

**University of Massachusetts Amherst**

---

**From the Selected Works of Peter Elbow**

---

January 1, 2002

# "Vernacular Englishes in the Writing Classroom: Probing the Culture of Literacy"

Peter Elbow



SELECTEDWORKS™

Available at: [https://works.bepress.com/peter\\_elbow/6/](https://works.bepress.com/peter_elbow/6/)

## Vernacular Englishes in the Writing Classroom: Probing the Culture of Literacy

Peter Elbow

[This is a slightly revised version of what's in **ALT DIS: Alternative Discourses and the Academy**. Christopher Schroeder, Patricia Bizzell, and Helen Fox, eds. Heinemann, 2002.]

I'm wrestling here with a conflict in goals--a conflict I know is shared by many teachers of first year composition. My strongest desire is to invite all students to write in whatever dialect or vernacular or variety of English is theirs. As the 4Cs statement on "Students' Rights to their Own Language" (see Committee) points out, these dialects are full, rule-governed languages with all the sophisticated bells and whistles of any language. But my desire is vulnerable to strong criticism that takes various forms: (a) I hear Lisa Delpit saying that such an invitation to write in African American Vernacular English (AAVE) is a white liberal way to keep Black students from getting power ("Silenced"). (b) I hear teachers (like me!) saying, "But what about helping students satisfy writing program assessments and other faculty?" (c) I hear critics of so-called "expressivism" saying I'm uninterested in academic discourse. Summing up this conflict: How can we change the culture of literacy yet also help all students prosper in the present culture?

A good strategy for handling contradiction is to introduce the dimension of time (see my "Binaries"): to work for the *long term goal* of changing the culture of literacy, and the *short term goal* of helping students now.

### The Long Term Goal.

What would we see if we waved a magic wand? We'd see a culture that accepts and even welcomes a multiplicity of dialects for writing; and lots of publication in many dialects that used to be oral, stigmatized, and associated with backwardness or stupidity. Even prestige writing and academic discourse would be published in these heretofore low dialects. And finally, these dialects would flourish so strongly that standard written English itself (SWE)--what is now the grapholect--would actually wither away.

What a fantasy. But it's already happened. It's the history of literacy in Europe. Not so long ago, Latin was the only *acceptable* medium for writing. What we think of as English, French, Italian, and Spanish were oral vernaculars: low, common, "vulgar" (*vulgar* = "of the people")--and unfit for writing. Dante argued powerfully for the eloquence of the vulgar tongue (*De Vulgari Eloquentia*) and made an even stronger political statement by writing his *Commedia* in the vernacular of a particular and restricted culture. Chaucer and many Medieval and Renaissance authors--now revered--wrote in oral dialects that were looked down on by intellectuals and academics. Even in the 18th century, Robert Burns wrote in a disparaged dialect. (The flowering of rhetorical studies in 18th and 19th century Scotland was partly driven by the effort of some intellectual Scots to avoid stigmatization because of their dialect.)

And now? Latin has virtually disappeared. The upstart, oral, low vernaculars are now official literacies. And they (such is the culture of literacy) try to forbid writing in vernacular dialects *they* consider low and vulgar. This complicated process took a long time (Menocal gives interesting insights), but we are moving surprisingly fast toward a similar end. Four hopeful signs:

(1) There is *already* a growing body of published writing in various vernaculars (examples in appendix). Most of it is not academic, but many readers have come to value this writing and realize that literacy itself--literally, the world of *letters*--is poorer without them.

(2) In academic writing, the *rhetorical* conventions have opened up fast in the last few decades. I sense that deconstructive and postmodern scholarship cracked things open first, but then various rhetorical and structural styles have flowered and become respected--often with a personal dimension. (Two 4Cs presidents, Keith Gilyard and Victor Villanueva, provide notable examples.) The present collection and Helen Fox's *Listening to the World* are powerful reminders of how many people are beginning to see the parochialism and limits of what have tended to be felt as universal canons of thinking, logic, and organization.

