Gumbo Ya ya: Tapping Cultural Stories to Teach Composition

Like the blend of varied spices into a delightful concoction known as gumbo, the stories from my Louisiana heritage are the very essence of my being. My story is akin to this soup, a delicacy of spices, vegetables, meat, and seafood. It is Gumbo Ya ya—a Creole expression that means “everyone talks at once.” At times it has the jaggedness of an improvisational jazz or blues piece—a little Ma Rainey and Louie Armstrong rolled into one. Thus, my narrative will take the form of a medley that recounts the influences of my diverse linguistic heritage and my encounters with theorists, in and out of our field, who have shaped my teaching of language and literacy. My belief is that writing and language can best be taught by emphasizing the interrelationship between orality and literacy and by teaching respect for the home language and culture of others. My stories can more broadly appeal to those of any racial or ethnic group who wish to understand their own language practices and attitudes by reminding them of the inextricable relationship between language and culture. A careful study of the evolution and history of the English language illuminates the distinct varieties that each cultural group has contributed to its dynamism. As an illustration of my pedagogical philosophy and practices, I will tell stories about my personal experiences from my earliest years to my later years—experiences that have led to, and taken place in, my professional journey. To tell my story, I will mingle my voice with those of other writers; I will allow everyone to speak, albeit not simultaneously, and will allow a polyphony of voices to resonate throughout.

"Un, deux, trois, quatre, cinq, six, sept, huit, neuf, dix . . ." I chanted, then a child of about nine years old, as I eagerly practiced the French I had

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been studying in school. My Aunt Vic, whom I was visiting in Franklin, Louisiana, a small town nestled in the heart of Cajun country, became excited over my recitations. “Oh listen to that child; she speak-a French, she speak-a French!” Noticing that I had pleased her, I continued my recitations, then began practicing some of the dialogue which I had learned from Madame Thibaut. I would envision Madame as she imparted our weekly lessons to us: “Quelle heure est-il?” Looking directly into the black and white television, we fourth graders would enthusiastically respond, in turn, “Il est huit heure, il est neuf heure, il est dix heure,” for drill and practice were the standard forms of language lessons. In junior high school I continued my French classes, which used songs as models for learning French. I can still sing the French national anthem, and I can still recite in French most of the Pledge of Allegiance. My French teacher, a Louisiana Creole woman, had taught us well. I remember her distinctly because she used to boast of the many French influences in New Orleans, especially how Elysian Fields, a major boulevard there, was named for the Champs Elysees in Paris.

Although I enjoyed my lessons in French, being the strong-willed individual that I am, I was happy that in high school I could choose which language to study. I decided upon Spanish, español, the other language of my hometown’s heritage. Or perhaps I should say the other language of which it boasts. Certainly anyone who has visited New Orleans has been to the Vieux Carre, as it is called by many natives, and has seen the many signs illustrating the city’s bilingual heritage. Visitors to this historic district will observe signs inscribed or posted on store fronts: “Aqui se habla español; ici on parle français.” Or they might notice the street signs asserting, “When New Orleans was under French rule, this street bore the name Rue Royale. When New Orleans was the capital of the Spanish province, this street bore the name Calle Real.”

I had not realized, because of either my cultural naiveté or my cultural incuriosity, that the city was heir to another language evident in the songs sung by the African Americans who masqueraded Indian style during Mardi Gras. The songs were tinged with traces of an African ancestral past—songs like “Tu-way-pock-e way” and “Hoo-na-nay,” which they rendered in call-response fashion. And I vividly remember how many black New Orleanians felt ashamed and embarrassed by the cultural displays of the Zulu Club who paraded with their faces painted black like those wild, barbaric Africans.

