "The Language Mavens." In *The Language Instinct: How the Mind Creates Language*, Perennial Classics, New York, New York (1994);
- 3) *African-American English: Structure, History and Use ("AAE")* (ed. Salikoko S. Mufwene, John R. Rickford, Guy Bailey and John Baugh (1998).
  - a. John Baugh, "Linguistics, Education and the Law: Educational Reform for African-American Language Minority Students;
  - b. Lisa Green, "Aspect and Predicate Phrases in African American Vernacular English") (function and form);
  - c. Guy Bailey and Erik Thomas, "Some Aspects of African American Vernacular Phonology" (Functional approaches to Words and Sentences");
  - d. "The Sentence in African American English."
- 4) John Baugh, *Beyond Ebonics: Linguistic Pride and Racial Prejudice*, Oxford University Press (New York, New York 2000) (chapters 1-4);
- 5) "Testimony submitted by William Labov, Professor of Linguistics at the University of Pennsylvania in explanation of his research and support of Ebonics;
- 6) "Ebonics Notes and Discussion," John R. Rickford, December 1996;
- 7) "S.B. 205—Well-intentioned but uninformed," John R. Rickford ([Los Angeles Times](#), Cambridge, Massachusetts (1998).
- 8) FREE INDICRECT DISCOURSE, Textual Collection, A state University System of Florida PALMM Project, Website <Http://fulltext10.fcla.edu/cgi/t/text/pageviewer>.



### Lesson Ideas

- 1) Using the questions on African American language handout, divide students into groups and assign set of questions to each group. After fifteen minutes, assemble and discuss.
- 2) Using African-American jump rope songs to discuss AAVE
- 3) Using the Internet, locate a poem by Paul Laurence Dunbar. Then rewrite the poem in Standard English. Discuss which version of the poem is more powerful and explain why. One site you will find useful is <http://www.udayton.edu/~dunbar>.
- 4) Take students to McCarter theater to see play written by Zora Neale Hurston, entitled *Polk County*.
- 5) Take students to Crossroads Theater in New Brunswick, New Jersey, to see African-American theater.
- 6) Select an artist from the Harlem Renaissance and research his or her contributions to the movement. You might choose a writer, a painter, a singer, or a musician. Then write a composition outlining what you have learned.
- 7) Using the Internet, find poems by contemporaries of Countee Cullen, who participated in the Harlem Renaissance; see The University of South Carolina's Harlem Renaissance page at <http://www.unc.edu/courses/eng81br1/harlem.html>. Divide into small groups and select a poem for everyone in your group. Then sit in a circle and take turns reading the poems aloud. As you listen to the speaker before you, take notes on his or her poem. Then write a transition to present a logical segue to your selection. The first presenter can write a general introduction to all the selections by focusing on common themes in Harlem Renaissance poetry. Finally, videotape your presentations, including transitional statements and the introduction, and play the videotape for the class.
- 8) Using the Oakland resolution as originally drafted, the federal statute (The Federal Bilingual Education Act, 20 U.S.C. 1402 et seq.), and background material on Ebonics, direct students to structure arguments for and against the passage of the proposed resolution and then to engage in a debate if time allows.