(3) Even the grammar and syntax of conventional academic discourse shows a crack. Geneva Smitherman has written respected academic discourse using not just the *rhetoric* of African American Vernacular English (AAVE or Black English or Ebonics) but many features of its grammar and syntax (see "Soul 'N Style" and *Talkin and Testifyin'*).

(4) In 1994, Smitherman led a small research team that analyzed AA Vernacular English in hundreds of student essays on nationwide literacy tests (NAEP). In the latest exams they looked at (1984 and 1988), they found that "Students who employed a Black expressive discourse style received higher NAEP scores than those who did not . . ." (*Talkin That Talk* 186). In earlier exams from 1969 and 1979, Black discourse style did *not* correlate with higher scores. To explain these findings, Smitherman writes: "As cultural norms shift focus from 'book' English to 'human' English, the narrativizing, dynamic quality of the African American Verbal Tradition will help students produce lively, image-filled, concrete, readable essays . . ." (*Talkin That Talk* 186). This correlation between high scores and a Black rhetoric or discourse style held up across genres (persuasive, comparison/contrast, and informative essays).

### **The Short Term Goal**

But Smitherman's research news wasn't all so happy. It turns out (and this is an important finding for what I will suggest later), Black grammar and Black rhetoric or discourse style didn't necessarily go together. ("BEV[ernacular] syntax and BEV discourse are *not* co-occurring variables" [*Talkin That Talk* 183, her italics].) That is, students were as likely to write with only one or only the other or both dimensions of AA language. This enabled researchers to notice what was not so encouraging: even though AA *rhetoric* made scores go up, AA *grammar* made scores go down. (The benefits of AA rhetoric were also enhanced by primary trait scoring. In comparison, "with holistic scores, there continues to be what we found in

1969-79 . . . the more BEV, the lower the holistic score. This finding is not surprising given the holistic method, which includes assessment of grammar, mechanics, and syntax" [*Talkin That Talk* 174].)

This is sad but not surprising. People tend to stigmatize the grammar and syntax of nonstandard dialects more than their rhetoric. We have plenty of anecdotal evidence that teachers (and the general public) sometimes penalize AAVE "mistakes" more heavily than garden variety (white?) mistakes or ESL mistakes. Perhaps this is because grammar and syntax are more internalized and automatic--and thus experienced more as markers of identity. Villanueva tells of learning that he could get top grades on his undergraduate papers by making his grammar flawless--even though his rhetoric was "Sophistic" or "Latino" and far from what his teachers called for as "logical thinking and organization." In any case, this situation is built into literacy itself. Literacy as a culture or institution almost always implies just *one* dialect as the only proper one for writing: the "grapholect." (Some dialects are closer to the grapholect than others, but *all* dialects other than the grapholect are oral. Standard Written English is no one's mother tongue.)

There's one more problem for our short term goal. Students are mostly *not yet* benefiting from the recent rhetorical diversification of academic writing. Most faculty won't accept from students many kinds of rhetoric and structure that they happily write and read from their colleagues. (The term *academic discourse* doesn't really apply to student writing. We need a term like "school discourse" for what academics demand of students--as opposed to what they accept from peers [see my "Academic Discourse"]).

So this unhappy news--that students are heavily penalized for AAVE grammar--and often for AAVE rhetoric too--makes our short term goal is clear: we need to help speakers of vernacular dialects in our classrooms today to meet the demands of most teachers and employers. We can't wait for a new culture of literacy.

The traditional way to meet this goal is to distinguish between an oral and a written form of English: to get these students to restrict their vernacular to speech and use only SWE for writing. Marcia Farr, a notable champion in the fight against the stigmatization of so called nonstandard dialects, took this view (in an email response to my "Mother Tongue" essay):

I worry a bit about trying to get them to write in their 'mother dialect.' . . . [U]sing it in the classroom (unless in creative writing) confuses form with function. I think it's more important to get them to *fully* realize the adequacy of all dialects. 'Leave their oral language alone,' as it were, but teach writing in SE.