Recalling the stories of my youth helped me to realize the importance of using stories as a means to explore my cultural and linguistic background and of giving others a window into this rich legacy. The story is a particularly appropriate form to use because of its oral nature and its grounding in African American culture, even though it has other merits. Race theorist and public
hip-hop intellectual Michael Dyson has theorized that stories and narratives yield self-knowledge and hold the key to unraveling black self-identity (83). Black feminist critic Barbara Christian has aptly recognized the value of stories for the survival of people of color, who “have always theorized . . . in the stories we create . . . . How else have we managed to survive with such spiritedness the assault on our bodies, social institutions, countries, our very humanity?” (336). In fact, exploring mis varios cuentos in this essay will help me firmly locate the ideological bases of my teaching of language and writing viewed through the lenses of both race and culture. In the academy students from various socioeconomic, linguistic, and cultural backgrounds will encounter stories like mine. They should be armed with the cultural competence and respect for cultural traditions that many from privileged backgrounds tend to denigrate. By telling my story, I invite African Americans and others to correct long-standing misconceptions about the cultural and linguistic traditions of African Americans.

While a graduate student, I was asked to lead a seminar discussion on Geneva Smitherman-Donaldson’s article in which she issued a challenge to language professionals to advance a national public policy on language. She called for them to reaffirm the legitimacy of non-mainstream languages and dialects and to promote mother tongue instruction as a co-equal language of instruction along with the language of wider communication (35). “It’s time to call the children in and teach them the lessons of the blood,” (29) she urged. Her statement is important in that it purports the communal view establishing a linguistic link among people of African descent: they share a kinship that is not a genetic one. For Smitherman-Donaldson, it follows that these children should speak a language belonging to the community. Of course, Smitherman-Donaldson had little trouble convincing me to respect linguistic diversity. I who had grown up in a household in which my father regularly sprinkled his speech with Cajun expressions. A painful reminder jolted me into an awareness, however, that not everyone in my field embraced linguistic tolerance when I was ridiculed during that class session by two African American students who vigorously denounced the nonstandard dialect Ebonics, variously called Black English Vernacular (BEV) or African American Vernacular English (AAVE). These students, who, like me, were preparing to teach English, distanced themselves from what they perceived to be utter nonsense that denigrated African Americans.

It was then that I began to wonder why Smitherman-Donaldson believed that professionals who teach language and literacy could promote valuing nonmainstream dialects and languages when many English teachers themselves do not embrace each others’ regional forms of language. For example, there
still exists a widely held bias against Southern speech compared to the preferred Northeastern and Midwestern varieties of English. Only when language and literacy professionals learn to appreciate the linguistic differences among themselves and within their own local communities can they work to educate others about the diversity of languages, providing a strong, unified voice to influence public attitudes and policies toward language.

My own relationship to AAVE was also something I had contemplated. Surely it had been my first language. I do not, however, remember when I first learned to communicate in the language of wider use, although I am as skilled at making the transition from AAVE to Standard English as an Akan speaker from Ghana who switches from English to Twi during a conversation with friends. At home I use AAVE all the time, as had my mother, my father, and other relatives and friends. I can remember hearing my parents say things such as, “John, he been gone,” when we were relaxing at home. But I knew that in a more formal setting, they would construct that sentence differently: “John has been gone,” or “John left hours ago.” I always knew how to distinguish between home language and the language one used in school or at work. In school, the teachers reprimanded anyone who did not speak using the language of wider communication, making those who used AAVE seem stupid or lazy. Not wanting to be stigmatized, I persisted in using the formal language required when speaking in school. Writing was a horse of a completely different color, however, because when a teacher returned a paper, no one other than the teacher would witness my misuse of the formal language.

**Affecting Linguistic Tolerance**

Though Smitherman-Donaldson calls for a greater emphasis on linguistic diversity in the K-12 level (35), the college level offers abundant opportunities to affect the language attitudes of our students by reaching those educators who prepare future K-12 teachers. Thus, I have responded anew to Smitherman-Donaldson’s call to help shape students’ attitudes towards language.

At the height of the Ebonics debate in 1997, my frustration at not having any trained writing or linguistic professional consulted to engage in public debate in our local media prompted me to write a letter to the Baltimore Sun, clarifying misconceptions about what the Oakland School officials were proposing. After I wrote the editorial endorsing the view that students’ learning of Standard English might be facilitated by using Ebonics or AAVE as a bridge, I learned that I was able to affect not only practicing and prospective language and composition professionals, but also those in other disciplines. One of my colleagues in the philosophy department at the state university where I teach said that until she read my letter, she really had not understood the Ebonics
debate. Another colleague in psychology, who teaches a course to prospective teachers, invited me to speak to her class because she felt that I could bring a much needed perspective to students, mostly education majors, studying to teach exceptional children. She now regularly invites me to guest lecture on nonstandard dialects because she learned more than she had ever anticipated.

