# EXPLORING DIASPORIC DIALECTS OF BLACK WOMEN IN COLLEGE COMPOSITION AND COMMUNICATION: A CRITICAL REFLECTIVE NARRATIVE INQUIRY

by

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ABSTRACT

ALICIA D. DERVIN. Exploring Diasporic Dialects of Black Women in College Composition and Communication: A Critical Reflective Narrative Inquiry (Under the direction of DR. TEHIA GLASS)

Historically, standard English language ideologies have been perpetually ingrained in American educational practices and policies (Smitherman, 2017; Wong & Teuben-Rowe, 1997). These practices are not limited to K-12 studies and maintain a position of dominance in higher education (Álvarez-Mosquera & Marín-Gutiérrez, 2020). Calls for diversity in curriculum and pedagogical practices currently involve increasing demands for linguistic inclusion that reflects the diversity of student populations (CCCC, 2020). This study explores how Black women students across the diaspora who use home and/or native languages, dialects, and accents navigate their identities in academic spaces of higher learning where standard English language ideologies are often the only acceptable language varieties that are valued or encouraged. Data were generated in virtual, individual semi-structured in-depth sequences using Seidman's (2006) three-interview model, followed by a single focus group interview with all three participants. Data analysis was characterized by a qualitative, critical, narrative-based approach that included emphasis on both small stories (De Fina and Georgakopoulou, 2012) and dominant narratives (Lyotard, 1984). Findings indicated the experiences of Black women in college composition and communications are marked by feelings of rejection, inadequacies, pressure to conform, and a lack of linguistic agency. Implications for post-secondary practice and future research are included.

DEDICATION

I dedicate this work to my mother, Vonzie Pecola Dervin, and to my grandmother, Ella Mae Burns, for the many lessons about life and love that no course could ever teach. Also, to my dearest son, Edward Charleston Dervin, this work is now a part of our legacy. May you carry it on. Finally, this body of work in its entirety is dedicated to the memory of my loving father, George Edward Dervin, Sr. We did it.

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Tremendous gratitude is extended to the young women who participated in this study. To the three of you, and to all of the other students who feel their voices are not always heard, you are my drive and my motivation as a scholar and an educator. To say, "Thank you," doesn't quite seem like enough, so I will say this instead, "I got you." Finally, to my loving family and friends (and Lady) who held me down and uplifted me during this process - and all my life -, THANK YOU!

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CHAPTER 1: INTRODUCTION

It's always seemed to me that black people's grace has been with what they do with

language. In Lorrain, Ohio, when I was a child, I went to school with and heard the

stories of Mexicans, Italians, and Greeks, and I listened. I remember their language, and a

lot of it is marvelous. But when I think of things my mother or father or aunts used to say,

it seems the most absolutely striking thing in the world.

-Toni Morrison

"Where dat at?" This inquiry rang out from a row at the rear of a chilly college classroom

with burnt-orange walls. Students were sprinkled here and there with each their faces illuminated

by a computer screen that mirrored the larger image that was projected on the board in front of us

all. During my first semester teaching as a community college instructor, I was urged to observe

a class while one of my new colleagues instructed their Introduction to College Composition

course. So, there I sat on the back row with the student who boldly posed the question anxiously

awaiting a response. "Great question," I thought to myself. "Where is that?" Most of the students

in the classroom were struggling to locate the designated page of the learning management

system the teacher had instructed them to navigate to. With a piercing glare over tortoise-shelled

frames the teacher replied, "I'm going to let you give that another try." Other students laughed

and snickered. The curious student made yet another attempt to seek assistance. "Where is that

located?" they said. "That's more like it," the teacher responded. I watched as the student sunk

into their seat, likely regretting ever posing the question in the first place. I do not know what

else was taught in that course on that day in the burnt-orange classroom. My thoughts lingered

with the student, now embarrassed and unlikely to ever ask another question, and what that

encounter must have made them feel. To be heard and understood, yet rejected; to have their absolutely striking way of speaking struck down.

Year after year, college classrooms continue to become increasingly diverse as students from an expansive array of racial, ethnic, cultural, and socioeconomic backgrounds arrive eager to learn and eager to excel (Smith, 2018). Additionally, this mixing, merging, and meshing of multiple racial representations is believed to not only equip students with cultural competency but is also thought to mold them for the ever-evolving, globalized workforce (Deruy, 2016; Wiggan & Hutchinson, 2009). In 2016, Black women were dubbed the "most educated group in the US" (Helm, 2016). This proclamation came after the National Center for Education Statistics (2019) reported bachelor's degrees conferred across all racial and ethnic groups recorded in the United States amounted to 64 percent for Black women students for the 2015-2016 academic year; the highest percentage reported for all ethnicities and all genders at that time. The pursuit of educational advancement has become a necessity across varying Black women identities in America. To echo the sentiments of Anna Julia Cooper (1988), this evolving destiny of the Black woman experience in education warrants an exploration into the ways in which they learn, know, and speak within the realm of academia.

For centuries, standard English ideologies (SEI), both oral and written, have remained dominant and in some cases, the solely acceptable language ideology in American education systems, despite the home and native languages of diverse student populations. Students with culturally specific dialects shared by many Black students like the Black English Vernacular (BEV), African American Vernacular English (AAVE), or Ebonics, Afro-Caribbean dialects, and native-African languages are often strongly encouraged to speak proper or "real" English instead. Navigating this push for the usage of standard English can be dually detrimental. In the

event that these pupils fail to transition from the usage of their home languages, their level of academic achievement subsequently suffers (Hill, 2009). Conversely, students who can succeed in mastering these mandated language structures risk losing cultural connections and the benefits of multi-linguistics (Stewart, 2012).

It has been a widespread notion in the American education system that Ebonics has no place in discussions and discourse conducted in classrooms on behalf of both teacher and student (Barnes, 2012). More specifically, English and languages arts (ELA) classes on all grade levels have focused predominantly on the use of standard English mastery in written assignments, and in oral exchanges as well (Hass Dyson, 2013). Despite being formally defined as a "language in its own right," ("Ebonics", n.d.; Perry & Delpit, 1998) opposition to the acknowledgement and use of AAVE and other diasporic dialects manifests through the dismissal of culturally specific dialect in literacy expectations and desired educational outcomes (Boutte, et al., 1995).

In perhaps one of the most controversial attempts to acknowledge AAVE as a distinct language and incorporate it into school curricula, the school board of Oakland, California, presented what would become known as the Oakland Resolution in December 1996. This resolution stood as an effort to validate AAVE as a language and sought to alter teaching practices in ways that would help young Black children see gains in literacy skills per SEI standards as exemplified in other teaching English as a second language (TESOL) programs. According to Messier (2012), the Unified School District of Oakland "determined that academic programs should be developed that recognized the existence of Ebonics as the primary language in the domestic and social lives of the students, as well as its cultural and historical legitimacy for the African American population" (p. 1). While many believed the aim of the proposition was rooted by good intentions – pulling the proficiency rates for African American students above

the state and national averages – others saw it as a mechanism to further hold Black children back academically by teaching the emphasis of slang. The media coverage and controversy that followed yielded one of the first widely polarized instances of anti-Ebonics legislation (Richardson, 1998). As illustrated by the Oakland Resolution, as well as subsequent and similar studies and propositions, research and praxis regarding the use of home/native languages and dialects often centers on the early childhood and K-12 experience.

**3.2 Statement of the Problem**

The dismissal or rejection of home language varieties in academic settings can result in students disconnecting from content or disconnecting from their cultural heritage (Carter, 2007; Hill, 2009). The maintenance of cultural competence implied by Paris (2009) highlights the latter. For many students from urban settings who find themselves excelling in standard or mainstream English, labels like "Black nerd" and being accused of "talking White" have damaging effects (Baugh, 1996; Hannaham, 2002; Strickland, 2010). The students often find difficulty navigating social circles during a time in adolescence where acceptance, for many, is more vital than education (Hannaham, 2002). Language that deviates from the norm of "standard" English is often presented in materials that are used to highlight inadequacies or perpetuate stereotypes (Bouie, 2014; Carter, 2007). As a result, students conclude that their own voices, or their culturally and socially learned manner of speaking, are not welcome in a classroom that focuses on the use of "proper" English.

By definition, a standard English ideology is a hegemonic philosophy (Rose & Galloway, 2017; Smitherman & Villanueva, 2003). It suggests one universal way of verbal and textual expression that is held to a higher regard than all other forms of communication. Many researchers and linguists have asserted that standard English maintains its dominance due largely

to its extensive use globally (Álvarez-Mosquera & Marín-Gutiérrez, 2020; Block, 2010). With regards to the notion of English as a–or in this case *the*–universal language, or *lingua franca*, Block (2010) wrote, "...more importantly, by protecting the individual's right to speak in a language in which he/she feels competent, this type of conversation serves to validate all speakers equally, something which does not and indeed cannot happen when English as a lingua franca is used" (p. 28). As a power structure, positioning "standard", or "proper", English as the exemplar fortifies a hierarchy in which other languages perpetually hold a lower status.

Detachment from discourse, coursework, and instruction is equally problematic. It can be concluded that when students feel as if they have no voice in a classroom setting, their level of academic achievement suffers. While more educators are embracing the inclusion of culturally relevant instruction across many subject areas, language and dialect are seldom integrated, specifically in English and composition courses (Matsuda, 2006) where efficacy in the standard English language ideology seemingly reigns supreme (Smitherman & Villanueva, 2003).

Language separation in academic instruction is not a new concept. In 1933, Carter G. Woodson's *Mis-education of the Negro* highlighted shortcomings of the American education curriculum while asserting it did not reflect the "true history, sociology, politics, economics – or language – of Americans" (as cited in Smitherman, 2017, p. 6). What Woodson designates as "Negro dialect" has been referred to over the years by additional terms and phrases which include: Black English Vernacular (BEV), African American Vernacular English (AAVE), Ebonics, African American Language, and African American English (Smitherman, 2017). AAVE is known for having complex and distinct features that other languages, like "standard English, do not have (Boutte et al., 2021); like five present verb tenses (see Table 1).

Table 1.

*AAVE Present Tense Examples*

| Aspect | AAVE Example | "Standard" English Translation |
|---|---|---|
| Habitual/continuative | She be livin' her best life. | She frequently has a good time. |
| Intensified continuative | She stay livin' her best life. | She is always having a good time. |
| Intensified continuative (non-habitual) | She steady livin' her best life. | She keeps on having a good time. |
| Perfect progressive | She been livin' her best life. | She has been having a good time. |
| *Irrealis | She finna go live her best life. | She is about to go have a good time. |

*Note:* *The term "irrealis" refers to an event that has not yet occurred.

Like many other non-dominant languages, the usage of Black dialects in classrooms, specifically in English courses, is rebuked and rejected while literacy tools provided by bilingualism are ignored. Syntax, grammar, phonology, and other sociolinguistic elements of various home and native languages and dialects have been extensively researched over the past 40 years (Etter-Lewis, 1985; Lee, 1995; Paris, 2009). This scholarship has provided insight into the origins and continuation of a shared language used by African Americans from vast locations and regions. Research has highlighted how African American students use AAVE, hip hop culture and language, and culturally shared colloquialisms and idioms to understand literary concepts like figurative language, simile, metaphors, and poetry (Boutte, 1998; Emdin & Adjapong, 2018; Lee, 1995). Connections have been made in support of utilizing AAVE as a means of teaching students how to "maintain cultural competence" while still operating under the standard English ideology widely used in American schools (Paris, 2009, p. 430). Essentially, meaning making–an integral component of literacy education–becomes influenced by the culturally specific resources students acquire prior to entering academic settings (Gomez-Estern,

et al., 2010; Pacheco & Miller, 2016). For many students, the development of the language they have grown accustomed to speaking differs drastically from what they are expected to use in academic settings.

For decades, educational researchers have recognized that African American primary-aged schoolchildren from a variety of backgrounds begin their academic journeys attempting to grasp two overlapping codes: AAVE and standard English (Etter-Lewis, 1985; Lee, 1995). Despite frequently being viewed as a more contemporary concept, Etter-Lewis (1985) asserted that "code switching" is a fundamental literacy tool for African American preschoolers. Etter-Lewis (1985) posited, "acquiring BE and SE is not only a matter of language learning, but also a situation that necessarily involves learning the respective social values of the codes as well as learning to switch between codes in appropriate contexts" (Etter-Lewis, 1985, p. 2).

As these students matriculate, many of them who have difficulty managing the complexities of both codes withdraw from contributing to classroom conversations. As they enter courses that begin to focus on the evaluating and analyzing of literary content, it is imperative that they are able to effectively express their own thoughts and opinions of the materials used for instruction. When dialect is equated to deficit, many students will refrain from participating in academic discourse to reduce critique (Stockman, 2010). Rather than nurturing a skill that many other bilingual students find beneficial, AAVE-speaking students begin to feel their language style must be modified rather than mastered. Conversely, this notion could cause college students to resist being encouraged to assimilate to dominant language structures (Hill, 2009).

In addition to distinct dialects and languages, Caribbean and African students often enter the classroom with accents that many educators view as barriers to learning and effective

communication. Due to the widely accepted notion that the pursuit of higher education in the West warrants a higher degree of educational attainment, international students account for a larger portion of enrollees (Irungu, 2013). This includes students from African and Caribbean nations. Some scholars even suggest accents can determine or influence group membership and sometimes countermand socially constructed categories like race (Álvarez-Mosquera & Marín-Gutiérrez, 2020). As previously mentioned, when it comes to the application of literacy skills in higher education, it is often linked closely to proficiency in standard English. Álvarez-Mosquera and Marín-Gutiérrez (2020) wrote:

> Issues with language performance in academic and professional domains often underline the necessity of *good language skills.* Paradoxically, being a black South African with a prominent command of standard-like English comes with a social cost. The term coconut is typically used as a racial slur meaning these speakers are perceived to be taking a white identity or acting white. (p. 3)

Malcom and Mendoza (2014) found in a study that explored ethnic identity development for Afro Caribbean international students (ACIS) at a research-intensive university in the United States, that language and accents played a major role in the academic identities they often felt they had to assume. One participant reported the need to speak "Americanese" when conversing in classroom settings (Malcolm & Mendoza, 2014, p. 606). The complexities associated with the notion of having to adopt multiple identities due to language, dialect, or accents while pursuing higher education, particularly in the United States, is a concerning, yet shared experience for students across the Black diaspora. Additionally, it is not a foreign concept for Black people. From Olaudah Equiano's and W.E.B. DuBois' notions of double consciousness to Paul

Lawrence Dunbar's poetic portrayal of the mask, living what can feel like multiple lives in multiple worlds is a familiar feeling for many in the diaspora.

**1.2 Significance of the Study**

Fine (1987) defined silencing in schools as a "process of institutionalized policies and practices which obscure the very social, economic, and therefore experiential conditions of students' daily lives, and which expel from written, oral, and nonverbal expression" (p. 157). Essentially, silencing refers to the suppression of students' voices figuratively and literally due to systemic structures within the American educational system that often manifest in the form of both verbal and textual expression, resulting in verbal and textual oppression (Kirkland, 2017). As this notion permeates through all levels of education, "the very voices of students and their communities that public education claims to nurture, shut down" (Fine, 1897, p. 158). The silencing of voice as a result of vernacular follows non-standard English speaking students into higher education. The conditioning that has taken place for many of these students in their elementary and secondary years of schooling could be considered a contributing factor as to why many college educators are finding the number of students across all demographics who are willing to "speak up" in English, literature, composition, and communications courses is increasingly dwindling (King, 2018; Stewart, 2012).

The debates about what college student engagement and participation mean continue to be discussed and deliberated (Dirk, 2010). Despite varying definitions, this perception of engagement often includes the prevalence of verbal communication and academic discourse. It has also been suggested that by the time Black students who use their home/native dialects reach the collegiate level, their own attitudes about language may lead them to believe they will be

harshly judged by their instructors and their peers if they willingly participate in discussions while using their home or native languages in an academic space (Stewart, 2012).