This approach has worked for many students and teachers. Perhaps I will be convinced that it's best when I've had as much experience as she's had with *lots* of nonSAE students in lots of contexts. But I can't resist suggesting a different approach, namely, to invite students who speak a vernacular dialect to use it for writing too. I find support from two important sources. Geneva Smitherman writes: "once they have produced the most powerful essay possible, then

and only then should you have them turn their attention to BEV grammar and matters of punctuation, spelling, and mechanics” (*Talkin That Talk* 00); Lisa Delpit writes: “Unlike unplanned oral language . . . writing is more amenable to rule application--one may first write freely to get one’s thoughts down, and then edit to hone the message and apply specific spelling, syntactical, or punctuation rules (“Ebonics” 7).

I suggest this approach for two reasons. (1) How can we help speakers of a nonSAE dialect ever feel fluent or comfortable in writing if we have to force them to write in a grammar and syntax they don’t feel as their own? And in particular, how can we help speakers of *stigmatized* dialects (like AAVE or Puerto Rican English or Hawai’ian Creole English or various Caribbean creole Englishes) develop their best skill on paper if we enforce a dialect that they correctly feel is bent on wiping out their own language and culture? After all, we experience our language or dialect--our natural grammar and syntax--not just as something we use but as a deep part of *us*. How can students get energy, vitality, and voice into their writing--deeper resonances--if they can’t use the dialect that has access to their unconscious?

(2) Look at the literary, rhetorical, and even syntactic richness in the many works published in the vernacular (see the Appendix), it is clear that literacy is impoverished if it’s restricted to writing in SWE. In addition, dialects and varieties of English are precious in themselves as living cultural entities; and they are far more likely to thrive against widespread dialectal leveling if they are used for writing.

Let me stress my earlier phrase, “*invite students to experiment.*” That is, we need to *invite*, not demand or even pressure; and our invitation should be to *experiment*--try out options, not settle on a single approach. We need to recognize and respect (and talk about) the various reasons why vernacular speaking students might *not* want even to try out a vernacular “home” dialect in writing--particularly if it is stigmatized. Some may not want to use a home dialect for *any* classroom task; some may not want to use it for those academic rhetorical tasks that they experience as impersonal, abstract, square, or clunky--alien to home rhetorical traditions; and some may not want to use it because they want to develop fluency in *producing* SWE--and therefore be willing to pay a price of reduced comfort, fluency, and power at the stage of putting words on the page; and finally, some may feel that they have too few allies in the class and so will need to use vernacular dialect only for private writing (if at all). A few may actually disapprove of their vernacular--just as Jesse Jackson called Ebonics “trash talk.” Nevertheless I maintain that we should *make* this invitation to experiment.

But *can* we invite students to write in vernacular dialects and still produce writing to satisfy most of their teachers and employers--readers who often see stigmatized grammatical features as signs of laziness and stupidity? The idea might seem merely speculative or utopian, but we have important evidence that it is feasible and desirable. When I wrote the version of this essay for *Alt Dis*, I’m sorry to say that I didn’t know about the exciting research by Patricia Irvine and Nan Elsasser. They taught basic and honors writing classes at the College of the

Virgin Islands and invited students to read and write and study their Caribbean Creole vernacular English. They write:

Although many educators acknowledge the problems inherent in the sociolinguistic status quo, they hesitate to challenge it because of the deep-seated belief that any time devoted to Creole literacy takes away time that could be spent in English instruction, and so interferes with students' understanding of English. However, our experience with freshmen remedial and honors students at CVI does not corroborate this assumption. In fact, confronting and challenging sociolinguistic norms through the study and use of Creole effected a change in stance and attitude toward learning in general and writing in particular. Both remedial and honors students wrote more, and wrote more carefully and convincingly, in the Creole-centered courses [and did far better on exit exams in standard English,] than did our students in the English-centered classes. (Elsasser and Irvine 144 [page number in Shor volume]). See also Irvine and Elsasser.

I urge readers to consult their important and eloquent research reports.

The short term goal, then, involves two tasks: helping students learn that it's *possible* to write in their most comfortable dialect--for most assume they must use SWE for writing; helping students learn how to take *some* of these pieces written in the vernacular and revise them into SWE.