Usually I begin my guest lecture by asking students to consider their language heritage using these questions:

- What is your language background? Is English your first language?
- What form/variety of English did you learn first?
- How many languages other than English have you ever studied?
- What are these languages?
- Which of these languages do you speak, write, or comprehend?
- When did you first study this language?
- Is English the first language of your parents?
- What form/variety of English do they speak?

The responses from the predominantly Caucasian group of students usually indicate that most students consider English their first language, that few have studied a foreign language, and that their parents’ first language is English as well. A small percentage of the students admit that sometimes both they and their parents speak an informal language variety at home. Few have admitted that in their families are residuals of language from working class communities, such as those in the Pennsylvania Dutch country, Appalachia, Baltimore, and Dundalk, Maryland.

In sharing my language background with the students, I mention my father’s frequent use of Cajun expressions and compare varieties of English that Louisiana Creole speakers use, such as “tree loaf of bread” for “three loaves of bread.” It’s not uncommon to hear a sentence like the following: “I buy tree loaf of bread when I make grocery today.” During one discussion, an African American woman, the only one in a classroom with mostly Caucasians, talked proudly about how she doesn’t allow her children to speak Ebonics because they will only become confused. Indeed, she, like many other African Americans, represent the most vocal opponents of AAVE. During the outcry against the Oakland Ebonics proposal, national leaders such as Jesse Jackson (though he later retracted), Maya Angelou, and Kweisi Mfume were among the most visible detractors.
Not surprisingly, the student displayed a common, middle-class African American belief about Ebonics that implies fear, shame, and distrust of an important component of their linguistic heritage. Some African Americans deny that Ebonics speakers use a language variety with its own specialized vocabulary, sounds, and structures, as indicated by the linguistic scholarship of prominent researchers (Smith [129-40]; Turner [209-46]); its opponents maintain that Ebonics or AAVE is simply lazy speech. The reality is that many African Americans persist in denigrating their own cultural and linguistic heritage just as those New Orleanians disparaged the African-inspired cultural practices associated with Mardi Gras.

I remembered Smitherman-Donaldson's admonition to “teach the children the lessons of the blood,” but instead of using Smitherman-Donaldson’s quote to respond to the student’s criticism, I mentioned that I had observed several African children in a compound in Ghana speaking four and five languages simultaneously. I impressed upon her that children can learn to speak many languages, especially if they learn them during their formative years. Not certain that I had reached her, I culled many examples from my background teaching African American literature: “Writers like Langston Hughes, Charles Chesnutt, Zora Neale Hurston, and Alice Walker have successfully used the rhythms of black English to carve wonderful masterpieces of literature,” I argued. All of these writers have published works exemplifying bi-dialectalism. Some of their publications use mostly African American vernacular, others use Standard English, and others, still, shift between both the two. Like these writers, most African Americans who speak a home language other than the Standard can code switch. They use an informal variety with family and peers, but in more formal environments such as the academy, they use a Standard or wider-use variety of language. Those who resist such code switching limit their capability to master more than one language.

Although Standard English has been identified as the language of commerce, the language of choice of corporate America, many people have climbed the ladder of American success using African American Vernacular English, not always alternating shifts between AAVE and the Standard. Witness controversial sports promoter Don King, the countless African American NBA and NFL stars, fiery folk preachers like T.D. Jakes and Creflo Dollar, and the wealthy Hip Hop mogul and producer Master P, all of whom retain traces of their nonmainstream dialects. Even former President Bill Clinton has been known to use traces of Ebonics in his speech. Judging by America’s standard of economic success, one could argue that surely they have “made it.”