## 1.3 Subjectivity Statement

In stark contrast to the positivist paradigm, qualitative research requires the researcher to acknowledge their own subjectivity (Glesne, 2011). According to Glesne (2011), this leads to passionate and personal research. Peshkin (1988) asserted that it is not possible for the researcher to reject their subjectivity. Having grown up and experienced the various phases of life as a Black girl, teenager, and woman, I have been able to function within academic spaces subscribing to the norms of SE while also strongly maintaining the use and knowledge of my own home language – AAVE – outside of those spaces. Nothing fascinated me more as a child than the sound of *my* people. From the Gullah/geechie language of the various regions of Charleston, SC, to the distinct dialect and accents of members of my grandfather's church in Kingstree, SC, I knew early on that there was brilliance in Black language, despite what others thought. These experiences undoubtedly influenced and, in many ways, guided this research. My choice of a research site in the Carolinas is two-fold. On one hand, the convenience of conducting my research where I am employed allowed for readily available participants. On the other hand, having resided, worked, and attended school in both North and South Carolina, I wanted to use this location to pay homage to other Black women who have lived and learned in the Carolinas. I now serve as an English instructor at a community college. Weekly, I have experiences with students whose home languages and dialects are rejected under the standards and principles of SEI when it comes to teaching composition. The guilt that has come forth on my own behalf as a result of this position also plays an important role in this study. Telling students that they cannot say what they wish to say in the way they wish to say it in their writing

contributes to the rejection of non-standard English. This is something that I personally struggle with semester after semester. As I continue to work in higher education, I want to be able to help students establish agency when using the languages and dialects they are most comfortable with in academic spaces as it is a vital part of their identity, and my own.

**3.2 Purpose of the Study**

The purpose of this study is to explore how Black women students across the diaspora who use home and/or native languages, dialects, and accents navigate their identities in academic spaces of higher learning where standard English language ideologies are often the only acceptable language varieties that are valued or encouraged. (Ferguson, 2003; Smith, 2016; Wolfram, 1979). Composition and communications courses are among the most prevalent courses in collegiate curricula worldwide and are required as a part of students' first-year experience at the majority of two-year and four-year institutions in the United States regardless of their intended major or plan of study (Warner, 2018). In addition to the convenience of participant recruitment due to my occupation as a college English instructor, these courses have been purposefully selected due to their prevalence in higher education. Furthermore, these courses often serve as a means to outline the expectations of writing according to collegiate standards, and as an introduction to academic discourse (Matsuda, 2006; Thornborrow, 2013). Plainly stated, they attempt to teach students how to be a successful college student; adequately using standard English heavily contributes to this presumptive success. This investigation focused on the following three research questions:

1.) How do Black women students narrate and navigate raciolinguistic identities and experiences in college composition and communications courses?

2.) In what ways does the rejection/acceptance/ambivalence of "non-standard" English in academia impact Black women students' linguistic agency in academic discourse?

3.) How does the hegemonic positioning of "standard" English in collegiate composition assessment influence the written work of collegiate Black women?

This study was guided by a narrative inquiry methodological approach. Narrative inquiry is being used to portray the individual experiences of the participants with depth and detail (Kim, 2008). Through narrative inquiry, stories of the lived experiences of those involved in the research process are presented in a manner that can illustrate the complexities of language in a variety of fields (Moen, 2006). Data and narratives were collected through virtual interviews with students formerly enrolled in a composition course under my direction at a large community college in the southeast. Participants also agreed to attend a one-time virtual focus group at the conclusion of individual interviews. Additionally, as the research focuses on the use of home/native language through speaking and writing, writing submissions (archival documents) and the written work of the participants were analyzed using thematic analysis that identifies similarities and differences in participants' responses and their relationship to the research questions.

CHAPTER 2: LITERATURE REVIEW AND THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

If Black English isn't a language, then tell me, what is?

-James Baldwin

## 2.1 Literature Review

This study focuses on the experiences of Black women in collegiate composition and communications courses with regards to the intersectionalities of literacy, language, learning, and identity across the Black diaspora. In this chapter, I will review existing literature on identity concepts and structures for Black women, language and literacy practices for young collegiate women of African American, Afro-Caribbean, and African descent, and the theoretical framework that will fortify this study. According to Drake (2015), "The diaspora paradigm involves the concept of a 'Homeland' and various situations outside of it into which individuals have migrated and where persisting 'diaspora communities' survive despite profound changes in the culture and physique of the people" (p. 2). These various situations for the current Black diaspora in the US have included colonization, the institution of enslavement, migration, and other circumstances that have resulted in the displacement from the "Homeland" of Africa. For the purposes of this study, the terms *Black identity* and *Black women identities* will be used to encompass the three distinct ethnic backgrounds/identities of the participants who identify with the following ethnic characterizations: African American, Afro-Caribbean, and African.

The state sanctioned murders of Black men and women, and other events where the humanity and dignity of Black people was denied in 2020 and the subsequent social climate in the United States has presented a call for change that resembles the calls and cries of the ancestors. From slave-led rebellions, political leadership during reconstruction, civil rights boycotts, and the formation of groups like the Black Panther Party, to the youth activists who

filled the streets of various cities across the country in the wake of the murders of George Floyd, Breonna Taylor, and others, members of the Black diaspora are familiar with the power of protests (Davis, 2016). This activism stems beyond the tragedies linked to racial inequality and police brutality and can be applied equally to the experiences of Black students in college classrooms. Historically, Black students have made demands for justice and inclusion on college campuses that have had lasting effects on representation in higher education as it pertains to access and curricula (Joseph, 2003; Zulu; 2014). According to Joseph (2003), "During the decade of the 1960s black students demanded education that was relevant to their specific history of racial oppression" (p. 182). These sentiments are echoed by many students and educators today. A recent position statement from the Conference on College Composition and Communication (CCCC, 2020), a division of the National Council of Teachers of English (NCTE), entitled, "This Ain't Another Statement! This is a DEMAND for Black Linguistic Justice," states, "As language and literacy researchers and educators, we acknowledge that the same anti-Black violence toward Black people in the streets across the United States mirrors the anti-Black violence that is going down in these academic streets." Some scholars suggest the dismissal of Black language in academia is a direct reflection of how Black culture is viewed in the world: devoid of value (Baker-Bell, 2020).

In *We Be Lovin' Black Children: Learning to be Literate about the African Diaspora*, Boutte et al. (2021) outline the importance of dismantling anti-Blackness in schools and address the lasting impacts of oppressive educational practices. Wynter-Hoyte and Boutte (2021) write, "Because schools are sites of physical, symbolic, linguistic, curricular/instructional, and systemic suffering for most Black children, our children are actually learning many things that are not good for their spirits, souls, minds and bodies" (p. 2). As a whole, this latest work from Boutte et

al. (2021) represents the dire need for instructional practices that honor the African diaspora, including language use, and its contents centers specifically on the K-12 experience.

This study does not seek to suggest that no gains have been made in the effort to address systemic issues within both K-12 and college-level education when it comes to students' language and literacy practices. In 1974, CCCC announced a resolution entitled, "Students' Right to Their Own Language (SRTOL)," and in the decades that have passed since the SRTOL inception, a variety of policy adjustments and pedagogical practices have been researched, established, and disseminated (Perryman-Clark, et al., 2014). Despite these efforts, standard English and standard English ideologies remain the acceptable norm as they continue to dismiss and diminish Black voices (Lyiscott, 2017).

## 2.1.1 Black Girl Literacies

In recent years, there has been an influx of research that focuses on the experiences of Black girls in K-12 settings in American schools. From various instances of physical violence from authoritative figures and increases in discipline disparities (Morris, 2018) to the adultification of Black girls (Esptein, Blake, and Gonzalez, 2017) and the assumption of "having an attitude", contemporary studies and publications have illustrated how young Black girls are often under attack and under scrutiny in educational settings. As a result, scholars like Price-Dennis et al. (2017) suggest there is a prevalent link between Black girls' experiences with literacy and their identities. In referencing literary societies for young Black girls in the 1830s Price-Dennis et al. (2017) concluded these "Young Black women came together to make sense of their complex identities through a literary means. As they were reading text, they were not only discussing their collective identities as Black women, but also their individual and unique self-identities" (p. 3). Many researchers and academics believe these principles and opportunities

are needed for young Black girls today (Muhammad & Womack, 2015). This study was conducted in an effort to illustrate the ways in which these issues and this need for young Black women to feel like their voices are heard and valued does not end when they accept their high school diplomas.

**2.1.2 Black Linguistic Justice**

The 2020 Special Committee on Composing a CCCC Statement on Anti-Black Racism and Black Linguistic Justice, Or, *Why We Cain't Breathe!* created the following demands: (a) teachers stop using academic language and standard English as the accepted communicative norm, which reflects White Mainstream English, (b) teachers stop teaching Black students to code-switch! Instead, we must teach Black students about anti-Black linguistic racism and white linguistic supremacy!, (c) political discussions and praxis center Black Language as teacher-researcher activism for classrooms and communities!, (d) teachers develop and teach Black Linguistic Consciousness that works to decolonize the mind (and/or) language, unlearn white supremacy, and unravel anti-Black linguistic racism!, and I Black dispositions are centered in the research and teaching of Black Language! (CCCC, 2020). This study is a response to this call with a particular focus on young Black women.

**2.1.3 The Black Woman's Identity**

To understand the Black woman's identity, it is imperative to examine their experiences in America and in education through a historical lens. From being taken from their homelands and forced to endure the hardships of the Middle Passage to being stripped of their dignity by having their bodies auctioned, examined, and violated in unimaginable ways, the history of Black women in the US, and other areas impacted by enslavement, is one of both tragedy and triumph (Berry & Gross, 2020; Shorter-Gooden & Washington, 1996). As a result of this history

of oppression, the development of an intuitive spirit of resilience, perseverance, and strength has become one of the foundational tenets of the Black woman's identity and womanhood (Berry & Gross, 2020).

The formation of this identity is believed to be one that occurs in the early adolescent years (Erickson, 1968; Hall et al., 1972). Erickson (1968) postulates the formation of a woman's identity is closely tied to her prescribed roles of wife and mother in society. Critically, this view is limited to a masculine and misogynistic view of a woman's identity. A few years after the publication of Erickson's (1968) text, Hall et al. (1972) conducted a report that aimed to explore the formation of identity for Blacks from an educational perspective. They write:

> Since the historic Supreme Court decision of 1954 outlawing segregation in the nation's schools, we have experienced a change in the nature of black-white relations in America. This change has produced many consequences, one of which has been an identity transformation among many American blacks. The transformation has been from an older orientation – in which most blacks viewed themselves as inadequate, inferior, incapable of self-determination, and unable to cope with the intricacies of life in a complex society – to a new one. Through this new orientation, most black Americans view themselves as adequate, self-reliant, assertive, and self-determinative. (Hall et al., 1972, p. 1)

The works of Erickson (1968) and Hall et al. (1972) illustrate problematic historical analyses of the formation of the Black woman's identity, specifically through a White male lens. Through these perspectives, these researchers iterate the ways in which Black identities are devalued in society, positing self-awareness and educational aspirations as negative characteristics.

**2.1.4 African American Women's Identities & Language**

According to Shorter-Gooden & Washington (1996), the context in which African-American women in the United States develop an identity is a racist and sexist one" (p. 465). The previously mentioned forced displacement from various African countries to the Americas during the institution of slavery has had a lasting impact on the lives of African American women. For many years, scholars have suggested that Black women in the US are dually oppressed by both race and gender; or thrice oppressed when social class is included (Shorter-Gooden & Washington, 1996). As they continue to be compensated less than most other ethnic groups in the states (Helm, 2016), despite their educational gains, African American women are often forced to remain in a position where economic mobility and financial security are hard-fought accomplishments. Historical representations of Black women have been charged and challenged as many researchers have presented information that changes those narratives (Berry & Gross, 2020; Sheets & Hollins, 1999).

As outlined in this chapter, there is currently an existing gap in literature when it comes to research pertaining to scholastic identity for Black women and the role language plays in the formation of that identity. The focus of such discussions often centers on deficit perspectives across various course subjects and often seeks to highlight where and how Black students fall short. When not emphasizing these perceived achievement gaps, other studies typically focus on the criminalization of Black girls in schools suggesting these young women are constantly in need of disciplinary action (Morris, 2018). Issues with discipline are further addressed due to the ways in which Black girls speak. Speaking too loudly and speaking too frequently can both place Black girls in a position of being viewed as having an attitude rather than a form of linguistic expression (Koonce, 2012). While research in recent years regarding language diversity has

shown that both pre-service and in-service teachers often have negative perceptions of AAVE (Champion et al., 2012), these studies and conversations are often limited to the K-12 experience.

**2.1.5 Afro-Caribbean Women's Identities & Language**

The transatlantic slave trade was not limited to a two-way traverse between Africa and the Americas. As colonizers continued the quest for securing land and wealth, Caribbean islands became populated by enslaved Africans who were considered capable of enduring both the climate conditions and the labor. Sheridan (1972) states, "…Afro-Caribbean history has been influenced by the epidemiology of the slave trade" (p. 18). Agriculture played a major role in the influx of enslaved Africans being brought to islands like, among many others, Jamaica, Barbados, and the Bahamas, as the cultivation of crops like sugarcane, coffee, and rice resulted in major economic gains for White slaveowners (Gumbs, 1981; Sheridan, 1972). In addition to enslavement-based migration, the Caribbean islands also became populated by a wide variety of groups including those of Asian and European descent who joined indigenous natives, like the Taíno of many Caribbean islands, who already inhabited these lands (Henry, 2017). Henry (2017) writes, "In many ways, exploring the unique construction of the identity that is the Afro-Caribbean women, is inevitably tied to the familiar mark of Colonialism" (p. 2). Representative of a shared experience with African American women, identity for Afro-Caribbean women can be closely tied to the ways in which their lives were impacted by colonization. Henry (2017) presents colonialism as a metaphorical "umbrella" under which the societal formation of which life in the Caribbean from a historical context was formed (p. 2.).

Extant literature that emphasizes the Caribbean woman's experience in America with a distinct focus on language is scant, and all the more void when the focus centers on higher

education. Despite this, Bahamian women, like the participant in this study, continue to outpace their counterparts in literacy rates and in the pursuit of higher education. In the Bahamas, according to current UNESCO (2021) data, female residents have a slightly higher literacy rate than males. Additionally, from 2006 to 2016 female students were slightly more likely to attend secondary schooling (see Figure 1).

**Figure 1.**

*Secondary Education Attendance by Sex in the Bahamas*
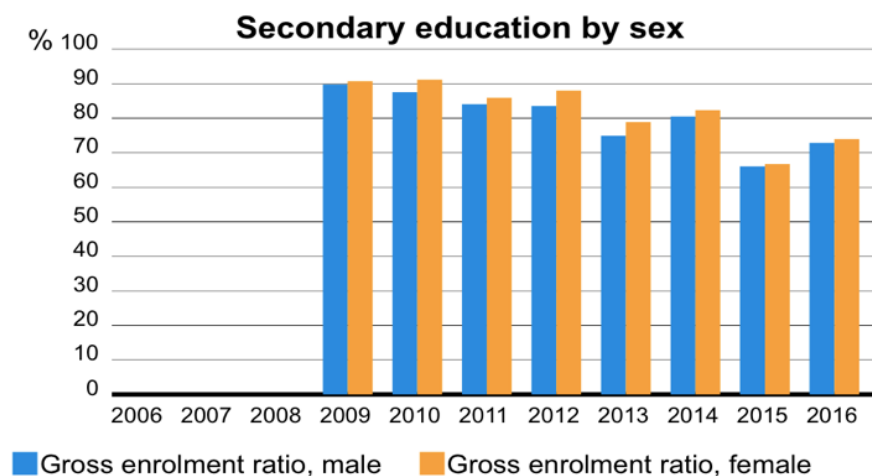


While there is no current data on post-secondary school attendance, it could be possible to assume that many of these female students go on to seek out tertiary education as well.

Language and dialect across the Caribbean islands, akin to the formation of AAVE in the United States, is yet another clear illustration of the firm grip imperialism and colonialism held on places and people. Caribbean linguistic features are a result of Dutch, English, French, and Spanish colonial powers (Wong & Teuben-Rowe, 1997). These languages, dialects, and accents, often referred to as creoles, vary from region to region and are often a mixture of West African, Caribbean, Arawak (native), Hindi, and Spanish vocabularies and grammatical structures (Wong & Teuben-Rowe, 1997).

The demographics of individuals pursuing degrees in the United States suggest international students account for a large number of students enrolled in colleges and universities, largely due to the fact that international students pay their own tuition (Stromquist, 2014). Caribbean students are amongst the groups of international students seeking education in the states in influx, and Caribbean women are statistically more likely to attend than men. (Nero, 2006). It has been suggested that because Caribbean students are typically English-speakers, they face less language-based issues than their nonnative international counterparts (Hunter-Johnson & Niu, 2019), their accents and home dialects continue to play a major role in their overall experience while pursuing higher education in the United States.