### **First Task: Ways to Help Students Write in their Most Comfortable Dialect**

1. Help students understand how language works and that vernacular dialects of English are not "broken English" or slang but fully developed, sophisticated, rule-governed languages. ("I learned I had a language" wrote one of Irvine's and Elsasser's students.)

2. Provide students with published examples of powerful writing in vernacular dialects (appendix). Students need to know that writing in vernacular dialects is not some weird experiment but something proven by some of our best published writers. They also need to know that much prestige literature of our culture was written in vernacular dialects that were considered low, vulgar, and unsuitable for writing (e.g., Dante, Chaucer, *Gawain and the Green Knight*, Robert Burns).

3. Be more careful about introducing freewriting. I used to say, "Write quickly and don't worry about mistakes." I finally realized that when I phrased it this way (and thought in those terms!) I was reinforcing the idea that language that differs from SWE is a *mistake*. In short, I was inadvertently reinforcing the idea that writing belongs only in one standard dialect. Now I try to introduce it more like this:

Try to use this freewriting for whatever language comes most easily and naturally to your mouth and ear--that feels most comfortable, most yours. If it's different from school language or formal writing, that doesn't make it wrong. Do you remember the powerful published writing we read together--where

eminent authors used various home dialects of English? Just write whatever comes and don't worry.

4. Invite *some* pieces to stay in the vernacular while being revised and copy edited through to final versions. This will seem most natural with more personal or creative pieces--which campus literary magazines will often publish. But it can also make sense with some academic essays. I often ask students to revise midstage drafts in two directions--both into SWE and into vernacular--even when it's an essay trying to do academic work. Some of Smitherman's academic writing in AAVE makes a good model (see "Soul 'N Style.")

5. When an essay has to end up in SWE, we can hold off pushing for standard English even into later (but not final) drafts. Consider the criteria that most teachers look for in good academic essays: effective ideas, reasoning, organization, and clear sentences. Even if we choose to define these criteria in a conservative, "square" or "Western" fashion (and Helen Fox shows how "effective" in one culture is not the same as in others [*Listening to the World*]), we can restrict our feedback to those criteria of thinking and rhetoric. In that way, we can help students achieve every one of those strengths--even parochially defined--*and still totally ignore matters of dialect or grammar and syntax.*

After students have revised their essays as much as possible to meet the desired rhetorical criteria, they (and we) can finally turn attention to grammar and syntax. It's encouraging to see fewer surface problems--syntax that is mistaken or tangled or both--when students write in their most comfortable dialect through the middle drafts of an essay. As most ESL teachers know, many ESL mistakes in English grammar and syntax are "production errors" that result from students stretching to write in language that is alien to them. Of course, vernacular speakers who write comfortably in their own dialect will retain all the "wrong" grammar and syntax of their dialect, but they won't be so likely to make production errors or to tie up their syntax in knots. (Similarly, plenty of mainstream SAE students make fewer grammatical mistakes in their freewriting than in their carefully crafted writing.)

But some teachers have trouble ignoring grammar and syntax and responding *only* to thinking, organization, and clarity. Errors in grammar and syntax tend to grab the attention of readers and blind them to substance. Here's a sad but understandable comment by a dedicated teacher (from a list serve): "Only now can I really address the underlying thinking and understanding problems--because previously the writing was so atrocious that I couldn't see them." If we want to help all our students, we have to get over this. Nancy Sommers pointed out that even mainstream dialect students need us to *read through* grammar and syntax to the content. Countless students of all sorts get too little feedback on their thinking, organization, and clarity because they've mostly been pushed about their "wrong" language.