I judge myself successful when students are encouraged to imitate the precedent of using African American vernacular that these established writers
have set. Perhaps student writers will experiment with writing essays in their home language and “become more adventurous in finding audiences for their writing in nonprestige dialects,” as Peter Elbow suggests (“Inviting” 15). In the same way that students are sometimes able to switch between the standard and the vernacular when speaking, they should feel at ease doing so when writing. Or sometimes they should be able to write their essays incorporating the vernacular. Composition professionals have begun lending some support to this flexible use of language, as illustrated by Elbow’s prediction that one day more “mainstream readers will appreciate such writing” (“Inviting” 15). Elaine Richardson also advocates this position. She had students mimic Black discourse forms in writing refutational essays emphasizing a topic important to the African American community (123). In a summary of research on Black language practices in the composition classroom, Richardson concluded that “the use of African American language is helpful in teaching composition as it helps to develop a more well-rounded writer, while showing that Black language usage is a worthwhile resource in the educational enterprise” (30).

I also help students to understand the rich contributions of Africans to the English language and culture of the New World: the infusion of words like okra, gumbo, and jazz, or the ring plays like “Little Sally Walker” (Jones 108-10) or clapping plays like “Hambone” (Jones 34) that many sang on the playgrounds and in the classrooms of their youth. Many of these folk songs and games originated in Europe but took on syncopated rhythms in the African American community. At the end of the lecture-discussion, I distribute a bibliography, which students can use for further research into this topic, including James Baldwin’s wonderful essay, “If Black English Isn’t a Language, Then Tell Me What Is?” After class, students thank me for coming because, for many of these prospective teachers, this discussion represents their first conversation on the ways that nonstandard dialect can inform their pedagogical practices.

I judge myself successful when I am able to change students’ attitudes toward nonstandard English both in and outside of the composition classroom. In literature classes, I seize the opportunity to help students to appreciate language divergence. An assignment that has become a mainstay of my African American literature classroom is one in which students listen to “The African American Oral Tradition,” a one-hour lecture by University of Dayton professor Herbert Woodward Martin, delivered via Ohio University’s web site. In the lecture, Martin lauds African American slaves for having learned the English language “under duress.” Martin further argues that in spite of the prohibitive circumstances, they accomplished a feat when they learned the language solely by hearing it.

One student, who identified her language background as white, middle-class, had early in the semester displayed a disdainful attitude towards African
Americans’ use of dialect when she wrote in a summary of Dr. Martin’s lecture that “Blacks use too much dialect.” However, after studying some of the works written in the vernacular and hearing them read expressively, she seemed to change her viewpoint. By the end of the course, when this same student had completed her research paper about *Their Eyes Were Watching God*, she sang quite a different tune about Hurston:

In order for one to fully appreciate and understand the novel, the reader must be able to decipher the language used throughout the novel. In her video, Hurston was not timid about displaying the dialect spoken by the members of the town. The dialect is an important part of African American culture and is presented this way by Hurston. Again, the dialect is used to create a feel for the environment in which the characters were immersed. Sentences were spoken, as “Dat we don’t know. De store is got tuh be sold and then we’se goin’ off somewhere tuh git married.” By using the dialect the way she does, the reader gets a better understanding of the atmosphere. The use of the dialect also shows that Hurston does not fear her cultural heritage. A reader who is not used to this type of writing may have to get past the “language barrier” first. Once past the barrier the reader will better understand what is taking place in the novel. The dialect that is used in the novel is an example of Hurston taking her personal background and applying it to her writing.

I judge myself successful when I develop students’ interest in their home dialects; students have become interested in Bawlamerese, spoken in working-class neighborhoods like Highlandtown and Dundalk in Baltimore, Maryland. As an African American teacher at a traditionally white university, it’s important that I encourage students to recognize the validity of languages and speech patterns unique to local communities. Often students will question why African American Vernacular English has been recognized as a legitimate dialect and how it differs from the home and regional dialects spoken by non-African Americans. Geneva Smitherman explains AAVE in a way that students can begin to find answers to their questions: she identifies it as “a language born from a culture of struggle, a way of talking that has taken surviving African language elements as the base for self-expression in an alien tongue” (18). Also, AAVE has been for many decades the subject of serious linguistic scholarship that has established its legitimacy as a language system. The same breadth of scholarship is not available on the home dialects spoken by most of my students. To help the students understand a slice of language variety prevalent in some of their own backyards, I encourage viewing *The Story of English* series, which highlights the Chesapeake Bay fishing workers
who have retained the accents of their native Britain (McCrum, et al. 108-109). Unlike those who subscribe to the Richard Rodriguez camp of language learning, which insists that speakers alienate themselves from their home languages in order to assimilate into mainstream culture by speaking the public language (19-20), these students understand the origins of some of their parents’ and grandparents’ tongues. Having this information should allow them a clearer vision of and greater connection with students whose first language is a variety other than the language of wider use.