**2.1.6 African Women's Identities & Language**

It would, perhaps, be more appropriate to lead this section on identities with that of the African woman living and attaining education in the United States, as it is widely acknowledged in Black culture that Africa is Mother, and from her stems the origins of all things (ben-Jochannan, 1997). After years of expansive and intensive investigation that was often met with refutation and dispute, scientists have definitively traced the origins of modern humans to the vast continent of Africa (Owen, 2007; Zimmer, 2016). In this vein, she is the beginning. The positioning of this section of this work in no way refutes this claim. Rather, it stands to illustrate that without the removal of the first African woman from her homeland, neither of the other classifications or identities used under the term Black throughout this body of work would exist.

The term *immigration* is one that is often not historically associated with the African experience in America. The Atlantic slave trade which forcibly brought Africans various locations, could be more aptly referred to as forced migration instead. According to Capps et al. (2012), immigration from Africa in the way that it is viewed today is a rather recent occurrence.

Despite the frequent negative portrayals of Black and Brown immigrants in the United States,

Capps et al. (2012) report Africans who migrate to the States are often already "well educated,

with college completion rates that greatly exceed those for most other immigrant groups and US

natives" (p. 1). The disregard of existing and previously obtained levels of education for African

immigrants is a long-standing tradition that dates as far back as colonialism and British

expansion. Upon their arrival in Africa, the British "paid little attention to pre-existing forms of

education in Africa" (White, 1996, p. 10). Today, some African groups continue to have higher

levels of education than some European and Western nations (Anderson & Connor, 2018). This

is yet another example of how ideal European standards play a significant role in the devaluing

of other cultures' traditions and values (Whitehead, 1981).

African women are among this growing group of college-educated immigrants.

Additionally, research suggests migrant African women are more likely to contribute to the

workforce in the United States than women from other immigrant groups (Capps et al., 2012).

Researchers from Michigan State University found that African women in the US have a higher

earning rate trajectory than native United States women of other races and ethnic groups (Nawyn

& Park, 2019). Along with their desire to learn and work, these women bring with them a deep

connection to culture and heritage, with language serving as a key component. According to

recent data from the Pew Research Center (Budiman, 2020), African immigrants from

geographical regions south of the Sahara Desert have the highest rates of English proficiency at

74 percent. Despite these high levels of proficiency in standard English, far fewer African

immigrants speak English in their homes. Capps et al. (2012) state, "For immigrants from other

Anglophone African countries, English is generally not the primary language but a second,

colonial language learned during formal schooling" (p. 13). These researchers, along with the

Migrant Policy Institute, found that only 21 percent of the African immigrants studied reported using English as their primary language at home (Capps et al., 2012, p. 13.).

## 2.2 Theoretical Framework

This study will utilize Critical Race and Language Theory (LangCrit) as its guiding theoretical framework (Crump, 2014). According to Reeves et al. (2008), "Theories give researchers different 'lenses' through which to look at complicated problems and social issues, focusing their attention on different aspects of the data and providing a framework within which to conduct their analysis" (p. 631). While many studies that focus on sociolinguistics and/or dialect will use an either/or approach using critical race theory or critical language theory to support their work, Crump (2014) introduces LangCrit, which urges educators to "look for ways in which race, racism, and racialization intersect with issues of language, belonging, and identity" (p. 207). The defining constructs of LangCrit consist of identity, language, and race. The interconnectedness of these complexities suggests they are not always separate entities. Rather, LangCrit highlights the sociocultural connections amongst the three.

Identity, in this context, is not presented as a singular construct. Crump (2014) posits identities are "hybrid and multiple" (p. 208). LangCrit rejects the notion of socially constructed or fixed identities or labels, and instead suggests that identities can be determined through actions like that of language and language learning. Instead of being viewed as something one is, identity becomes defined as something one does. While the participants of this study have socially constructed racial identities, the exploration of the role of language, or the use of language in academia, stands to reveal how they choose to communicate, both written and orally, within the space of higher learning. Using this theory also allows for distinct interpretations of

identity directly from the participants as it could expose multiple identities that exist both in and out of a school setting.

One example of such a performative or action-based form of identity would be language. Language, in the scope of LangCrit, presents itself as a unique and valuable concept to research on linguistic agency as it:

> …involves looking at how power has come to be clustered around certain linguistic resources in certain spaces and exploring how this shapes what individuals can and cannot do in their everyday lives, what values are attached to how they use language, and what identities are possible as a result. (Crump, 2014, p. 209).

This will be essential in an exploration of the experiences of Black women students in higher education as it will help to illustrate the connections between identity and language within academic spaces. This doing of language, or languaging, moves away from the notion that language is merely a system used for communication, to an approach that language is something that is acted out as one navigates socially constructed boundaries. For the purposes of this study, the prevalence of a standard English ideology in academia presents itself as one of those boundaries.

Finally, the positionality of race in LangCrit is that the biological view of race is strongly opposed. Instead, emphasis is placed on "…examining what role languaging plays in racial formation" (Crump, 2014, p. 211). This study will use the umbrella term of Black in reference to people of African descent across the Black diaspora. It will include the racial categories of African American, African, and Afro-Caribbean. Racial formation for these three categories and its connection to identity and language supports the selection of this particular guiding theory. All participants in this study attest to identifying as Black women.

The need for the existence of this theory and this conduction of this study are closely related. For many years, institutions of higher learning have been largely exclusive when it comes to acceptable languages, dialects, and ways of speaking. The standard English language ideology that reigns supreme is dismissive to students who may not speak and learn under these standards. The American education system, higher education included, fully relies on a standard English language ideology for instruction. Research regarding the role of home/native languages and dialect in education has been present for many years related to both teaching practices and literacy policies. However, limited research exists that explores how students who prefer to speak in their native tongues perform in academia under a standard English ideology.

Several theories emerged prior to the contemporary arrival of LangCrit. One such theory that heavily contributed to the emergence of LangCrit is critical race theory (CRT). CRT applies to this research as the implementation of SE often targets students of color who arrive in classrooms with their own distinct dialects, languages and various other ways of communicating (Bernal, 2002; Ladson-Billings, 2010). While Derrick Bell (1980) is known as the founding father of critical race theory from a legal perspective, Gloria Ladson-Billings and William F. Tate (1995) applied this theory within the field of education. Critical race theory within education seeks to validate the strengths of individuals of color, rather than focusing solely on dominant-informed deficits (Ladson-Billings, 2010). Accordingly, the theory focuses on the following guiding tenets: a) Racism is a norm within the educational system; b) Dominant groups benefit from racism economically and socially; c) Cultural capital and strengths exist among racial groups and should be reinforced; d) Racism begets power and supports oppression and domination; e) The lived experiences of people of color need to be validated and heard (Crenshaw, 1991; Delgado & Stefanic, 2017; Ladson-Billings & Tate, 1995).

When analyzing the tenets of CRT, the intersectionalities between its principles and theories like LangCrit that emerged from it can be clearly seen. With the specific focus on language, LangCrit emphasizes the ways rejection of non-standard English perpetuates racism, hegemony, and oppression (Delgado & Stefanic, 2017). In the years since CRT's application to education, it has been used to address issues within the United States' education system that range from early childhood education to college campuses (Ladson-Billings, 2010). CRT promotes the use of counternarratives as a framework for marginalized voices to begin to control their own narratives (Allen & Joseph, 2018; Ladson-Billings, 2010). This study also recognizes Black feminist thought (Collins, 1989; hooks, 2000) as an epistemology that highlights the lived experiences of Black women, specifically their lived experiences with language and learning in academia. Hooks (2000) theorizes that Black women must have an understanding of the meaning of being a part of a marginalized group, while having a heightened awareness of what it means to be at the center as well, a constant crossing of borders. Communication and language are vital to this process of border crossing. Scott (2013) writes, "Constant movement across edges and borders results in the consciousness of the borderlands, where communicative strategies and language use are key components of identity negotiation in this border-crossing process" (p. 313).

In this study, I examined this intersection of language and identity (Scott, 2013) for Black women in college composition and communications courses. The implications of this study stand to provide insight into the importance of language diversity and the recognition and acceptance of Black dialects in higher education. Moreover, it challenges the prevalence of standard English ideologies in composition and communications studies (Matsuda, 2006) as a power structure of educational and linguistic oppression (Baker-Bell, 2020). Using narrative inquiry as a research

design, this study shares the stories of Black women college students with particular attention to the ways in which the participants choose to tell them.

CHAPTER 3: METHODS

Research is formalized curiosity. It is poking and prying with a purpose.

-Zora Neale Hurston

**3.1 Research Methodology and Design**

The purpose of this study is to explore how Black women students across the diaspora who use home and/or native languages, dialects, and accents navigate their identities in academic spaces of higher learning where standard English language ideologies are often the only acceptable language varieties that are valued or encouraged. The narratives of these young women could illuminate relationships between identity, language, literacy, and scholastic endeavors. The research questions to be investigated are as follows:

1.) How do Black women students narrate and navigate raciolinguistic identities and experiences in college composition and communications courses?

2.) In what ways does the rejection/acceptance/ambivalence of "non-standard" English in academia impact Black women students' linguistic agency in academic discourse?

3.) How does the hegemonic positioning of "standard" English in collegiate composition assessment influence the written work of collegiate Black women?

In order to address these questions, I will conduct a qualitative study using narrative inquiry and a semi-structured interview process to share the stories of the participants.

**3.1.1 Narrative Inquiry**

This study is guided by a narrative inquiry methodological approach. Narrative inquiry is used to portray the individual experiences of the participants with depth and detail (Kim, 2008). Through narrative inquiry, the lived experiences of those involved in the research process are presented in a manner that can illustrate the complexities of language in a variety of fields

(Moen, 2006). According to Webster et al. (2007), narrative approaches to research methodologies have gained impetus in recent years. One reason for this is due to the emphasis on the human experience. Webster et al. (2007) write, "It provides researchers with a rich framework through which they can investigate the ways humans experience the world depicted through their stories" (p. 1). As previously stated, CRT provides the framework for counternarratives (Ladson-Billings, 2010); in giving participants the space to speak on their own experiences, narrative inquiry serves this purpose as well.

In the late 1980s, Mischler (1986) disseminated an analysis regarding the importance of the interview in the process of observing and analyzing data in behavioral sciences. In this similar vein, the interview is described as "an instrument for story making and storytelling" (Mischler, 1986, p. 233). Here, the interview moves beyond a question and answer, or stimulus and response, to a method from which a narrative emerges. Additionally, Riessman (1993) suggests rather than the participant, it is the story that becomes the object of investigation. It is this in-depth level of analysis of narratives that drives the methodology selection for this study.

**3.1.2 Critical Reflection**

To explore the stories and experiences of my participants more deeply, I will also be applying critical reflection in an effort to address my own assumptions as a researcher, and as an educator, regarding standard language ideologies in academia. According to Hickson (2015), critical reflection can be used to deconstruct and reconstruct assumptions. As it pertains to qualitative research, in order for a researcher's work to be considered critically reflexive the research must determine:

> whether a broad range of participants are represented and have their voices heard,
>
> whether the processes as well as outcomes have been evaluated and whether researchers

recognise and question their values and assumptions as well as those of the participants

(Hickson, 2015, p. 381)

It is under this notion that I would suggest I used *critical narrative inquiry* as the research methodology for this study. As previously stated, I have selected Black women's voices from across the diaspora in an effort to broaden my range of participants as opposed to focusing specifically on the African American experience and using it as a collective term for *Black.* In my work as a college English instructor, I continue to encounter situations and scenarios where I am actively engaged in upholding the structures of oppression that are in place and at play in higher learning when it comes to language and literacy, particularly in composition courses (Matsuda, 2006; McLaren, 1994). Additionally, as I presented the narratives of each young woman who participated in the study, I used critical reflections of my own experiences to examine similarities and differences. This insertion of my own critical reflections can be seen throughout their narratives as I would often process their experiences while reflecting on my own. I will revisit this concept in my discussion of my role as researcher.

## 3.2 Research Context and Design

### 3.2.1 Site Selection

Each participant was previously enrolled in a composition and/or communications course at what will be referred to from this point forward as Northern Point Community College or Northern Point, a large community college in the southeastern United States. Northern Point currently serves 50,000-60,000 students per academic year. With its primary campus located in a central urban area, several additional campus locations throughout the various counties, and a variety of online course offerings, Northern Point prides itself on the enrollment of a diverse student population with "diverse" accounting for race, ethnicity, age, socioeconomic status,

lifestyle status (non-traditional students, veterans, etc.). The latest available data for Northern Point Community College reports a 57 percent minoritized population for the 2017-2018 academic year, with an average age for curriculum-track students at 25 years old. The college also enrolled a total of slightly over 3,500 international students representing 153 countries, including the Bahamas and Nigeria for the 2017-2018 academic year.

Like many other colleges – two-year or four-year – a heavy emphasis is placed on the first-year writing experience and composition. Northern Point is no exception. This means most students, regardless of their chosen or designated path, will have to complete composition courses at some point during their enrollment. For the last four years, I have had the pleasure of working as an English instructor at Northern Point Community College. I began my teaching career at a historically and predominately White, public-private four-year university situated about 40 miles south of Northern Point just one year prior to accepting my current position. Before making the transition, I will reluctantly admit here that I was naively unaware of the disparities between the two types of institutions. From prestige bias and social stratification (Karabel, 1972; Diner, 2010) – from the perspectives of students and colleagues – to a much broader spectrum of diversity in terms of the faces that sat before me each class session, I do not think that in those initial moments I could have anticipated the journey that awaited me. It is a journey that has enlightened me on so many issues concerning today's degree-seeking demographics. It is one that shifted my outlook with regards to how I *see* my students. It is one that has altered the ways in which I believe my students see me. It is a journey that led me to this very study, and one that has compelled me to share the stories of the three young women participating in it.

**3.2.2 Participants & Recruitment**

One of the aspects I enjoy most about my role at Northern Point has been the relationships that I have established and, in many cases, maintained with my students. While this program does have a distinct K-12 focus, it seemed only right that given this space to highlight the experiences of students in higher education that I would share that opportunity with them. As a result, in addition to the convenience of having readily available participants to recruit, purposive sampling was used here, which consists of a "deliberate choice of a participant due to the qualities the participant possesses" (Etikan, et al., 2015). Participants, who I prefer to call storybearers, for this investigation included a total of three students who are still currently enrolled and pursuing degrees at Northern Point (see Table 2). I knew they would have a connection to this subject matter based on the work they produced in one or more of the classes I teach. I have had the privilege of working with each of them in three different courses that I teach at Northern Point. All three young women self-identify as Black women and they admittedly speak and write in AAVE, Afro-Caribbean dialect, and/or African languages and dialects, so they were asked via email if they were willing to participate in the study. While there were other students that could have been chosen to participate, I specifically chose these three young women because they met the criteria of identifying as Black and speakers of Black languages, they represented more than one sect of the diaspora, and because they were not enrolled in my courses at the time of the study in an effort to reduce any conflicts of interest. AAVE and home/native dialects and languages were clearly defined for the recruitment process through the use of a recruitment script. As there are no set rules or limitations for participants in a study with qualitative research, the narratives of the experiences of these three students allowed for detailed analysis (deMarrais & Lapan, 2003).

Table 2.

*Participant Overview*

| Name/Pseudonym | Race/Ethnicity/Nationality | Current Professional Goals |
|---|---|---|
| **Kai** | Black/African-American | Physical Therapy Specialist |
| **Asha** | Black/Bahamian | Emergency Medical Technician |
| **Naomi** | Black/Nigerian | Information Technology Professional |

### 3.2.3 The Role of the Researcher

While this study highlights the experiences of three young Black women in college composition and communication, I considered myself a fourth participant in the study. In doing so, I adapted a dual role in this study as both researcher and participant (Probst, 2016). Not only did this continue to allow me to provide the previously mentioned critical reflection of my own experiences with language and literacy in education, but it also allowed me to remain connected to my participants in a sense of revealing and revisiting those shared experiences. Hearing their stories and sharing, or choosing not to share, my own reminded me of the construction of my own identity that has occurred throughout my life, allowed me to reminisce on the ways in which I have navigated academic spaces, and provided a sense of sisterhood that is celebrated amongst Black women.

### 3.3 Data Collection

Using Seidman's (2006) in-depth, 90-minute, three-interview series as a foundation, I conducted three individual interviews with each participant during the 2021 summer semester while only one of them was actively enrolled in coursework. Due to the constraints of the coronavirus pandemic on social and physical interaction, all of the interviews were conducted

virtually using the media tool WebEx. This tool yielded a very streamlined process for the participants and me as it was connected to all of our Northern Point email accounts.