### **Second Task: Ways to Help Students Revise Late Drafts into SWE.**

6. We can directly *teach* some of the grammar and conventions of SWE. As college and university writing teachers, we don't have much time for this because we generally have our

students for only one semester--and often ours is their only writing course in college. Nevertheless we can help them a lot by sprinkling in some *mini-workshops* of only ten to twenty minutes to treat the most frequently troublesome matters in grammar and syntax. These mini-workshops are more effective and interesting if they highlight contrasts between vernacular dialects and SWE (including contrasts between spoken SAE and standard written English). Even mainstream students tend to be interested in learning the logic of, say, African American or Latino grammars, and to learn that they are just as regular and sophisticated as the grammar of SWE and not at all limited or defective. (See Palacas for an account of how Black English has a more sophisticated system of tense and aspect than “standard” or “white” English. He builds a first year writing course around the study of AAVE as it compares to SAE and SWE.)

7. I have found it enormously productive to make a simple but major change in my calendar of assignments: to add an extra “final final draft” or “copy edited draft” assignment. *After* students have revised their essays on the basis of feedback from me and from classmates to strengthen the ideas, reasoning, and evidence, and to increase the clarity of structure and sentences (however defined)--but not yet worrying about grammar and syntax or spelling--*then* they have one more draft assignment. Their only job now is to give *all* their attention to matters of grammar and syntax. At this point, the final process of copy editing and changing to SWE is less daunting. A good number of surface problems have disappeared, and it’s easier than expected to change the so-called “nonstandard” dialect features of grammar and syntax into SWE.

I find this extra draft assignment helpful for all my students because it finally teaches them at a behavioral level the crucial difference between revising and copy editing. In preparation for this “final final” draft, I usually give a bit of feedback. For most students, I’ll circle deviations from SWE on a couple of paragraphs or the first page. For a few students where it seems appropriate, I’ll actually suggest corrections--but only on the first or second essays of the semester.

Readers of earlier drafts have said, “But Peter, you blithely skate over this huge job: how can vernacular speakers ‘just’ copy edit into SWE?” I agree that it’s a daunting job, but I have a simple response to this objection: there’s no way for vernacular speakers to *avoid* this job. Sooner or later, they *have to* translate their most automatic dialect into SWE. Their only choice is whether to do that translating during earlier stages of writing when it is likely to distract them from the task of coming come up with thoughts and developing and clarifying them--or at the very end after they’ve finally got their thoughts the way they want them. So the only help for vernacular speakers is the same help I offer speakers of the standard oral dialect of English: “Experiment. You’ve got to end up with so-called correct grammar and spelling. Is it easier to try to keep everything correct right from the very beginning?--or not to worry about correctness while you generate ideas and revise, and only copy edit for correctness at the very end?”<sup>1</sup>

## **An Objection**

All my suggestions lead to an obvious objection:

You can't use vernacular dialects like AAVE for academic discourse. These dialects carry a whole culture and rhetoric--they involve ways of seeing and thinking--that conflict with the practices of academic discourse.

In order to address this objection, I need to call on the distinction between the two levels of language, rhetoric and grammar, and remind readers of Smitherman's finding that they don't always go together in the writing of AA students. So if we look at traditional AAVE *rhetoric* (such as the heavy use of narrative [Arnetha Ball 524] and the use of proverbs and aphorisms, sermonic tone, direct address, and conversational tone [Smitherman, *Talkin That Talk* 181]), these may indeed conflict with traditional Western academic rhetorical habits and styles (such as impersonal or detached abstract reasoning and certain styles of point-based argument and organization). But AAVE *grammar and syntax do not preclude any of these academic rhetorical practices*.

I can illustrate my this distinction between rhetoric and grammar by describing a teaching process that I and countless other teachers have used for ages to help mainstream SAE students to write a persuasive or analytic essay, even when it is intended to be wholly impersonal. I invite them to start with freewriting or journal writing about the topic (sometimes even playing with genres such as a "rant" for the seed of a persuasion essay--or an angry letter for the seed on an analysis essay. Next I ask students to change the rhetoric and structure. That is, I ask them (sometimes by reading to each other in pairs) to find and articulate the "points" that are already embedded in the writing, and to figure out other points that are needed in order to make a piece of analysis or persuasion that is fairly impersonal rather than an expression of their feelings. This creates the "midprocess" draft that gets feedback and is revised to a "final" draft. *But still* there is no attention yet to grammar and syntax. Then for the final final draft, all attention goes to grammar and syntax.