I judge myself successful when my students can talk about the well-known, dialect-filled “Arn’t I a Woman?” speech attributed to Sojourner Truth, analyze her arguments as sophisticated, and marvel at how she, “unlettered and untaught,” produced masterpieces of rhetorical elegance. I judge myself successful when they recognize Uncle Julius as a shrewd character who skillfully manipulates language and even attempt readings of Charles Chesnutt’s dialect in his fictional “The Goophered Grapevine” or Dunbar’s dialect poem “When Malindy Sings,” having overcome their initial timidity of reading Chesnutt. Perhaps one of the final measures of my success at changing their language attitudes occurs when they no longer use terms like “proper English” and “correct English” to distinguish the language of wider communication from various nonstandard dialects.

From Orality to Literacy

My familiarity with the richness and variety of vernacular language inevitably led me to become a proponent of orality in literacy. I have a strong interest in not only how people are affected by use of various levels of language, but also how teachers can use oral features to help students produce effective writing. In this subsection with a title that revises Walter Ong’s landmark book on orality and literacy, I will provide a glimpse into some of the ways that I have tried to affect students’ writing ability. Unlike Ong, however, I will not look historically at what has occurred as societies have shifted from orality to literacy; I will instead examine the pedagogical implications of this shift by analyzing how students in writing classes might write more vibrant, engaging texts by conscientiously engaging in the study of oral or speech-like texts.

Many in our field exhibit a bias towards the literate tradition and maintain that oral qualities present in writing hinder the development of effective expository prose while others highly value oral practices in writing. When writing comments on students’ compositions, instructors often write, “Avoid colloquialisms” or “you write as if you are talking.” Indeed, students should understand when speech forms are inappropriate in their writing, but there are times that speech forms can enliven writing styles. Peter Elbow, for example, maintains that the best writing has voice, the life and rhythms of speech. He
further argues that unless students are actively trained to translate speech into writing, they will write prose that is “dead, limp, and nominalized” (“Shifting” 291). Like Elbow, linguist Akua Duku Anokye strongly endorses the belief that oral language has qualities that can enhance writing. She argues that African Americans come from a lineage that values the oral tradition, evidence of which can be found among the values and linguistic practices of West African peoples (230). My research and teaching have been inspired by the attitude that both Elbow and Anokye have professed.

When Malcolm X in his autobiography told of his difficulties communicating to governmental officials and others in leadership positions by writing letters in the vernacular (34), he set the stage for a discussion of the differences between oral and written language. In my composition and writing classes, when students discuss Malcom X’s popularly anthologized autobiographical piece detailing how he acquired the fundamentals of reading and writing, they explore the meaning of literacy. Thereafter, students begin to understand that there is a language—written language—appropriately used to communicate with a wider audience, while the oral language used with a narrower audience limits the number of people with whom its speaker can fully articulate his/her ideas. After this discussion, students are able to understand what is Standard English or the language of wider use; thus, they begin to understand the limitations of the term “proper English.” They gain an understanding of Malcolm X as part of a primarily oral tradition which others such as Sojourner Truth, Maria Stewart, and Frederick Douglass have helped shape. Though many of the speeches these speakers delivered were later published, because of their beginnings as oral texts their speeches retained the features of oral discourse. These texts are to be distinguished from those that emanated from the tradition of literacy. This oral tradition, which hearkens back to African shores, I realize, is something I appreciated as a child, whether I was listening to the call-response of those who costumed and performed American Indian-style at Carnival in New Orleans or whether I was absorbing the flavorful traditions of the Black preachers and teachers who mesmerized me with their captivating rhythms and cadences in their Sunday morning messages and their daily classrooms. As awed by these word artisans as Zora Neale Hurston, I studied their sermons, as did Hurston, but unlike her, I did not incorporate them for aesthetic effect in novels or as examples of collected folk traditions. Instead, my research and teaching draw upon the sermons and speeches of African American orators to highlight the oral-written link.