As Seidman (2006) posits, "stories are a way of knowing" (p. 7). To get to their stories, I used this in-depth interview approach as a means to allow these young women to really reflect on their experiences with language in education. According to Seidman (2006), "At the root of in-depth interviewing is an interest in understanding the lived experience of other people and the meaning they make of that experience" (p. 9). The first interview focused on getting to know more about their backgrounds, upbringings, and early experiences in education. Using a semi-structured interview protocol, my prepared prompts and questions for the first interview with each participant included:

- Tell me a little bit about yourself and your family.

- Where did you grow up?

- What was your family home structure/dynamic?

- Tell me about your earliest memories of attending school? What do you remember learning?

- What kind of student were you in the early days of school?

Glesne (2011) describes interviewing as the "process of getting words to fly" (p. 102). While those questions may appear limited, the semi-structured nature of the interviews allowed for flexibility, and it allowed the conversations to flow, or fly if you will, in directions that might not have been explored had I used a more structured approach (Drever, 1995). The second interview focused more on the use of home/native dialects and languages in school settings. Questions that were posed in the second round of interviews included:

- When did you know that the way you spoke/wrote at home was different from the way you were being asked to write/speak in school?

- What are some examples of your home/native language, dialect, or accent that you use regularly?

- Have you always felt comfortable speaking the way you prefer to speak in educational settings? How about in discussions in your college classrooms?

- Was there ever a time when you felt like your language was not welcome in schools? If so, tell me a little bit about that.

- When you were enrolled in my composition course, were there ever times when you felt the way you prefer to communicate, spoken or written, was not welcomed or valued?

Again, these questions often resulted in additional follow-up questions based on the participants' responses. The third round of interviews focused on identity formation and meaning. Questions presented during the final round of interviews included:

- What does being Black mean to you?

- What does being a Black woman mean to you?

- How would you define yourself?

- If given the opportunity, what would you tell a younger version of yourself?

- What does the term academic identity or scholastic identity mean to you?

- Why is the pursuit of higher education important to you?

- What are your future goals and aspirations?

At the conclusion of the third round of individual interviews, the participants and I met together, and virtually, as a focus group to further discuss this subject matter. This *sister circle*,

as we would refer to it throughout the interview, provided me with a "flow of information" (Calderon, et al., 2000, p. 92) that reflected the collective views and beliefs of this newly bonded group of young Black women. It mirrored the "collective we" that I will speak of later in this work and it repositioned me in a longstanding tradition of sisterhood and bonding for Black women (McDonald, 2007). There were less questions presented during the focus group as I wanted it to be a space for sharing with each other what they previously shared with me in their individual interviews. While two of the participants, Kai and Naomi, were enrolled in one of my classes at the same time, they had not spoken to each other for the duration of that semester.

Interviews during this study were conducted with the expectation of eliciting responses that might potentially answer, or attempt to answer, the established research questions of this study. Since this research also focused on the connections between home/native language and writing for academia, archival documents like rough drafts and final drafts of some of the participants' written work was collected as well. The purpose of this was to address the second research question presented in this study, and to illustrate the changes designated by instructors like myself that are often recommended when students use their way of speaking as opposed to the standards of academic writing.

### 3.4 Data Analysis

In the tradition of qualitative research, data was analyzed as it was collected (Glesne, 2011). Since this study included more than one method of data collection in the form of interviews and textual archival documents, like drafts of their written work, multiple modes of data analysis were used. As evident by the transformations in qualitative research over the years, there are often intersections and overlapping that occurs when categorizing methods of analysis and determining which to use. Since the heart of this work lies withing the stories these young

women boldly and beautifully shared with me during our time together, I decided to focus primarily on structural narrative analysis (De Fina & Johnstone, 2015) as my primary means of data analysis.

Some narrative researchers suggest narratives are combinations of clauses that outline personal experiences in a structural way (De Fina & Johnstone, 2015). Historically, scholars such as Labov and Waletzky (1967) have implied that analyzing personal narratives requires an "invariable semantic deep structure of personal experience narratives, with an eye to correlating surface differences with 'social characteristics' of narrators" (De Fina & Johnstone, 2015, p. 153). Labov and Waletzky (1967) also suggested the clauses in narratives serve the function of being either referential or evaluative. According to De Fina and Johnstone (2015), referential clauses have to do with what the story is about: events, characters, setting. Evaluative clauses (and evaluative aspects of referential clauses) have to do with why the narrator is telling the story and why the audience should listen to it" (p. 153).

The steps included in my data analysis process were to develop interview questions like the ones previously listed that aligned with my clearly-defined research questions, gather information pertaining to the context of those questions through the three 90-minute virtual interviews, code and analyze the interviews for themes and patterns, organize and write the narratives, and finally, determine what conclusions could be derived from the results. According to Franzosi (1998), narrative analysis also focuses on sequencing, or ensuring the narrative has a beginning, middle, and an end, as well as its linguistic characteristics. Doing so requires the use of presenting narrative clauses sequentially. De Fina and Johnstone (2015) write, "A narrative clause is a clause that cannot be moved without changing the order in which events must be taken to have occurred. If two narratives are reversed, they represent a different chronology.

Narrative analysis also "focuses on individuals' storied experiences" (Ravitch & Carl, 2016, p. 221). In order to ensure this sequential method of individual stories was being applied to this study, I made a concerted effort to present the narratives in the order in which they were collected. In doing so, I was able to retell three dominant, or "fully developed" (De Fina & Johnstone, 2015), narratives that highlighted the similarities and differences between the experiences of the three young women who participated in this study. As De Fina and Johnstone state:

> A 'fully developed' narrative may include clauses or sets of clauses with a number of functions. Each of these elements of a personal experience narrative serves a double purpose, making reference to events, characters, feelings, and so on that are understood to have happened or existed outside the ongoing interaction, and at the same time structuring the interaction in which the story is being told by guiding the teller and the audience through related events ensuring they are comprehensible and worth recounting. (p. 154)

Thematic content analysis was also used for the transcriptions of the individual interviews and for the development of the individual narratives. This method of analysis emphasizes relationships, differences, and similarities that are present in the data (Gibson & Brown, 2009; Ravitch & Carl, 2016). Using the transcripts provided by WebEx and the software tool known as NVIVO, I used a combination of deductive coding and inductive in vivo coding in the analysis of the individual interviews to clearly outline the perceived relationships within the data (Bingham & Witkowsky, 2021). Before coding each interview, I created a codebook of six codes based on my recollection of our discussions. Additional codes were added and reorganized

as each interview was coded. As codes were added, I used in vivo coding to emphasize the language of these young women (Saldana, 2016).

With a total of nine individual interviews that produced hundreds of pages of transcript data, I had to be very intentional about which pieces of data to code. This is where in vivo coding served purposeful. In using their own words to code the transcripts, in vivo coding demanded close readings of the data and the creation of categories from specific segments of the text (Saldana, 2016; Thomas, 2003). Additionally, since my focus in this study is on the experiences of these young women, in vivo coding helped to highlight those experiences in their own voices. It is important to note here that some of the themes that "emerged" from the data were constructed by the researcher and the perceptions of those themes (Braun & Clarke, 2006) as it applied to the responses of the participants. These themes also helped establish an organizational flow for the presentation of each young woman's narrative with the use of their very own words often heading each section.

Finally, as this is a literacy-based study, I want to acknowledge an additional method of analysis that is often not included in conversations about sociological and educational research: textual analysis (Fürsich, 2009). While more commonly used in the study of media and journalism, textual analysis "typically results in a strategic selection and presentation of analyzed text as evidence for the overall argument" (Fürsich, 2009). The manifestation of this "strategic selection" exists in the form of what are known as word clouds or tag clouds. These word clouds that were automatically generated in WebEx at the conclusion of each interview provided me with a way to visualize the data. According to DePaolo and Wilkinson (2014):

> Typically, a word cloud takes the most frequently used words and displays them in an
> appealing visual representation that identifies key words in different sized and colors

based on the frequencies. By examining frequencies in a word cloud, an instructor can

look for specific patterns of words and phrases, or the lack thereof, in text data. (p. 38)

At the conclusion of data collection, I had a total of ten WebEx-generated word clouds for each

interview.

### 3.5 Limitations and Delimitations

While this study did seek to be inclusive with regards to selecting Black voices and

experiences from across the diaspora, there are some limitations as well. This study did not

include the use of Afro-Latina, mixed race, or other racial demographics. This was in no way an

attempt to silence their voices. It was the result of a personal choice on my behalf and a result of

convenience sampling. Thus far in my time spent at Northern Point, I have not had any students

who have shared with me that they are from those racial demographics. Further research should

be conducted to account for the experiences of young women of other races in higher education,

as well as members of other ethnic groups. Additionally, having had prior relationships with the

participants as their instructor and mentor could have prevented them from being forthcoming in

their responses. Choosing participants who were not actively enrolled in my classes was a means

to reduce any feelings that they might be punished as a result of participating or declining to

participate in the study.

### 3.6 Risks, Benefits, and Ethical Consideration

While there were no immediate and explicit benefits associated with participating in this

research, the findings that resulted could provide valuable information for educators working

with college students who are Black women who speak home/native languages and dialects.

Additionally, it stands to shed light on how standard English language ideologies impact student

trajectories. To ensure students were confident their participation in this research would not

result in any negative ramifications, punitive or otherwise, their identities are protected through the use of pseudonyms throughout the text. Participants were given total disclosure regarding the purpose of the study and its scope. As outlined on the informed consent document, they were given the knowledge and understanding that they could decide to no longer participate in the study at any given time. Each participant was sent the informed consent form electronically through Docusign. Those consent forms were signed and returned electronically as well. I adhered to all Institutional Review Board (IRB) protocol for the University of North Carolina at Charlotte, as well as the IRB protocol at Northern Point Community College.

### 3.7 Strategies for Quality

To enhance the overall quality of the data and analysis, my field notes, notes that I typed during the interviews, were reviewed and expanded as close to the original time of collection as possible. This also allowed me to prepare for subsequent interviews and follow-ups so that I could fill in any "holes" I believed to be present in the data. Member checks, or participant validation, were used during the research process after the narratives were written to provide the young women with an opportunity to discuss how they were feeling about the production of the findings (Ravitch & Carl, 2016). Interviews were transcribed and "cleaned up" soon after the conclusion of the interview. Throughout this process, I maintained communication with the supervising faculty member of the research committee. Finally, peer reviews with other students within the researcher's doctoral program and the UNCC Writing Center were used to challenge me to consider any angles that might not be addressed, issues with writing style/structure, and/or issues with APA documentation.

## 3.8 Summary

Literacy and language both take on many different definitions when it comes to education and learning. This study narrates the experiences of three young Black women as they reflected on life, learning, and language use in their everyday lives and in formal school settings that spanned from their elementary years to their current collegiate coursework. While my initial focus centered on their experiences in college composition and communications courses, the stories they revealed brought forth much larger conversations about the young Black woman's experiences in several spaces.

CHAPTER 4: FINDINGS

The Black female is assaulted in her tender years by all those common forces of nature at

the same time that she is caught in a tripartite crossfire of masculine prejudice, white

illogical hate and Black lack of power.

The fact that the adult American Nego female emerges a formidable character is often

met with amazement, distaste, and even belligerence. It is seldom accepted as an

inevitable outcome of the struggle won by survivors and deserves respect if not

enthusiastic acceptance.

<div align="right">-Maya Angelou</div>

## 4.1 "It's the Power for Me": Kai's Story

### 4.1.1 Kai Goes to School

There is a certain thrill, albeit fleeting, the pandemic has thrust upon those of us who

have found ourselves constantly connecting with others through computer, tablet, and

smartphone screens. It is the thrill of wondering whether or not the person or persons on the

other end will have their camera on. This was the thrill that I felt as I waited for Kai to connect.

Moments later, in the very midst of a heavily discussed *for the culture* social media debate about

whether or not sleep bonnets are acceptable and appropriate for any settings beyond slumber,

there she sat adorning her black satin bonnet with white frills that sat perfectly perched on her

head like a crown. To know Kai is to love her. Authenticity flows from her through every gesture

she makes and every word she speaks. And so, after we weathered the expected and seemingly

inevitable storm of initial technical difficulties – the "I can see you, but I can't hear you"s or vice

versa –  that virtual sessions often bring, we began.

At that time, I felt as though I already knew a little about Kai as it pertains to her involvement in my study and its subject matter. In the fall of 2019, she strutted into my Intro to Composition course at Northern Point, placed her blinged-out, baby bottle-shaped phone cover on the desk, and plopped down directly in front of the lectern. I soon learned, based on information she willingly shared with me, that prior to my course, she was enrolled in a developmental reading and English (DRE) course Northern Point offered at the time. State recommendations have since resulted in Northern Point, and other institutions across the country, ending such courses and enrolling students who would have previously been placed in DRE directly into the curriculum course I teach. At the time of Kai's enrollment, students were placed in DRE due to a variety of different factors that included high school grade point averages, placement testing, and the like. Beyond that, I knew very little about all of the other factors that beautifully blend to make her who she really is. And so, urging her to take over, to tell me about herself, her history, and where she comes from, here is where she began.

"I'm mixed with, like, Puerto Rican and…" she pauses. "…and, you know, Black." Kai continued to tell me that despite this ethnic inheritance from her father, she still identified as Black and Black alone. "Um, because on my dad's side, I never, I never really met all of my dad's side because we don't have a relationship. And when I went to his wedding, I saw one of my great grandmothers and she…she look White," she shared. "I know I get my lightness from my dad. My dad is really like light skin, so I know that I know that's where I get that."

It intrigued me, even if only for a moment, that when given the task of telling me about herself, she would start there. Immediately reminded of how prevalent issues of skin color and colorism are in the Black community (Wilder, 2015), I understood her focus. In hearing that her father was Puerto Rican, I thought perhaps I had, albeit unknowingly, included an Afro-Latina

voice in the study after all. However, my goal here was not to assign ethnic/racial classifications to these young women based on what society or what the U.S. Census might have them report. Self-identification was the goal, to which Kai identified as Black.

While both of her parents were born and raised in Ahoskie, North Carolina, Kai was born in San Diego, California. "I'm not really sure the reason behind why she moved down there when she was pregnant with me. But I know she wanted to get up outta there because of my grandmother. You know how grandmothers can be." I do know how grandmothers can be.

Shortly after her birth, Kai and her mother relocated to North Carolina. Her mother was young at the time, Kai shares she was around the age of 20, and decided to seek help from an aunt and uncle. "They're Christians, they're very, very proper and they're, you know, how Christians are, they're just…" she paused. I do know how Christians are. "I don't wanna say strict, but it kinda is like that, it's kinda like strict, like very serious." Again, I pondered; pondered and reflected. I was quite familiar with the reference, with the propriety associated with being a Christian, with the Black church. It was sometimes otherworldly; like living in another world within this one. "They raised me to like, you know, be nice. I loved living with them because of how they lived and how they were," Kai said.

Our conversation shifted. In a way, I felt a bit guilty for leaving her with those thoughts fresh on her mind, but she seemed eager to take the conversation in another direction. We began to chat about her early experiences in education. She did not remember much about the very first school she attended, but she held within her, many memories about her second school, which I will refer to as Greenpark Elementary, that were mostly associated with the races of other students and the races of her teachers. "There were some that were white, so the white ones were always, you know, like," she said, "you know how white people are." I do know how White

people are. "They were like, super preppy. You know, like those just super well-mannered Christian ladies. They were like that."

I got the feeling that she was making a clear distinction. Her choices of words like "the _____ ones," suggested that she'd categorized them into groups, coded them if you will, narrowed them, their teaching styles, and her experiences with them, down to black and white. "And how was that different from your, uh, the other teachers?" I asked. "My chemistry teacher who was black, she kind of acted like she was white. Um, she sounded like she was white." I imagine a younger Kai sitting in her Greenpark classroom, possibly swinging her feet beneath her desk, watching as Ms. A (a pseudonym for the purposes of this study) stood before the class; Kai wondering why her mind, her ears, and her eyes were playing such a cruel game. "Her tone of voice…it gave off that white tone, like 'OK, guys…'," she mocked, trying out the White tone she'd spoken of. "You know that white tone and, um, it was interesting to watch." Yet again, I knew what she meant.

The notion of *talking White* or *sounding White* is one that essentially implies that the speaker adheres to all of the grammatical and phonological rules of "standard" English, including but not limited to punctuation, diction, and verb conjugation (Purnell et al., 1999). For Kai, this moved beyond simple syllabic comparisons to the way Ms. A acted, and even the way she dressed. This was not the case for Kai's third grade teacher. I will call her Ms. B. "She didn't care. She was, she was of course professional; like she had some sense in school teaching these third grade kids, but she was…" I could tell she was searching for her words, perhaps the *right* way to say what she was thinking. "…she was, she, she didn't care that she showed her black roots. Like you know, she was loud." I did not interrupt this new trickle of thoughts and memories that flooded her mind. "I loved it because she was cool. I knew that I could be myself

in the environment around her, you know. She went to college and everything; she was just pure black and she wasn't afraid to show that side of her."