Notice how this process, when used by speakers of nonSAE dialects, leads to an interesting theoretical puzzler: At what point would a speaker of (say) AAVE "stop using the vernacular dialect"? Was she no longer using the dialect when the rhetoric was no longer AAVE?--or only when she expunged AAVE grammar and syntax? I don't care so much about the theoretical conundrum; my point is pedagogical and phenomenological: such speakers get a chance to put all their attention on new rhetorical tasks (tasks that are often new to mainstream college freshmen too), and not distract themselves by spending the considerable attention they would need for *also* trying to change their grammar and syntax.

Of course, I've described the extreme case where the goal is a completely impersonal essay. More often I and most teachers are looking for an effective piece of analysis or persuasion that *doesn't* have to be so cold and square. For that goal, we can show students the model of an essay like Geneva Smitherman's "Soul 'N Style." She creates strong analysis and persuasion (and it was published in an academic journal); but she mixes this academic

rhetorical style with a vernacular rhetorical style involving direct address and a personal tone. And of course she uses plenty of AAVE grammar and syntax (though not exclusively)--even for final publication.

But the point is that Yes, vernacular students (like most students) will need to change their rhetoric as they move from early to later drafts. I have a hunch (though of course this is very speculative) that the difficulty of learning the rhetoric and thinking needed for college essays may come less from the fact that the home dialect is a *different ethnic dialect*, and more from the fact that it is an *oral dialect*. Ball writes: “[S]peakers of AAE . . . because of their cultural and linguistic experiences, rely on oral discourse features” and have “vernacular-based preferences in expository patterns” (“Cultural Preference” 520). Learning to *write* one’s oral thinking and rhetoric will serve as a helpful midway stage in the journey from oral to written modes of thinking and rhetoric.

And let’s not forget that *lots* of mainstream students in our first year writing classes have not read or written very much; therefore they too cannot really be considered to have entered the culture of literacy. Many of them also show the same tendencies toward an oral-based rhetoric of narrative, circumlocution, and indirectness.

## Concluding Reflections

It might seem as though everything I’ve written involves controversial issues of ideology, cultural theory, and pedagogical theory. But I would argue that the main thing, in the end, is a concrete personal and political choice that each student should be invited to make: a choice between two different processes for writing an essay that must end up in SWE: (1) starting out writing in the grammar and syntax of their most comfortable vernacular dialect and then gradually revising and finally copy editing into SWE; (2) starting out being careful to use the “proper” dialect of SWE and sticking with it throughout. We must demonstrate to them experientially that there *is* a choice. Then we can invite each student to make his or her own decision about which way to go:

Which of these two processes works better for you? In effect, which is more important for you: the comfort of not having to think about grammar and syntax while you’re trying to accomplish new difficult rhetorical and cognitive tasks? Or the potential confusion of using two different dialects for writing?

Of course, students don’t have to answer this question beforehand or once and for all. The crucial invitation is to *experiment* and *try out* alternative ways of arriving at final drafts in SWE--to see which is most productive for them. We should respect their reasons for declining the invitation, but surely we shouldn’t withhold the invitation itself. I can’t believe it’s right to leave students with the sense of no choice--with the sense that there is only one way to go about writing, namely to leave their most comfortable vernacular out of it--the sense that writing itself necessarily *means* trying to use SWE.

Choice turns out to be an ideal fertilizer for discussing the realities and politics of language. The discussion goes even better when I acknowledge to students that I am using my authority as teacher to create what can feel like a tricky combination of *choice-and-no-choice*. That is, I invite choice about what dialect to use for a good deal of writing--and even some final drafts. Yet (as a teacher of first year writing in today's culture of literacy) I enforce *no-choice* in my requirement that students copy edit successfully at least three or four out of the five or six main essays into the grammar and syntax of "correct" SWE.