Black oratory, like the speeches from the Greek and Roman classical rhetorical traditions, provides sources of the African American rhetorical tradition. It is in the culture of African Americans that orality reigns supreme, where the poets, the preachers, and other people of the word command respect
and authority in the African American community, as did the orators of ancient Greece. By his own admission, Malcolm X exemplified one whose verbal artistry helped earned him a place of respectability among his street peers even before he became fully literate: “I had been the most articulate hustler out there—I had commanded attention when I said something. But now trying to write simple English, I not only wasn’t articulate, I wasn’t even functional” (34).

I theorized that if I could exploit the oral tradition to facilitate expression in the written tradition, perhaps this exploitation would provide an important link to achieving literacy among my students, most of whom feel more confident articulating their views in speech than in writing. After devising a way to teach writing by drawing upon this oral tradition, I generated an excitement in students who had grown up listening to another dimension of the oral tradition: rap, rock and roll, and rhythm and blues. My instructional project hinged upon students carefully studying the black sermonic style evident in the speeches and other oral texts of African American orators and writers to improve their writing styles.

Analyses of the speeches, sermons, and other oral texts indicated that these writers had used many of the stylistic embellishments of the Greek and Roman classical traditions, such as anaphora, antithesis, and chiasmus, as well as the call-response style inherited from African traditions, all of which are solidly grounded in the oral tradition. Socio-linguist Deborah Tannen calls these stylistic strategies that are based on repetition “involvement strategies,” those that draw an audience into the discourse emotionally (17-18). Tannen’s research analyzed speaking and writing that used involvement strategies basic to conversational discourse and found that these strategies engaged audiences in discourse through musicality and rhythmic patterns (17). Peter Elbow makes a similar point in his exploration of what he calls the “three mysteries of writing” (“Three Mysteries” 1). According to Elbow, writers use these mysteries to create engaging discourse for their audiences. Similar to Tannen’s theory of involvement, his third mystery of writing emphasizes how writers draw the reader into written discourse by using euphonious words and phrases (“Three Mysteries” 7). In response to Tannen’s and Elbow’s concepts, I argue that if highly effective writing attends to the needs of the audience, more highly involved texts, such as these oral texts, should be useful in teaching writing, especially persuasive writing. Writers who create the kinds of artfully balanced, musical sentences characteristic of oral texts establish themselves as mature, sophisticated, and credible writers.

As part of a research study, I designed a four-week instructional unit based on the theoretical principles espoused by Tannen and the rhetorical ancients and implemented it in an introductory African American literature class.
to assist students to develop a clear, elegant style (Ampadu 77-88). First, we discussed a brief background of classical rhetoric and the historical role that it has played in the preparation of speeches (Corbett & Connors 489-543); after receiving a handout with examples of the specific stylistic strategies (repetition) that exemplify orality, students engaged in an inquiry discussion about some of these strategies. Working in pairs or trios, students identified examples of these repetition strategies in the speeches they read. Next they analyzed these repetition strategies and the rhetorical intent of Douglass’s “Fourth of July” speech. Their first writing task was to demonstrate their ability to emulate skillful use of repetition by writing a short speech modeled after those that they had just finished studying. The speech, an argument against the enslavement of women, was to be directed to a hostile audience of whites. Though the enslavement of any human being is unacceptable, students were asked to argue specifically against the enslavement of women because that would allow them to focus intensely on one aspect of slavery they had studied in some of the model texts; thus, they should have more confidence in their ability to imitate these texts since they would be familiar with the kinds of arguments made for and against the enslavement of women.