*Pure Black.* I thought for a moment on what that might mean, what it might have meant to Kai, but I would save that for another time. I needed to give myself time to process what it meant to me as well. Kai spoke briefly of another teacher, without nearly as much enthusiasm as she had for Ms. B. This teacher, Ms. C, she said, reminded her of me (who she coincidentally and endearingly calls Ms. D.). This teacher, Ms. C, was also Black, but seemed to have somehow found the balance that Ms. A and Ms. B had not yet found, and perhaps had not been in search of. Ms. C, according to Kai, "was very sweet and intelligent, and she was a Christian," she continued. "She had her moments where she showed her blackness, but she kind of kept it to a minimum at school." Ms. C, apparently, was codeswitching.

Kai went on to tell me a bit more about Ms. C. She described her as someone who seemed trapped, silenced, lost even. "I kinda sometimes didn't feel like I could be myself around her just because of how she acted. It felt like she wasn't being herself neither," she said. "What do you mean?" I ask. In some way, I felt like I already knew the answer. I was the answer. Kai hesitated as if she wasn't sure if she could say what she really wanted to say. She took a sigh and released the words:

> Some teachers, when you're 'round a bunch of white teachers, you feel like you have to…I feel like they feel like they cain't be themselves. They cain't speak or act the way they want. I mean, yeah, I get it, you're in a professional setting. Um, but, you know, when you're a teacher, and you're in school, you can…you can have a relationship with other staff members. You can be yourself or whatever, but, but, but, she kind of gave me that vibe as if she couldn't be her true self.

*True Self.* I wanted to unpack that. It was a phrase she'd already used more than once. "What do you mean by that?" I inquired. Kai replied:

> In the school system there are a lot of racist white people who don't really care for the, the black teachers or students. So, when there is black teachers who are around these white teachers, they feel like they cain't show their black side. Like they cain't be loud or say certain things or act certain ways around them because, you know, like we have a different way of acting than white people do because we grew up in a different environment and we're just not the same as white people.

The longer we talked the more I realized that even at a young age, Kai had a keen awareness of the differences, perceived or otherwise, in the ways that Black and White people spoke and acted. She talked about how in her classes, when Black kids were being themselves, which she identified as talking loud, laughing, or joking, it was immediately viewed as acting out versus a form of self-expression. "It was pretty annoying because me, you know, I'm loud. My personality is just the bomb." She stops talking and replaces her words with a sly giggle. She shared, "That puts you in an uncomfortable situation because now when you get to the class, well, for me, when I got to class every day, and I'm just like, okay, so I'll just sit here and be quiet."

Kai's middle school experiences were drastically different. She spoke with fervor of her experiences there. "It was always positive vibes," she said. "You know, they would be laughing with me or, you know, and with me if I say something funny, it was always positive vibes. And they were just like very accepting of it." In high school, however, as is the case for many youth, something shifted. "I was a lot," she said. "I was. I'm not gonna say I was bad or I was a problem child. I was getting into trouble and into altercations because I didn't play that." Kai

explained her high school as having students from various backgrounds, but focused once again on the teachers. "There were, you know, white teachers who felt like, oh, she's, she's too much or she's doing too much."

Kai later explained an altercation with a teacher that spurned from a conversation about what she was wearing, the typical sort of policing that school dress codes permit. "And we got into it," she said. "I had a smart mouth because I didn't, I dunno, I don't like disrespect. I don't, I don't do too well with people coming for me. And maybe it was a little bit too much, but I was just, you know, I'm very outspoken and I'm real."

*Real; the act of being true to one's self and to others.* I was noticing that authenticity was meaningful to Kai. Many of her early educational experiences, or at least her memories of them, centered on this concept. It applied to her, and it applied to others. For her, being real included speaking how one chose and at the volume in which one chose as well. We talked more about those altercations with her teachers. Once again, she mentioned that she did not know why they did not like her. "I don't know if it was because of me; they just didn't like me or if I was the issue, or if how I talk or how loud I was. Just being me was too much for them. I continued to be me because I'm going to be me," she said.

After a brief interruption for a grocery delivery, we were back on track. I wanted to know more about her high school experiences with regards to how she felt about learning. "Education really wasn't my thing," she said. "Like I always had an IEP and they were always trying to make it seem like I had a…" there was slight pause. "…just a disability. I don't have a disability. I just learned differently from others. So, when growing up with them [IEPs] you just feel like you cain't do anything."

Kai was referring to individualized education programs (IEPs). In the wake of the historic *Brown v. Board* decision, many parents of children who were labeled as disabled expressed that their exclusion from traditional school settings was discriminatory as well. The Elementary and Secondary Education Act (ESEA) of 1965 was amended a year later to expand programs for children with diagnosed disabilities, but these programs still largely excluded students with perceived special needs from in-school instruction. In the years that followed, new legislation was introduced and revised, including the introduction of IEPs in 1975 under the Education for All Handicapped Children Act (EHA), now known as the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA). These IEPs were designed to provide additional support to students and families, and were meant to constructed collaboratively with parents, educators, administrators, and special education professionals (Sabino, 2020). However, research has shown that due to various circumstances, parents from culturally and linguistically diverse backgrounds are often unaware or uninformed about this process (Jung, 2011). Additionally, in many cases, students themselves are designated as in need of IEPs without a clear understanding as to why. Such was the case with Kai.

I urged her to tell me a bit more about IEPs. "I dunno what that stands for," she said. "I never knew that." After a quick Google search, she tells me what it stands for. Kai's IEP began in around what she believes was the second grade. With no recollection of why she needed one, she said, "I didn't really know where that came from. Maybe it was because, like, test scores or like, um assignments that we would have to do. Maybe I didn't perform my best." For Kai, having an IEP meant that on certain times and on certain days, another teacher would remove her, along with a few other students, from her classroom and they would complete activities and have shared reading time. It is not the extra time with another teacher that stands out the most for

Kai. Something far more damaging occurred as a result of this labeling. "It was hard on us," she said. "You get picked on and people are calling you slow and retarded. I hate that word. Just being super rude about it." I could tell Kai was thinking, the deep sort of thinking one does when they have not thought about a particular something in a really long time, in that moment. Perhaps her memories swooshed back to the days of being teased, perhaps the sting of it all still remained. This stigma remained for the duration of her compulsory education. "I had it in high school," she said, "and when you get to high school, and people know that, they're lookin' at you as if you're slow." At this point, I could tell Kai had much more to say. I could interject with another question, or I could simply let her unload all of the thoughts and feelings she'd quite possibly never uttered aloud before. I chose the latter. "I didn't take education seriously, she said." She continued:

> I didn't do work. My grades weren't good. My education wasn't interesting and I, I never had the confidence in myself. I didn't think I could do this or that or be good in a subject because of the label that they had put on me. So early. So, all throughout school, I was really bad in school, and I didn't care much for it. When you get that label put on you, you feel like you cain't do anything. You just feel like, okay, well I'm not even gonna try.

This justifiable negative outlook on education shifted for Kai when she enrolled at Northern Point. There, she began earning grades she once never thought possible. With the help of encouraging and patient instructors in her initial courses, she earned a 4.0 GPA her first semester. "I was super proud of myself because, I mean, I honestly feel like it's because I was in college, like, you know, this is the real deal. Like, you gotta figure, seriously figure stuff out." Kai began to love school because, for once, she felt like she was doing a good job.

We chatted a bit more about her future academic goals which I will outline later in the text. We also talked briefly about what being a Black woman means and some of things we – again, the collective *we* that is Black women – do and say that make us uniquely us. To her, being a Black woman means, "Truly being yourself, doing what you can do, being very independent, taking care of things the way they need to be taken care of, being loyal, and just, you know…" she said. I do know.

**4.1.2 Kai on Writing and Speaking While Black**

Before ending our initial conversation, I asked Kai if she could think of any specific AAVE sayings that she uttered on a regular basis. I shared with her a few of my own hometown and homegrown favorites. *Bo*, for example, is a regular term used to replace a pronoun being assigned to someone else in conversation. *Example: "Man, bo, gone 'head with that."* According to traditional English standards, that would be the equivalent of telling someone to, "Please, stop that," or, "Knock it off." Essentially, anyone can be a "bo". For me, it is often my older brother. Another common phrase I shared that I use is *finna*. This becomes paraphrased in "standard" English as "fixing to" as in "about to". *Finna* is also synonymous with *bouta*. It took a moment for us both to come up with things we say that would not be considered standard English. Through giggles, Kai began with, "I be like…", "I be like…", and as we both searched for the words, we realized we were doing it, talking our talking, in those very ponderings. The invariant "be", also known as habitual "be", is a commonly known and used form of speech in AAVE. It is used to suggest that an event or occurrence takes place frequently, or habitually (Wolfram, 1979). Kai and I were both employing this feature without even realizing it. For our second conversation, I really wanted to focus on Kai's experiences in the courses like the ones I teach.

"It's overwhelmin'," she said. "Because when you're given so many requirements on, like, an essay, and you to meet those requirements, it's a lot; it's a lot. It's overwhelmin'." It took little provocation on my part to get her to elaborate. It was like a pot boiling over from being left unattended for too long at too high of a temperature. "It's a lot to do, and you have to put a lot of thought in it and send it out correctly and make it sound a certain kind of way," she said. "To me, I feel like they think that it needs to be perfect, like professional; very, like, intelligent wording and just, they want it to meet their standards of a paper."

Guilty as charged, I thought. We do. We, speaking collectively of myself, my colleagues at Northern Point, and college English professors across the globe, do often push for perfection. Kai continued:

> In writing classes, you cain't, you cain't talk the way you talk. You cain't put your own vocabulary in wording. So, it's because that's how the system is made to be, in my opinion. It's like they're…it's like, it's forcing you to talk a specific way and use these words and this punctuation in this, and use these resources in that; cite this, that, and the third. So, I feel like when it comes to classes like that environment, you cain't. You just cain't. It's no getting around it.

Perhaps she was right. Perhaps there was no getting around it. Kai went on to tell me how even slipping one culturally specific word or phrase into an assignment could hurt a student's grade. She said:

> A lot of English teachers are super strict, and they take it very seriously. So, if there's even one, one thing out of place that you put in, or that this doesn't meet their expectations or their requirements, it's automatically like, 'OK, you get a point taken off because you did it wrong or you didn't edit that,' or I just feel like that's how the system

is. They don't want you to be you with those kinds of assignments, or add your own

language vocabulary and etc. because they're, they're wanting you to do what they're

telling you to do.

My grandmother used to use the phrase, "A hit dog gone holler," when I was younger. In short, it means you're likely to speak up or speak out defensively when someone makes accusatory statements that apply to you. I was hit by Kai's words, but I could not holler.

Kai went on. She said, "It's kinda like forcing you. You have no choice, 'specially for a grade. You wanna do great, so you have to meet those expectations." I could not ignore the fact that Kai kept mentioning a "system". In a way, it was like the mysterious "man" from back in the day who always had his foot on someone's neck. Growing up, I feel like I heard that saying a lot. I could not decipher whether or not it was from actual people or actors on the television screen, but I'd heard it, and Kai's "system" made me think of it. For those who used the phrase of the man having his foot on their necks, and now that I think a bit more about it, I likely heard my grandfather using it, the saying meant that there were powers in place that one could not feel, touch, impact, or alter that affected you, but you could not affect them. As Kai talked, I also knew that for years I'd heard education in America referred to as the "school system", so in a way, she was right. There was a system in place. I thought about what that system might mean for young women like Kai who felt failed by it, who felt like it was something that affected them, but that they could not affect in return. "I feel like because the system, or whoever came up with these rules, they are trying to hold us to high expectations," she said, "and I honestly don't feel like it's 'cause they want us to succeed or because they want you to be great. No, I feel like they just want us to meet their expectations and their rules."

I asked Kai if she felt like the assignments she was required to write in my class really reflected how she felt, or if the final drafts she submitted were really written in the way she would have chosen to express herself. "You know," she said. "It's pretty interesting because as a, as a black female, I don't talk like dat. All the essays that I've written and researched, I don't talk like that. That's how y'all want me to talk. Yeah, that's the representation that you guys want me to give," she said. Kai went on without interruption. If there is a sound that surpasses hollering, my inner proverbial dog was doing just that. Howling. Shrinking. "And it's annoying," she said. "Because if I don't talk like this, I'm pretty sure a lot of people in the class don't talk like that, [people] in college don't speak like that." She summarized how not following rules resulted in consequences. For example, breaking the law (sometimes) resulted in one being sent to jail. Consequences, while seemingly not as dire, applied to language and writing in English courses as well. This discussion produced a phrase I had not previously heard or considered. "It's kinda like," she said, "kinda like educational laws or something."

I quickly typed that into my "field" notes; the word "field" in quotations here as a reminder that the field meant my living room due to the pandemic. The phrase *educational laws* rang out in my ears over and over, and stuck out to me on the page like, once again as my grandma used to say, pepper in a saltshaker. I knew Kai was not referring to educational laws as in state or federal mandates that require parents to enroll their children in school by a certain age. No, the laws Kai spoke of were something entirely different. They were a product of the system. What must it feel like for students like Kai who break those laws simply by speaking and writing in the ways in which they choose? I asked.

"In my eyes," she said, "it's just like, it sounds, it sounds good to me. It makes sense. It's not like it's just gibberish. No, for me, it makes sense. It's not like I'm going completely out of

my way to mess up my paper." I asked her how it felt to submit a rough draft and have it returned riddled with purple, pink, or red markings (see Appendix).

"When I see markings and corrections, I'm just like wow. Okay, so now I have to go over all of this and fix it, even when I felt like I was doing my best." What Kai said from there was spoken with such compassion and such conviction, that I felt as if the pot had boiled over once more. Our conversation unleashed words and thoughts she possibly had not spoken or thought of before. Here is what she said:

> It's bothersome and it's annoying, especially, especially when you're black. You sound like a white person writing in the paper. We don't talk like this. So, I don't know if anybody else had this thought, you know, being black, but it's annoying to write. And I really want to say these, I'm going to call them educational laws again, were written by white people. I do feel like some of them were probably racist. They probably thought, 'Oh, they cain't do that. They cain't meet our requirements. They cain't meet our standards.' So, they make it hard.

I could have stopped there. I mean, what more is there to say after such a powerful and prolific profession? How could I respond to that? I intuitively felt as if there was more to be said. Kai's notion of a deficit perspective for Black students and anti-Black pedagogical practices, like the reliance on a standard English ideology in composition and communications courses, prompts me to share with her some of the CCCC Demand for Linguistic Justice statement shared earlier in this text. She agrees. "In the streets," she said, "we're considered doing too much or over the top. It's the same way in these assignments. If we say what we want to say, we're doing too much or being ghetto."

From there, we talked a bit more about curriculum and how she grew tired of learning about Anne Frank in English classes and how I have grown tired of teaching about Anne Bradstreet. During the civil unrest in the summer of 2020, Kai was enrolled in Northern Point's introductory American literature course. While I was out on maternity leave, she reached out to me for assistance with an assignment for the course. She sent over the requirements of the assignment via email. In the attached pages I found requirements that suggested to me I was working alongside colleagues who were completely out of touch with what their students were thinking and feeling in the wake of brutal and broadcasted murders of Black men and women, all while seeing their communities and families disproportionately affected by the pandemic. *Who*, I thought to myself, *who in the world cares about the trials of Anne Bradstreet's Puritan experience in the colonies at a time like this?* I asked Kai if she remembered that assignment and what she was thinking at the time. "Honestly," she said, "when it comes to assignments like that, I try to just do it and leave. There have been thoughts that run across my mind like, of course, why are we doing this? Like why are we learning about this? But, I'm honestly not surprised because when you're in elementary school and high school, there are so many things that we do not learn, especially when you have white teachers. There are so many things that they don't want to teach you."

As we inched closer to the end of our second interview, we talked about the terms *linguistic agency* and *linguistic justice.* I wanted to hear more about what those terms meant to Kai. Here is what she shared:

> Now, like, now you know, that we're talkin' about it and I'm bringing more knowledge
> to African Americans and the education system or whatever…Knowing what I know
> now, I will most definitely put my foot down on a couple of things because we're…we're

getting too old, and this is getting old because we have to abide by rules and follow these

requirements and meet the standards that we don't want to meet. We don't want to do

them. This is how I talk. What I'm putting on paper should not be that big of a deal. If

you see it as an issue, then you're not seeing me as a person and I'm going to have to

withdraw from your class. Because at the end of the day, you have a job to accept your

students if you care for them and about them.