I also provide choice and no-choice about rhetoric or discourse style. On at least a couple of persuasive or analytic essays, I restrict choice and try to insist on a generally point-driven rhetoric and structure rather than allow something purely narrative or associative. But for these point driven essays, I invite rhetorical choice about whether or not to meet conservative standards of "school writing" (first paragraphs with thesis statements &c. &c. &c.). I don't hide my bias toward more organic and less rigid structures for point-driven rhetoric--yet I try to get students thinking about, and *feeling*, the difference between stricter and looser school conventions for point-driven rhetoric. In my comments, I often find myself writing, "What you have here works well for me, but plenty of teachers would find it too 'loose' or undisciplined." Of course when it comes to more informal or personal essays, I invite non-point-driven rhetorical structures where the essay doesn't necessarily even "say" what it is saying.

This combination of choice and no-choice--along with the readings in vernacular dialects and the explicitness about my teacher authority--all this leads naturally to discussions of crucial topics: the reality of vernaculars as full sophisticated languages in their own right rather than "bad English"; the stigmatization of dialects; policies of institutions and teachers about various dialects and the present unfair burden on speakers of vernaculars; and signs of change in the culture of literacy. When there aren't many vernacular speakers in the class, it's helpful to start off with discussions of the way literacy works. I like to show students that *Standard Written English is no one's mother tongue*. At present, *no one* can write without moving from their spoken vernacular to the grapholect, but it's become common for speakers of the mainstream dialect to do most of their composing in their own oral dialect. The political point is that it's no longer controversial for mainstream speakers to write in their oral vernacular and afterwards revise and copy edit into SAE. But when Ken Macrorie and I (later) began to publicize freewriting, it was controversial.

These thoughts lead to a summary of my whole essay: everyone should be able to do what mainstream speakers can noncontroversially do: compose in their oral dialects. But in the short term--for the few decades till we achieve the long term goal of a more inclusive culture of literacy--speakers of nonmainstream vernaculars will be faced with an extra burden if they want to end up with essays in Standard Written English. We cannot wish away this unfairness, but we can at least show these students that they have a choice of two different writing processes for taking on that extra burden.<sup>2</sup>

## End Notes

1. K-12 English teachers can spend more time teaching the grammar and conventions of SWE. We college teachers of one semester courses can't teach writing if we make grammar and syntax a major focus. By the way, when I make a separate final final draft assignment where the only task is to copy edit to SWE, I openly allow and indeed *invite* students to get help with this process. This bothers some teachers, but it makes perfect sense to me. If we invite students to get feedback and help in making *substantive* revisions to their essays, why shouldn't we do the same when it comes to surface revisions? Figuring out what one needs to do to produce a final draft in SWE is a realistic, important, and writerly skill: one of the main ones I'm trying to teach.

2. In this essay, I draw on and build from my longer essay, "Inviting the Mother Tongue." I've shared various versions of that essay and this one in various settings and I'm grateful for the good ideas and criticism I received. I'm particularly grateful for extensive and cogent feedback from Marilyn Cooper, Helen Fox, and the participants in the 2001 UMass Symposium on Writing and Dialects and Varieties of English.

## **Appendix: Examples of Published Writing in Vernacular Dialects or Varieties of English Other than “Standard Written English”**

### **AAVE or Black English:**

Hurston, Zora Neal. *Their Eyes Were Watching God*. Philadelphia: J.B. Lippincott Company, 1937.

Sonia Sanchez was one of the earliest poets to use Black English. See *Shake Loose My Skin: New and Selected Poems*. Boston: Beacon P, 1999.

Sapphires. *Push: A Novel*. NY: Knopf, 1996.

Geneva Smitherman wrote academic discourse in AAVE “Soul n Style” and in some *Talkin and Testifyin*. (See Works Cited.)

Walker, Alice. *The Color Purple*. NY: Harcourt Brace, 1982.

### **Caribbean Creole English:**

Lovelace, Earl. *The Wine of Astonishment*. NY: Vintage, 1984.

Sistren, with Honor Ford Smith, ed. *Lionheart Gal: Life Stories of Jamaican Women*. London: Women’s Press, 1986.

Hodge, Merle. *Crick-Crack Monkey*. I’m told it’s a classic among Caribbean lit folk.