Students’ speeches demonstrated that they had grasped the stylistic principles that they had studied in the unit because they wrote very engaging speeches, influenced by the models but which helped them in developing a lively, effective voice. One exemplary speech, entitled “. . . But What of the Woman? Freedom for Woman, as Told by a Man,” began its argument by stating the privileges that the writer had enjoyed as a free black man and argued that woman should partake of the same privileges because she had played a prominent role in helping to develop man socially, intellectually, and physically. An analysis of this speech reveals that the student used varied repetition strategies, including anaphora, antithesis, chiasmus, and parallelism. Though the student used similar stylistic constructions to those found in the original text, his own voice clearly can be heard:

I have fought for my freedom with words, with violence, and with spirit. Many of my fellow men have died fighting to gain for me what should already have been mine to claim . . . freedom. I know what it is to have life taken from me and to feel the joy of having life renewed; you know what it is to take life and to witness its return while seeing the error of your ways . . . For if my mother, my wife, my sisters, and my daughters do not receive the same freedom I have received, the same joy I have felt, the same breath of life I have breathed, then vengeance shall open her bloody red eyes and extend her wings of darkness upon you. For the only thing worse than a man’s revenge is a woman’s scorn.
In a related study that I conducted, students studied a similar unit on speeches, then wrote a speech in response to a prompt centered on Alice Walker’s The Color Purple, arguing against the physical and mental abuse of women advocated by Celie’s husband, Mr._____. Again, students produced examples of lively writing that proved valuable in developing their voice. The best examples showed that students were willing to experiment with using some of the repetition strategies that characterize highly involved texts. An excerpt of a student’s speech follows:

…I see you all looking at me. I see your eyes searching for cuts, bruises, or a broken bone. Well you won’t find any of these kinds of injuries today, although I have had many in the past. Today, my wounds are not visible. You can’t see them because they are wounds to my heart, to my thoughts, and to my very existence as a woman… . Let me tell you about my husband, Mr. ______. I was secretly hoping that he would try to stop me, show me some kindness, and let me know that he could not live without me. How do you think he responded? Let me tell you how he responded. He did not profess his love for me or offer to try to get help for our marriage. Instead, he chose to hurt me. He never lifted a finger or touched a single part of my body. Instead of physically abusing me, he attacked me verbally. . . . But words, hurtful, hateful words never go away. They are always there. They are always taunting you and making you doubt yourself . . .

The student composed an emotionally intense speech delivered by the abused Celie who testifies about how the hurt of physical and verbal abuse has damaged her psyche. Careful, balanced parallel phrasing is evident in her writing. Clearly, the wedding of the oral with the written has wielded some influence on the persuasiveness of the writing of those who emulated the oral features of texts.

By telling and reflecting on the stories in my professional journey, I have gained a better understanding of what motivated me to value linguistic diversity and adapt practices emphasizing orality in my classroom. I hope that others can assemble the jagged rhythms of my stories to unlearn common misperceptions about vernacular English. I hope they can learn to weave their individual voices into stories that shape and refine their own pedagogies, as they simultaneously intermingle their voices with my stories and those of my people. Perhaps they can truly begin to use their stories creatively to turn composition and language classrooms into symphonic sites of engaged learning that draw from rich musical passages presenting myriad representations of language and culture. This sustained emphasis on stories can help them to use oral language
conventions in a positive fashion: to produce powerful and poetic prose that transcends boundaries of race, gender, and socio-economic class.

Baltimore, Maryland

NOTES

1 I am indebted to Peter Elbow for reading early drafts of this essay.

2 In New Orleans the cultural tradition of Mardi Gras Indians who parade by chanting, singing, and dancing in the streets can be traced back 100 years. African Americans dressed in elaborate hand-sewn costumes laced with feathers and intricate beaded designs practice rituals that celebrate and honor a common spirituality and consciousness of their African and Native American ancestry. Groups that mask as Indians have taken on names such as Creole Wild West, Wild Tchoupitoulas, and Wild Magnolias. For a discussion of the evolution of this tradition, see Berry, Foose, and Jones.

3 For this research study I gratefully acknowledge support from the NCTE Research Foundation’s Cultivating New Voices Among Scholars of Color project, 2000-2002. This quasi-experimental study, “Oral Texts as Models for Teaching Persuasive Writing Style in an African American Literature Class,” was conducted during the summer of 2001, under the mentorship of Dr. George Hillocks, University of Chicago. Students at a four-year, Mid-Atlantic university studied stylistic strategies from the Classical Greek and African American rhetorical traditions as models for imitation. The study also examined students’ perceptions of how their participation in this instructional unit helped to shape their choices of stylistic strategies in persuasive writing assignments.

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