Kai is not required to take any additional composition or communications courses at Northern

Point before she graduates. "I'm kind of glad I don't have another English class," she said.

"Because I woulda gave 'em hell if they would try to come for me. Like lemme, lemme call Ms.

D." I tease, "And then we'd both end up on the news protesting."

"Yeah," Kai said. "Cuz a lot of people would say, 'That's a bad influence,' or 'Who's

teaching you that?' But if you guys really understood and went through the process of learning

about what we're discussing right now, you know, you would then know how we feel."

### 4.1.3 "I Don't Take No Mess": Kai's Views on Being a Black Woman

We had to reschedule. Twice. The first time was my fault. The second time, Kai was

dealing with a personal matter that pulled her out of her effervescent self and transported her to a

place that I knew she did not like to go, but sometimes could not avoid. It was that very personal

matter that started our third conversation. I will not share the details of that here. At that point, I

was no longer the researcher, she was no longer the participant. This incident that Kai endured

was a welcome reminder for me at a very critical time. It reminded me that life happens. The fact

that she'd logged on was enough for me to know that my encouragement over the years to "just

keep going" had paid off. She was there. We talked about that situation and once I knew she was

in a better place, I proceeded with my questions.

The third conversation was designed to probe a little deeper on matters of identity and what being a Black women truly meant to Kai. I provided Kai with the CliffsNotes version of what intersectionalities are and we began with race. "What does being Black mean to you?" I asked. "It means a lot," she said. "We are the mothership of the world. So, being black is being powerful, being powerful and strong." She continued with phrases like, "We've been through so much over the years," and, "It's just who we are."  I began to notice a pattern. Although the question had been posed to focus on the singular Self, Kai immediately began to celebrate collective Blackness through her continued used of the second-person plural "we". "We're very open and vibrant to those who accept us. So, being black is…being black is amazing."

As a follow-up, we revisited a concept we'd discussed previously when I asked her what being a Black woman meant. "I have no choice, but to feel special and appreciate it and love it because we're strong," she said. "We put up with so much. We take so much from others and we also give so much." I let her continue without interruption. "I love being a black women," she said. "Because we, we the best, especially black women who have been through so much and done so much. So, yeah. It's the power for me."

Our talk shifted to scholastic and academic identity. I wanted to know what being a Black woman college student meant to her. Initially, she admitted that it was something she had not put much thought to. Because of this, I used an example from current news headlines. In March 2021, a Georgetown law professor was fired after a video with a colleague surfaced in which she claimed Black students were always her lowest performers (Thorbecke & Siu, 2021). Kai had not heard about the Georgetown professor, but this example created a space for her to share how she felt about the possibility of being prejudged as a student for being Black. She said, "If they feel that way about me, they can honestly kick rocks because I've been proving them wrong because

in all my classes I made good grades." I was happy to hear that thus far in her collegiate journey Kai has not felt the dread of feeling like an instructor might be viewing her through deficit-driven lens from the onset of the semester. I hope she never has to feel that way. She did, however, share an experience that she was surprised to see an instructor "let slide". Kai said:

> If anything, I can honestly say I've gotten that vibe from one teacher who was just kinda like…you know, just like, I don't know. And the thing that bothered me was to see a slide that said 'Negro' as a part of a, um, lecture, like a slide show. My girl, what? Girl, you're white! It doesn't matter if you're not saying n**** or something like that. You cain't say that.

I asked Kai if she remembered what the teacher had been discussing at the time. Sometimes, context really is key. "It was something sociology, like we talked about so many things, but it was something and it was a certain topic," she said. "She was just reading from the slideshow and I'm like, 'Whoa! You cannot say that!'"

We discussed being Black, being a Black women, and being a Black women college student, but I wanted to give Kai an opportunity to express what all of those things really mean when they come together to make her who she is. After all, this was her story to tell. "I don't take no mess," she said. "But then again, I'm super sweet and I'll give anybody the world, even though sometimes I have, you know, like my little problems or whatever. But everybody does." The bulk of our conversation had already been dominated by the questions that I previously prepared, but one thing I love about research, particularly research that focuses on the stories of the participants, is how the questions you do not plan to ask can sometimes be the ones that bring forth the most powerful responses. And so, with nothing more to formally ask, I asked Kai that if

given the chance, is there was anything she would tell a younger version of herself. Here is what she said:

> I've been trying to, um, honestly trying to figure out how to heal my inner child from stuff that I've been through and that's become like a project of mine. I haven't really succeeded because I'm just like, a mess, but what I would tell myself is…first, I would apologize. I would apologize to her for acting the way I acted and doing the things that I did and allowing myself to be looked at as a problem child or bad. I would apologize for that and really give myself a huge hug because I allowed her to be looked at as, 'Oh, her mom didn't raise her right,' 'She's doing too much,' or, 'Oh, she's so black.' I would tell her that the things that other people did to you were not your fault. Um, I'll let her know that she was loved. She was smart. She should give herself more credit. She didn't try as hard or she didn't try as much because she had a label put on her so early. Like she has a disability or she's slow or she cain't do this, that, and the third. And yeah, there's a whole lotta other stuff as well that I would say to her, but that's it for now.

## 4.2 "I Straight": Asha's Story

### 4.2.1 "A Very Curious Child": The Beginnings

"The Future Belongs to Those Who Prepare for It Today" - Malcolm X. These are the words on a poster that hangs on the wall of Asha's bedroom. It is the contrast of black and white that stands out to me the most. The white letters are in brushed stroke script on a shadow-like silhouette that cannot be mistaken for anyone except the quote's speaker. Perhaps I am getting too far ahead of myself. I did not see this image until our first conversation was drawing to a close. At the start of it, however, Asha sat before a white wall lovingly littered with photographs of loved ones. She would later talk me through each one, as if introducing me to her family

during a visit to her home. But that wouldn't be possible, at least not at the moment. So, with the formalities completed, we began. "Where did you grow up?" I asked. "Tell me about what life was like there."

"Okay," she said. "So, I'm from Nassau, Bahamas, but you can also just say the Caribbean, and it's totally different from the U.S., especially when it comes to schooling. We run under a British system and not the American system." For context purposes, I will interrupt this narrative once more to provide a clearer understanding of what Asha meant by the British system.

Few concepts in the annals of human history have had such long-lasting and far-reaching implications on vast amounts of people across the globe than colonialism and imperialism. Whether referred to as conquests or acquisitions, the claiming of land and its inhabitants heavily influenced future outcomes for vast places across the globe. From 1650 to the early 1960s, the British Empire moved as one of the key figures in colonization and imperialism "leading to the constitution of the modern global economy" (WHEC, 2018). When Spain and Portugal began their explorations of the New World in the 15th and 16th centuries, they often claimed the land they arrived on as their own. This prompted additional European countries like France and Britain to follow suit.

Among the first regions claimed by the British Empire were the thirteen founding colonies of what is now known as The United States of America. In 1776, the Revolutionary War drastically and permanently changed the relationship between the colonies and Britain as the colonies fought for and gained independence. This changed the course of Britain's quest for territories and expanded their sight beyond the colonies, and onto territories in Africa, India, and the Caribbean. While the Spanish and Portuguese had already moved droves of enslaved

Africans to the Caribbean islands prior to the arrival of the British, this practice continued as the British claimed St. Kits, Barbados, Montserrat, Antigua, and Nevis from 1624 to 1628 (Lambert, 2017). In sum, over 5 million Africans were forcibly taken from their homelands and moved to the Caribbean; close to half of that number were taken to what had become known as the British Caribbean (Lambert, 2017). Today, many Caribbean nations are still under British rule, including Turks and Caicos Islands, the Cayman Islands, Anguilla, and the British Virgin Islands (Briney, 2019). While other nations have gained independence, over 53 countries with former ties to British rule remain a part of The Commonwealth of Nations, or The Commonwealth, which was created with the goal of easing the "process of British decolonialization" ("What Is"). Caribbean nations in The Commonwealth include Trinidad and Tobago, Barbados, Jamaica, and The Bahamas, among others.

For Asha, operating under a British curriculum meant wearing uniforms and grading that differs from the United States. Aside from that, she shared with me that her childhood was "pretty simple. I did the average things that children do, like extracurricular sports, like swimming and I ran track, I was just standard, like every other child." We briefly talked about her family dynamic and structure. Asha is the youngest of three children. Her siblings and her parents all reside in Nassau while she pursues an education and a career in the States. However, getting to the United States, and to Northern Point, was never an initial goal. "At first, I wanted to be an IT technician," Asha said. "Because my brother's an IT technician, and we always shared the same interest in it. And then it just shifted after 2014. I found out that I had heart problems, and I got a pacemaker put in." The sort of shift that Asha was referring to was not the sort of "I simply changed my mind" shift that happens for many students when determining a

major and future career goals. No, this was a shift of substance; a shifting that would ignite a pursuit of a passion.

I knew this about Asha before our initial conversation for this study. She'd written about it before in her assignments for my introductory composition course but hearing her speak about it in this setting with such grace and such transparency reminded me that you really never know the kinds of battles students may have fought or might still be fighting. A little later in our talk, she walked me through how the second degree heart blockage was discovered due to random bouts of shortness of breath, dizziness, and fainting. She also talked about when she learned she would need a pacemaker for the rest of her life. "So," she said, "at 14, I ended up with a pacemaker and I was like, great. This is not what a 14-year-old child wants."

"I was in the hospital so much," Asha said. "So, being around patients and different people made me think, 'Oh, I kind of want to do this. This is cool. I like doing this. It's always done to me, so I want to help other people." Asha's experiences with her heart condition and the healthcare she received prompted her to, what she refers to as a "transition" from a desire to become an IT professional to a cardiovascular technician. According to her, these are "basically technicians that diagnose heart problems using machines and technology." For a moment, it seemed like she had it all figured out. "And then I kinda got bored with it because I don't like being within four walls. It drives me nuts," she said. Coming to this realization resulted in Asha enrolling in Northern Point's emergency medical technician (EMT) program. She received her EMT license in January 2020 and plans to complete the paramedic program this December.

I was curious about Asha's aversion to the monotony of working a job within the four walls she referenced, so I asked her if that might have had anything to do with growing up in

such a beautiful place. "I like to explore things," she said. "So being within four walls and seeing the exact same things every day sends me nuts. Like, how do you guys sit in here and do this every day?" When it comes to being an EMT, Asha sees it as an opportunity for adventure. "You show up to different types of environment every time you run a call. So, it's never the same thing over and over. It may be the same call, but the outcome is never the same."

Our conversation began to become like a game of ping pong, our words bouncing across our screens like a plastic white ball, leaving one topic for a moment, then coming back to another. This was largely due to processing information. I found myself thinking about what it must have been like to be in the midst of one's teenage years all while dealing with a heart condition. So, my questions shifted back to that. I asked Asha if she really understood the magnitude of what that meant at the time. "At first, I didn't get it," she said. "I always had those little questions. I was a very curious child. I started to look it up. At first, it was very, very hard to cope with and actually gave me, like some anxiety and depression for a while." Asha fought through the anxiety and depression and turned those experiences into a passion for healthcare and helping others. You can hear this passion in her voice as she talks about caring for patients. "I will always advocate for my patients. I know how it feels to be the one of the stretcher," she said.

There are hundreds of schools in the United States that offer similar programs to those offered at Northern Point. Again, in conversations that I had with Asha prior to conducting this research, I knew that she was studying at Northern Point while away from her family, friends, and all that she held dear. There must have been serious contemplation and conversations that occurred prior to her ending up at Northern Point. I was curious about how she'd arrived on our campus. Asha started her journey in higher education at a state college in Florida. "There was not

a lot of colleges that offered cardiovascular studies and there was not a lot of colleges that offered CBT [cardiovascular behavioral therapy]," she said. Tuition costs at the Florida institution eventually resulted in the search for a new program and school. Another Bahamian friend who was attending Northern Point suggested Asha should transfer. Asha's initial response to that proposition is one that many students entering higher education express. "I don't really know about community colleges," she told her friend. Thankfully, that stigma did not hold. Overall, Asha has been very pleased with her experiences at Northern Point. "I prefer this college over where I went," she said.

I wanted to know more about Asha's schooling experiences prior to college. She told me she initially despised English courses, but once mathematics courses introduced letters into their equations at around the ninth grade, her focus moved to English and language arts. "When I got to 10th grade, from 10th to 12th grade, my teacher would always tell me, like, 'You have such a gift to write in English. Like, you're such a good writer.'" Asha did not exactly believe that teacher, but her high grades in classes like the one she took with me served as validation for her. "I realize," she said. "OK, maybe English is my strength." She talked about how writing papers about a topic one already knows about makes it that much easier. In recalling an assignment from high school, she said:

> When I was in high school, we have this thing called Junkanoo, which is a festival that we have over there where people make their own costumes. It kind of looks like carnivals that they have here in the States. So, we have our own, it's called Junkanoo, and I never went in the 21 years of living, I've never went to Junkanoo in my entire life. So, when I had to write a paper based on it, I was like okay, this is embarrassing.

Asha explained how it becomes a bit difficult to attend the festival when you are just a kid. She ended up writing the paper about the food and costumes associated with Junkanoo, but even now, she's still never attended the festival and has no real desire to go.

Soon after this discussion, and after my thoughts returned from the Junkanoo-flavored ice cream I indulged in on my last visit to The Bahamas, we started to talk about Bahamian language and dialects. "Every time I open my mouth," she said, "and I speak around someone, they're like, 'Not to be disrespectful, but is English your first language?' and I'm like, yes, I've never spoken anything that was not English. It's just that I have a dialect." Asha informed me her dialect and accent seem to confuse people at times. "It's because I'm from a different place. Some people use American English versus British English. It comes off different at times. So, I'm like, I'm speaking English. I promise you, it's English."

Having an awareness of multiple variations of both written and spoken English is not something that many of my students have, but Asha does and for her, that awareness is innate and did not present any issues for her until college. She recalls:

> This was the first official time where it kind of offended me, because I was the only Caribbean, the only foreign student in that class. So, I took a communications class at [Northern Point], and I was doing a, what do you call it? Speech? I was doing a demonstration speech. And after, I got a 90 on it the first time, and it was fine. So, the second time, I had to do another speech and he marked me down on it. And I was like, well, why did you mark me down? Like, what did I do wrong? Because I'm a person, like, if I get a low grade, I want to know why so I don't do it again. And he was like, you have to learn how to pronounce your words. And I was like, excuse me! He was like, quick question; Is English your first language? And I was like, have you ever heard me

speak any other language? And he was like, no, but it just sounds like some of the stuff

you say does not sound like how the word is actually pronounced.

As Asha detailed this experience, I could see her re-live the experience. I could essentially feel just how much it irritated her. She spoke faster, almost feverishly. She continued:

I'm like, you have to remember, I'm a Caribbean student. It was very offensive for one, because I'm a Caribbean student, where we use British English, not American English, because 99% of the class speaks American English and I am the only one that kind of drifts off with a British accent sometimes. I'm like, you can't use that as a way to mark me down, because that's actually discrimination. I'm like, I'm actually speaking English. I'm speaking slow enough for everyone to understand me, but it's just that some of my words come out different. Like some people say *interesting*, and some people say *interesting.* I'm like, you can't really get on me for how I say it. I know what I'm saying and I'm using it in the right terms. It's just that the way I pronounce it is different, but I don't feel like I wants to adjust my way of speaking just to suit a classroom. Like, I understand we all need to understand each other, but I'm speaking as professional as I can, but I am not going to change the way I speak to make you feel better because that's actually making me feel awkward about myself.

Despite passing that course with the coveted "A", Asha's experience with that instructor and his deficit-based perspectives about her pronunciation of words was one that she won't soon forget.

I also noticed Asha's accent during our first interaction as student and teacher. This is not uncommon at Northern Point due to the previous data demographics I shared about the student body population. As she talked through that experience, I couldn't help but wonder about the experiences of all of those students in communications courses who are literally penalized for

pronunciation when they do not speak "standard" English, or American English, and what that must feel like. "When I speak, you can hear my accent off the bat," Asha said. "It doesn't matter how proper English I speak. You can hear my accent." Once again, Asha connected this to her healthcare training. She shared with me how much of a concerted effort she makes to sort of mask her accent when interacting with patients. This masking is in no way linked to an embarrassment about who she is or where she is from. "I try to make it as simple as possible just so that we can get through it," she said.