### **Hawai’ian Creole English (“Pidgin”):**

Lum, Darrell H. Y. *Pass On, No Pass Back*. Honolulu: Bamboo Ridge P, 1990.

Yamanaka, Lois-Ann. *Blue’s Hanging*. NY: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 1997.

--. *Saturday Night at the Pahala Theater*. Honolulu: Bamboo Ridge P, 1993.

### **Hispanic/Latino/a English:**

Anzaldúa, Gloria. *Borderlands / La Frontera: The New Mestiza*. San Francisco: Spinters-Aunt Lute, 1987.

Cisneros, Sandra. *Woman Hollering Creek and Other Stories*. New York: Random House, 1991.

Rivera, Tom’as [EDITOR: accent over a] *...y no se lo trag’o la tierra/And the Earth Did Not Devour Him*. Houston: Arte P’ublico, 1992.

Trevino (EDITOR: accent over n), Jes’us Salvador. *The Fabulous Sinkhole and Other Stories*. Houston: Arte P’ublico, 1995.

### **Scots:**

Kelman, James *How Late It Was, How Late*. NY/London Vintage, 1998.

## Works Cited

- Ball, Arnetha F. "Cultural Preference and The Expository Writing of African-American Adolescents." *Written Communication* 9.4 (1992): 501-32.
- Committee of the Conference on College Composition and Communication. "Students' Rights to Their Own Language." *College Composition and Communication* 25 (1974): 1-18.
- Delpit, Lisa. "Ebonics and Culturally Responsive Instruction." *Rethinking Schools* 12.1 (Fall 1997): 6-7.
- . "The Silenced Dialogue: Power and Pedagogy in Educating Other People's Children." *Harvard Educational Review* 58.3 (1988): 280-98.
- Elbow, Peter. "Inviting the Mother Tongue: Beyond 'Mistakes,' 'Bad English,' and 'Wrong Language'." *Journal of Advanced Composition* 19.2 (1999): 359-88. Reprinted in *Everyone Can Write: Essays Toward a Hopeful Theory of Writing and Teaching Writing*. NY: Oxford University Press, 2000.
- . "Reflections on Academic Discourse: How it Relates to Freshmen and Colleagues." *College English* 53.2 (Feb 1991): 135-55. Reprinted in *Everyone Can Write*.
- . "The Uses of Binary Thinking." *Journal of Advanced Composition* 12.1 (Winter 1993): 51-78. Reprinted in *Everyone Can Write*.
- Elsasser, Nan and Patricia Irvine. (1985). "English and Creole: The Dialectics of Choice in a College Writing Program." *Harvard Educational Review* 55 (1985): 399-415. Reprinted in I. Shor (Ed.), *Freire for the Classroom*. New Jersey: Boynton-Cook, 1987.
- Fox, Helen. *Listening To the World*. Urbana IL: NCTE, 1994.
- Gilyard, Keith. *Voices of the Self: A Study of Language Competence*. Detroit: Wayne State UP, 1991.
- Irvine, Patricia and Elsasser, Nan. "The Ecology of Literacy: Negotiating Writing Standards in a Caribbean Setting." *The Social Construction of Written Communication*. Eds., B. Rafoth and D. Rubin. Norwood, NJ: Ablex, 1988.
- Menocal, Maria Rosa. *Shards of Love: Exile and the Origins of the Lyric*. Durham NC: Duke UP, 1994.
- Palacas, Arthur L. "Liberating American Ebonics from Euro-English." *College English* 63.3 (Jan 2001): 326-352.
- Smitherman, Geneva. "Soul 'N Style." *English Journal* 63.4 (1974): 16-17. Reprinted in *Talkin That Talk*.
- . *Talkin That Talk: Language, Culture, and Education in African America*. NY: Routledge, 2000.
- . *Talkin and Testifyin: The Language of Black America*. Detroit: Wayne State UP, 1986.
- Sommers, Nancy. "Responding to Student Writing." *College Composition and Communication* 32 (1982): 148-56.
- Villanueva, Victor Jr. *Bootstraps: From an American Academic of Color*. Urbana, IL: NCTE, 1993.