Prior to conversing with Asha, I had not considered the concept of having an accent leading to others making assumptions about one's nationality. For Asha, this seemingly happens quite often. She said:

So, people assume sometimes that I'm a Jamaican, and when they do that, I'll say I'm not and they'll argue with me like, no, you're Jamaican," she said. This also often leads to offensive interactions. "We all know the…" she said, "… the famous Jamaican term – I'm not going to say it for your interview, because it's not appropriate – but we all know the famous "B" Jamaican word that everyone likes – that ends in '"clot".

The word Asha was referring to is *bumbaclot* or *bomboclaat*; a Jamaican slang term that is used as an expletive. I will not go into further details about its meaning here, but like Asha, I have heard the term used in jest when someone is mocking a Caribbean accent, but unlike Asha, I have never had anyone use it as an effort to greet me. Asha said:

People like, they think it's a greeting, people that are not really Caribbean. Their first intention is to say it like that and I'm like that is not a greeting. That's actually a curse word and you're cursing someone out. You're already assuming that I'm something that

I'm not and then you're saying that. You don't know if that's really offensive to me or not.

Even though we were not scheduled to discuss identity and race in great detail until later in our interview series, our initial conversation drifted in that direction. "So, Bahamian is my nationality," she said.

It has nothing to do with my skin or anything like that. It's just if I have to fill out a form, it would be African American because, you know, the standard terms. We all know that if it says African American, they're most likely assuming that you're black. I don't like that. Not every black person is African American. That's the problem with that. That's why I don't like to use that term [African American], because I am not American. I have no American status. I am a straight island girl. I have no American attachments. So, I'm like, I just kind of click that because I know that's the only option that's referring to. Are you a black person? I know that's kind of what they mean.

Asha continued to talk about the dangers of assuming someone's a certain race or nationality based on the color of their skin. She said:

I made this mistake once, and I made it while I was at home. I was like, I would never make this mistake again. I was working on a resort back home when I took my semester off in college because I was waiting to get into the EMT program. I was like, well, while I'm home I'll just go work at a resort and then when I come back, I'll have saved up enough to come back to school. And we have a term called Conchy Joe, which is a term for behavior and starting to look like white Americans. They just have that white pale sing and they just, that just does not look like island behavior walking around. So, one day I was talking to some of them, and I was like – this is where I switched off my

accent to talk to them – and they're like, "Why are you talking to us like that?" They

were from Long Island [Bahamas] and I was just standing there like, okay.

I asked if she had many experiences with White Bahamians, or Conchy Joes, when she was

growing up on the island.

We have an area in The Bahamas called Lyford Cay. It looks like a whole different place.

It's literally a neighborhood, a big neighborhood behind some gates and it looks like…it

does not look like it's the same place where I live. If you go behind the gate, you're like,

I'm going somewhere else. Like, when you're on the same island. I promise you. They

have their own hospital, but that's where the more wealthy people live. And usually a lot

of white skinned people live up there. They don't really have to leave the area. Then

there's a guy, Peter Nygard, he owns Nygard Cay, which is like a big cay. It's like a big

chunk of island in the middle of the water and he owns that. But the Lyford Cay

foundation is who gave me my scholarship to come to [Northern Point], so they're the

ones actually paying for my tuition. They give like up to $25,000, depending on if you're

a graduate or undergraduate, but I'm a technical student, so I'm surprised I even got

$15,000.

This conversation about the very wealthy and their elite, exclusive, and luxurious lifestyles

mirrored many of the same issues with wealth distribution in the States. Asha continued to talk

about the disparities between access to hospitals and healthcare, the cost of living and groceries,

and how many students, like herself, who go to America for schooling seldom return to the

island. This is largely due to drastic wage disparities. Asha is still not sure if she will return to

The Bahamas after she graduates.

There was a really effortless and natural flow to our conversation. Once again, it pinged and ponged between things we'd already discussed and topics I had not planned to cover. Towards the end of our initial discussion, we found ourselves giggling and discussing phrases and words that are uniquely Bahamian. The table below illustrates just a few of those phrases and their meanings. I shared with Asha that during my travels in The Bahamas, I've now gone three times, I learned that there is no need to distinguish a lemon from a lime. To most Bahamians, they are both a *sour.* Asha concurred.

Table 3.

*Asha's Favorite Bahamian Phrases*

| **Bahamian Phrase** | **Meaning** |
| --- | --- |
| *bey* | shocked |
| *cornflakes* | any type of cereal |
| *chirren* | children |
| *dem* | them |
| *I straight.* | I am OK./I am good./Leave me alone. |
| *jam up* | crowded |
| *jitney* | public transportation/buses |
| *muddasick* | "Oh my gosh!" |
| *spry* | rain/drizzle |
| *ting* | thing |
| *wybe – "What huh wybe?"* | problem – "What's her problem?" |

*Note:* Some of the words listed here are used in a variety of Caribbean dialects.

While there is no official name for Bahamian dialect, like Jamaican Patois for instance, these dialects are often viewed as "broken" variations of English. For students like Asha, there isn't anything broken about it. The language they speak, and the way it is spoken, is whole.

We ended our initial meeting with a tour of the gallery of loved ones that watched over her as she shared her story. She introduced me to them, one by one. I met her siblings, her parents, and her boyfriend, who's initial and promise ring she wore on a silver necklace around her neck. The wall next to her bed was decorated with certificates and accolades, like Dean's List letters and honor society inductions, that she's acquired since starting school at Northern Point. There are several. This wall is also where Malcolm X's quote and silhouette resides. Her father plans to frame all of the certificates when she returns home. Her mother encourages her to tell people that she is Bahamian, not American. "Tell them you're Bahamian," she recalls her mother saying. "You're not American. You're not an American. Don't tell them that. You need to be proud of where you come from so that they know smart people come from the Caribbean as well."

### 4.2.2 "It's Automatic to Me": Making the Switch

After brief pleasantries, our second conversation was underway. We revisited some of the topics we discussed the first time we met virtually for this process. Before long, we were discussing the concept of code switching, or perhaps I should refer to it as accent or dialect switching. When it comes to what Asha referred to as her standard English accent, she said:

> I prefer to just keep it for professional reasons. I prefer to keep it like that, but if I'm just informally talking to friends or family, my dialect comes out very hard. All right. There's not standard English within, within what I say around my family and friends because it's just where I'm just naturally speaking. I don't have to think about it at all.

Asha alternating between the two, between naturally using her Bahamian dialect and a more "standard" English dialect is something that she has a constant awareness of. "It's automatic to me," she said. "Like, I know when to turn it off. I am very aware when I do it because I'm like, sometimes I will sit down and think of something I just said, and I don't think you understood what I said." This constant questioning and wondering whether her words are understood as she intended when she spoke them often leads to not only having to repeat herself, but having to consider the speed at which she's speaking and the way the words she's saying, even though they are in English, are being pronounced. Essentially, she often works harder than most students in academic settings and most professionals in medical settings just to ensure that she is being understood. "To make it worse," she said, "I have to learn how to talk slow for people. I'm very fast. I speak very quickly sometimes, and the dialect and fast talking together…they're like, 'You said it so fast I didn't catch exactly what you said." Speaking from behind a mask during a pandemic has made this even more challenging for the EMT trainee. Asha shared:

> There's a lot of different things that come into play with having an accent. And it's very difficult, but very fascinating to some people. And then also, my accent is kind of a distraction, too, which is a good thing. They [patients] would come on the truck and they would be like, very upset or like, very agitated. And then, the minute I start talking, they're so focused on the accent that they forget what they're upset about and I'm like well, that's a good thing. That is a 50/50 gift and a curse type of thing to me.

I never really considered the idea of an accent or dialect being thought of as a gift and a curse, something that some people can fetishize while others despise. The need to feel like she is speaking the "right" way carries over into her writing as well. "I proofread like five times because of my accent," she said. Asha, for the most part, was what many instructors might

consider shy during her semester with me in the introductory composition course that I teach. She sat in the same seat each class, the corner aisle seat on a computer row of three to my right. I noticed very early in that semester that she was a perfectionist when it came to her writing. I also noticed that she exhibited what my colleagues would call "mastery of the written English language". In short, she wrote really well. What I did not know was the amount of time she dedicated to reading and re-reading her work before submitting it, largely due to her accent and secondarily due to how she thought the reader might perceive her. "So, it literally makes me proofread more than the average person," she said. "I don't want people to think I'm not getting it right. I don't want them to look at it and be like, she thinks she's at home."

"You don't want people to associate a tone of voice with your face," Asha said. "That's even worse." I had a feeling that I knew what she meant, but I asked her to elaborate to confirm my suspicions. Asha responded:

> We both know that we live in America, so there are a lot of people that associate black…they will be like, these uneducated people. So, I don't want people to look at me and be like, "Oh, she's so loud and ghetto," because that's the typical ting that people see with African Americans. It doesn't faze me, but I don't want people to have this perception. Like, oh, you think I'm this dumb girl and then I have to go take care of a family member and they you're like, "I don't want you to touch her because I don't feel like you're educated." And I'm like, you just making it worse on both ends because if the patient dies in front of me, I will feel bad because I know I could have done something to save them.

The notion of being viewed as "ghetto" was something that I knew very well. It was also something that I had heard all of my participants mention in some way. With potentially four

different meanings of the word, I pressed Asha for her personal definition of the term. "It's usually like they have no, you know, you have no class and you have no, we call it broughtupsy. I dunno what the actual word is," she said. *Broughtupsy*, pronounced as brought-up-see, is a Caribbean term for good manners. In my grandmother's tongue, being ghetto means they ain't got no home training. The term ghetto is also typically associated with locale, but as Asha shared, it is very likely for someone to be ghetto and not be *from* the ghetto. She said:

> When we say it, that's not what we mean by it all the time. If you are from a poor area, that doesn't mean you're ghetto because some of the smartest people come from the poorest areas. Like, when we say ghetto, we kind of mean how someone acts and how they dress or just how they talk.

Many of these same concepts can apply to writing, particularly collegiate writing. Educators can sometimes make assumptions about a student's level of intelligence based on the words they choose to use, or not to use, in their writing. I am guilty of this. I, too, have edited a student's paper and changed *for the culture* phrases to more acceptable "standard" English terms, all under the guise that I was helping them, teaching them. "Every student has a different way of writing," Asha said.

> I feel like that can also be an issue on why some people don't get good grades on their papers. It's not because they don't know how to write. It's just their choice of words that really cause them to get points off. And I'm like, just because I said "homegirl" and not "my female friend"…I'm like it's the same thing. It's not like I'm using any curse words or something. That's like not even viewing "homegirl" as a real word.

Hearing Asha say this, I immediately felt remorse for invalidating students in such a way with the click of my own purple pen.

**4.2.3 To "Know a Great Much"**

Our third conversation began just a few hours after Asha passed yet another certificate assessment for her paramedics course. I could hear the excitement in her voice. I had not expected anything less, but she passed, as the saying goes, with flying colors. With congratulatory praises complete, we began. As with all three of the young women, our final meeting was designed to focus on identity and what that meant to each one of them. I asked Asha what being Black meant to her, to which she replied, "I think it means everything to me. Because to me, it's a unique thing. Even though we have millions of people that are black around the world, to me, it's very unique."

I asked her to elaborate. Asha said:

It's like black people in general usually are, like, stereotyped by a lot of things that they do. Regardless, if it's the type of music we listen to, the way that we dress, stuff that we do in general. And it's like, to be a black person, you know you're going to be looked at in this way and then you're able to show people like, "Oh, not every person that you look at is not the same way." So, it's just like seeing a lot of black people graduate college, get these high end jobs. It's just a lot of things you're doubted for, and people really don't think you have the capabilities to do. So, I'm just like, it's like defying the negative.

To reflect the intersectionalities of identity characteristics, I layered the questions for the third interview. The second question inquired as to what being Bahamian meant to Asha. "We are a funny culture," she said.

I love being from there. It's like a 50/50 thing sometimes, though. I think it's like that with every culture. Sometimes you look at certain things that your culture does and

you're like, "Oh my God." Like, because you're like we're not all like that, but then other

times you're like, "Yep. That's my people. Imma stick beside 'em.

One of the things I love about Asha is her passion for her heritage, and the pride she takes in

being Bahamian. "We have…" she said, "…certain characteristics where we would be like,

'Only in The Bahamas,' because there are certain things that people do and say that you would

only find in The Bahamas."

Gender was the next layer of our discussion. "I would never regret being a black

woman," Asha said. She continued:

Regardless of where I grew up. Like if it's the United States or The Bahamas, wherever I

grew up, I would never regret being a black woman. I love my black skin. So, I would

never be ashamed, but it's difficult sometimes, being a black woman in America,

especially an international one. Because like I say, especially males, like some people

treat you as if you're nothing. Then some people treat you like you're the highest thing

they've ever seen in their lives.

I asked Asha if there were any specific Caribbean and/or Bahamian elements that contributed to

her pride in who she is. "First would have to be my accent," she said.

Most people, like, when they're from a certain place, when they get to America – I know

because I have a lot of Bahamian friends who do the same thing – they would try to

switch up their accent to sound more like the people around them. And I'm like, no, I

can't do that.

Other characteristics about being from The Bahamas that Asha loves include cultural festivals

like Junkanoo (even though she's never been), music, art, and naturally, food.

My question, as it had for the other young women, asked what being their race, ethnicity, or nationality meant to them individually, but Asha, like the others, replied with a litany of collective "we"s, reminding me of the role of community in Blackness. For Asha, "It's not just me in general," she said.

> Because the people that I surround myself with has something to do with me as well. So, it's not just how I view us as one big bundle of people, but they affect how I'm doing because I don't like to downgrade other people of my own kind. If I'm going to say I'm from The Bahamas at my lowest, I'm going to say I'm from The Bahamas at my highest.

I asked Asha how she would describe herself. She chose three specific words: passionate, empathetic, and determined. These are all characteristics she believes she inherited from her father, a humble and reserved man who works in plumbing and construction in Nassau. If given the opportunity to speak to her younger Self, Asha's advice would be to choose friends wisely and relax when possible. She said:

> I would probably tell myself, "It's okay. You don't have to work yourself so hard to the point that you developed anxiety when you, when things don't work for you." So, I would just give myself a break as I was growing up. I should have given myself more of a break than I did. Because now I have chronic anxiety. So, that's what I would tell myself. Don't be so hard on yourself, don't rush it, and be wise about the people you keep around you.

The pursuit of higher education is important to Asha. Despite the obstacles she has faced in her collegiate journey as an international student in the States, she perseveres. She does not consider herself to be, in her own words, "one of those brainiac people or someone who knows a great much," but that may have been, perhaps, the only thing she shared with me during the

process to which I do not agree. With just six months remaining in paramedic school, I do believe she knows a great much, and I also believe that knowledge will take her very, very far. She said, "I would lose sleep trying to study to make sure that I understand something, because I'm like, it's not just about passing the class. It's like I'm taking the skill that I'm learning in my books to the streets to deal with people's lives."

## 4.3 "You Don't Sound Nigerian": Naomi's Story

It would probably be more appropriate to title Naomi's section something more along the lines of, "When an Introvert Interviews an Introvert: What Could Possibly Go Wrong?" When I selected all of my participants, this is certainly something that I considered. Would it be awkward since neither of us cared much for talking? How would I get good responses from her? Would she be willing to sit through three interviews? Naomi is what I would call a quiet wonder. During our first semester together at Northern Point, when classes were in-person and met twice a week, and before COVID claimed all sense of classroom normalcy, she would always beat me to the classroom. As I strolled in each Tuesday and Thursday in preparation for our class, her head was often the first thing I would see, and a soft "Hello" would drift up from the place where she sat; front row, aisle seat, directly to my left, and in front of the wall clock that was always running too fast or too slow. While she hardly said much during class discussions, even successfully navigating her way through a group assignment without much of the usual group banter, I could look at her and tell she was one of those people with a story to tell. I was right.

I began our first conversation in the same manner in which I started the others. "OK, Naomi," I said. "Tell me a little bit about yourself." This is where she chose to begin:

In August 2009, I came here from, I came from Nigeria to the United States. We started living in a place, in a house on *Eastern Avenue, and it was just like we all shared one

room. It was four of us. My dad came here first to prepare for us to come here together.

When I first got here, I was, I mean I was amazed by the different colors [of people]. I

think I saw, I thought, like seeing a white person was really cool because I never

had…just mostly my skin tone in my country. I mean, I think in South Africa you have

people of different colors there. But being outside of Nigeria, yeah, it was cool at first.

I believed there was some unintentional foreshadowing occurring, her way of letting me know

that the grass was, in fact, not much greener in America. It did not take long for Naomi to

confirm my suspicions.

And then I went to school at *South Royal Elementary School, something like that. Oh,

things started happening. Um, I was really shy so every time I said something, you could

hear my accent. I would get made fun of for being from Africa and about my skin color.

Um, so that was hard.

Terms like *critical moments* are often used in psychology and in education (Thomson &

Holland, 2015), and I knew what Naomi was telling me was just that. I knew this because I had

many similar moments in my early educational years as well. They are the kinds of moments and

memories that leave you scarred, if they ever really leave at all. These early experiences, Naomi

believes, were a major contributing factor to her introversion and shyness. She said, "I said I

don't want to get made fun of, so I would just keep quiet." Naomi shared with me that her family

did not have a car when they arrived in the States. This resulted in catching the bus to get to

school. "Overall," she said, "it was hard with school."

Memories from her early years of schooling have not stayed with her. Since she was

around the age of ten when she moved, much of what she learned prior to her arrival escapes her.

"What I learned in Nigeria, like, is way different," she said. "I don't even know what I learned.

That's the thing," Naomi said with a slight chuckle. "I think I was just there. I was just playing school when I was over there." The humor she found in that statement seemed to fade as she continued. "When I got over here, I was like wow, I never knew all of this stuff. So, like, I would constantly have to repeat exam because I didn't really understand the concept, but later on, I got the hang of it."

As I was transcribing the initial interview with Naomi, I could not help but to think about the flawed testing and assessment systems that are largely still in place in American public schools. The notion that a child like Naomi can arrive in the United States from another country where English is not their native language, yet still be required to test at and meet American academic standards is a highly problematic concept. Further, when these students do not meet those standards, the consequences and long-term effects of this rejection is dire. "I remember one time where, if we pass the EOGs, we were supposed to go to Dreamland [a local amusement park whose name has been changed for the purposes of this study], but I couldn't go because I didn't pass the first time. So, I had to stay back."

After their initial move, Naomi and her family moved within the same city up to three times that she can remember. This meant she would attend a variety of different schools in the area, but she encountered the same issue at all of them: bullying. "I went to middle school, and I also got bullied over there. And then I went to high school, and I still got bullied over there," she said.

> And I think it was my twelfth year where I was kinda like, I made sure I got all my
> credits and graduate early. I think that was when the bullying stopped and that was when
> I was able to, like, oh yeah, I was able to speak up for myself because I finally
> understood everything.

After high school, Naomi got an associate's degree in graphic design from a trade college in the area that has now permanently closed. Once she found out her credits would not transfer from that college so that she could enroll in a four-year institution, she decided to start over at Northern Point. Naomi has also been able to consistently find employment since her late teens. "I've had seven jobs since I got here and I'm thankful for that," she said. "Because if I was in Nigeria right now, I wouldn't have a job at all because our economy is so bad. It's corrupt in that country. So, I'm thankful that I got the opportunity to come here with my family."

Surprisingly, Naomi does not shy away from talking about her family. It seems natural and effortless.

> So, my dad, he was a doctor in Nigeria, so he was thinking, ok, like, if he came here, like, he was thinking that cause he was a doctor in Nigeria, it would be easy to be adapted when he got here, but no. You have to start over because I don't think the education system over there matches the education system here.

Naomi's father has now worked as a certified nursing assistant for many years. Her mother, who also works in healthcare, has taken pride in working for a mother and baby center in one of the area's healthcare systems. Both of her parents have embraced the fact that Naomi is forging her own path here in the States, and they support her wholly.

There are a few vivid memories about school in Nigeria that returned to Naomi while we spoke. She remembers wearing uniforms that had to be ironed and had to remain clear. Her hair, and the hair of other little girls, had to be neatly styled, her own often in two braids. As children in the States once stood to recite the pledge of allegiance at the start of each school day, Naomi and her peers would stand to recite the anthem before school started. They sat in rows of desks, each row long enough to seat three students. There was no light in the schoolhouse that was not

provided by the sun. There were computers that did not work. What Naomi remembers most is playing. She speaks fondly of this memory, "What I mostly remember is play time when we would go out on the playground and just be playing." As she continues to talk, the memories seem to rush forth like a flood. There was no letter-based grading system. They used rankings like first, second, and so on. "I was always getting second place," she said.

Despite its ethnic diversity, English is the official language of Nigeria. It is what is taught in schools. Naomi remembers there being a focus on writing complete sentences in English, what she calls "easy stuff" like, "The boy went to the moon." Because of this, Naomi does claim English as her first language. Her parents, however, speak Yoruba; one of the languages of the three largest ethnic groups – Hausa, Igbo, and Yoruba – in Nigeria. "I speak Yoruba," she said. "But I don't speak it right. I just understand it more because my parents are speaking it to me at home and anywhere else." Without prompting, she began to speak about what she calls her "big English accent". In other words, she *sounds* much less Nigerian now than she did when she arrived in the states. Her accent has started to fade. "I'm used to speaking like this," she said. "But sometimes when I'm nervous, you can hear it." The *it* she referred to here would be her accent.

Naomi claims English as her first language because she did not learn to speak Yoruba at a young age. With the primary focus on language in her early years of schooling being placed on English, her only exposure to Yoruba was listening to her parents and older family members when they spoke outside of school. "My parents talk to me in Yoruba, but I talk back to them in English," she said. For the most part, their communication has always gone this way. There are a few Yoruba terms (see Table 4) she knows well and uses frequently when conversing with her family.

Table 4.

*Yoruba Words and Phrases*

| **Yoruba Phrase** | **Meaning** |
|---|---|
| *bawoni* | How are you? |
| *beeni* | yes |
| *raaro-o* | no |

In elementary school, Naomi was placed in an English as a Second Language (ESL) class. "They put me in ESL when I got here," she said. "I don't know why." She continued:

I think I stopped going to ESL when I got to the ninth grade because I was just like I don't need this anymore. I know how to speak English. I don't understand why I'm in ESL. It was just like easy classes. I don't understand what the whole point of that class was.

There was no placement test or assessment that she recalls that would have resulted in her being placed in ESL. "I guess they saw that we were from Nigeria, so they were like, okay, we're going to put her in ESL." Naomi remembers feeling like she was in the second grade when she was in the ESL class. "I'm not dumb. I know what I'm doing. I was like, I'm so confused. I never know the purpose of that class. I even thought it was, like, to learn a different language, but it wasn't." All of the students in Naomi's ESL class were immigrant students. Despite knowing English when she arrived, it was still labeled as her second language. "I spoke English when I got here," she said. "It might have been a different English from what they spoke, but it was English."

Naomi has lived in the Carolinas for eleven years. She does self-identify as an immigrant and her sometimes indistinct accent sometimes results in other people inquiring where she's from. "I remember at my old building, this guy asked me where I'm from and I said Nigeria and he said, 'You don't sound Nigerian.'" Naomi believes her accent is only noticeable under certain circumstances. "I think when I say certain words, and like, when I have to speak in front of people, um, well, now, like, people don't even, like, when people see me, when I speak, they don't think I'm Nigerian." When she's with close family and friends, she chooses not to make an effort to hide it. "I'm more Americanized now," she said. "But when I got here, it wasn't like I wanted to get rid of the accent, but I didn't want to show it."

### 4.3.1 "That Doesn't Make Any Sense"

One of what I found to be the most prolific statements Naomi made during our first meeting was, "Being a Nigerian woman in America is different from being a Nigerian woman in Nigeria." Revisiting this statement is where our second conversation began. "In Nigeria," she said, "women are like, they're not really respected, and I also feel like I'm sure, like, this happened back then, too. They think as women, we're just supposed to cook. We don't need any education experience."

Since Naomi brought up the topic of education, I thought that might be a great time for us to begin our discussion on writing and speaking as it pertains to her collegiate experiences. "It wasn't until your class," she said. "I was like, okay, I could express myself." The class she was referring to was not the composition and research-based course in which I first had her as a student. This class was a bit different. While it still fell under our English curriculum, this class was a creative writing-based class, one in which there is much more freedom on the instructor's behalf in terms of how it can be taught. I follow more of an anything goes approach when it

comes to that course. For me, I want the students enrolled in it, who as in this case are usually students who have taken me for one of the two required composition courses, to have an opportunity to move away the rules, regulations, referencing, and "standard" English requirements of the other courses, and embrace a space where they can say what they really want to say in the ways in which they really want to say it. I have found that oftentimes, students will write about their experiences in education (see Figure 2).

This was not the experience that Naomi felt in the introductory course. She had an instructor who she describes as "very strict" when it came to writing standard. "He wanted me to write his way," she said. "I'm just like, I don't write like that. I don't understand what you mean," she said. Receiving feedback was also difficult.

> He would just say things like, "This has nothing to do with that. This sentence isn't supposed to be here." It was just too much. Like, I would read it and I'm just like, I don't even know what you're talking about. Like, I was just trying to get the grade, but he was so technical about everything. Like some words…he was like, "That doesn't make any sense," and say stuff like that.

Navigating coursework shifted from the possibility of enjoying a class and strengthening or acquiring new skills to dreading the work and surviving the course. This happens often when students are forced to adhere to specific communications standards, and when it does occur, they often risk the possibility of losing their own voices in their work to suit the needs and expectations of the teacher. Naomi applied this mentality to her writing classes and her communications courses. She said, "It's more of like trying to find other words that sound all smart. Like trying to use words, more advanced words to be able to just, like, make sure my paper or my speech sounds proper and smart." Giving speeches increases Naomi's anxiety, and

even causes her accent to become more prevalent when she is nervous. "I just try to say it really slowly," she said, "so I pronounce it correctly."

Naomi noted that there is a clear difference in how she speaks based on the setting or environment she is in. Sometimes, this can lead to really losing one's self. In telling me about an experience she had while working at a local sporting goods store, she said:

> It was majority Caucasians over there. I was having to talk like a Caucasian because that was the, like, it was the norm. I was forcing myself. I would literally have to do something else just to fit in. But, I only lasted three weeks and left. I felt like I just had to…I wasn't myself and I wasn't really comfortable. That's why I left. I'm not saying black people don't talk proper. It's just like, I don't want to be talking like this all the time.

Naomi admitted that it can often feel that way in classrooms, specifically writing classrooms, as well. "It's like putting on a show," she said. "Like, why am I talking like this? I feel like if you can read my paper and understand what I'm saying, I really shouldn't lose any points because I didn't use the words, the proper words, the teacher thought I should use.

We began to talk about terms like linguistic justice, linguistic freedom, and linguistic agency. "I want to speak my mind," she said.

> But it seems sometimes, like, I don't want nobody to judge me. I just want to be quiet because it's just too much to try. I just want to do it their way and get my grade and just be out instead of trying to talk like I want to talk because I know they don't want me to talk that way.

Was I a part of the *they*? Naomi continued:

I feel like when we're in class, we're, um, we're supposed to speak a certain way to make it sound like we're smart. It's just like when you go to interviews. We can't really be ourselves and talk like we want to talk. I don't want to say we're being fake, because we're not trying to be fake. I don't really know how to explain it. We're just trying to meet the standards they want us to meet.

### 4.3.3 "I'm Strong and I'm Different"

Our final conversation was a bit shorter than all of the others, but per usual, Naomi transparently shared things about herself that I firmly believe she seldom discusses with others. After working a few long, consecutive shifts at her job at a well-known company's warehouse, she was a bit tired. Naomi also suffers from migraines, so in agreeing to meet with me after one of her employer's biggest selling events of the year, I knew I would not keep her long. Our conversation on identity began.

When I asked Naomi what being Black meant to her, she replied:

It means I'm strong and it means I'm different. For all of the stuff that we have gone through, and we're still here. That's really what it means. As a black woman, I am able to overcome anything that comes my way and I'm able to excel.

Like Naomi, I am also someone who says that I often pull strength from those who came before me. It is a sentiment that has really helped me in life and along this particular part of my academic journey. What Naomi shared with me next was an idea I had never considered and for a moment, left me a bit speechless. "We all have a past, and we all have things that we've been through," she said. "When I was in Nigeria…I didn't know about slavery until I got here. So, being able to see how far black people have come. Like, I don't know if it's really over, but I know it's different now.

The concept that a child from an African country could arrive in the United States at the age of ten with no knowledge of the slave trade was something that I do not think I ever considered could be a possibility. It was not until middle school, where a teacher showed their students *Roots* for days on end (a problematic pedagogical choice beyond the scope of this particular study), that Naomi learned anything at all about the topic. I was unable to quickly process or unpack all that I was thinking. I found myself criticizing my own preconceived notions and beliefs. Was I under the assumption that *all* people from Africa should know about slavery; should have feelings about it, any kind of feelings? I managed to return from my thoughts, and I asked Naomi if she felt like she might have perceived or received learning about slavery differently as someone with a much stronger connection to the continent of Africa. She responded, "I can't really say because I was never treated like that." My thoughts still drift to those words sometimes.

Mentioning her connection to Nigeria was a natural segue into my next question. I asked Naomi what being a Nigerian woman means to her. "It means everything to me," she said. "That's who I am. Anytime anyone asked me about myself, that's what I say first." She continued, "It means I'm different and I'm proud of my country. Yes, I'm a [United States] citizen, but I don't consider myself, like part of the African American clique." Naomi and I previously had conversations about the term *Americanah*, made popular by Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie's (2013) novel of the same title. In the book, and in Nigerian culture, the term refers to someone who has been "Americanized", or exhibits traits and behaviors more commonly associated with American life. Naomi, despite her denouncement of the term African American, does admit that the term *Americanah* applies to her in many ways.

As it had for all of these young women, my next question focused on the intersection of race and gender when I asked Naomi what being a Black woman meant to her. Initially, she could not find the words. I shared with her my own definition, and I even shared snippets of what the others said when they were posed the same question. Naomi shared with me that it was honestly something she had never really put much thought to. I challenged her to think about it and she promised to have a response prepared when we met for our final focus group conversation.

Since I gave the other young women a chance to talk to their younger selves, I wanted to do the same for Naomi. She said:

> I would just say, stand up for yourself from an early age so that it doesn't get to you. Don't let anything affect you or get to you that much because people will always be mean. That's what I wish I did. Instead of just crying I should have stood up for myself then. I feel like if I did, I wouldn't be like this today. I'd be more out there. But I didn't know what to expect, so… Just speak, speak up for yourself and don't let nobody just step on you.

### 4.4 Analysis: Tellin' It Like It Is: They Said What They Said

This research was guided by my will and desire to hear and tell the stories of young Black college women with regards to language, learning, and writing under the "standard" English ideologies that are prevalent in higher education. While some of my commentary in the previous sections of this chapter addressed many of my initial and "in the moment" analyses of the things they shared with me, I will outline my overall analysis in more detail in the following sections. As previously stated, this study was supported by three distinct research questions.

Those questions and their respective responses based on the findings that were highlighted in the individual interviews and focus group interview were analyzed as such.

**4.4.1 "Whatever They Choose Not to Like about Us": Academic Assault**

*1. How do Black women students narrate and navigate raciolinguistic identities and experiences in college composition and communications courses?*

One of the things I loved most about sitting with, albeit virtually, these young women and hearing their stories was the transparency with which they told them. They all spoke to me as if they were speaking to a family member or friend. There were no pretenses or efforts to "sound proper", or as Naomi would say, "talk like a Caucasian". They narrated their raciolinguistic identities with authority and authenticity. In other words, they told it like it is. While it was not the focus of our conversations or the questions that had been prepared in advance, all three of them touched on the ways in which it seems systems like education, whether it be K-12 or post-secondary, are not designed for students like them to thrive. Two of the three participants were assigned deficit-based labels in their elementary years, and the lasting impact of those labels still weighs heavily on them both as they continue their coursework in college.

*4.4.1.2 We're Gonna Make It*

These young women also navigate these identities in higher education under an intense sense of survival. This theme was apparent throughout all of their narratives. They all admitted to conforming, adapting, or adjusting to the standards their instructors, myself included, expected of them, rather than expressing themselves in the way they felt best both verbally in and in their writing. As a result, they navigate higher education courses like composition and communications from a perspective of doing what needs to be done – a seemingly key pillar in the Black woman experience – for the sake of the final outcome. In their case, passing their

courses. Additionally, for all of them, it appears as if they function in academia from a mental space of proving others wrong. I once read a T-shirt that said, "I am my ancestors' wildest dreams." As Asha was talking during our last interview, visions of that T-shirt came to mind. Her term "defying the negative" is very closely related to deficit discourse for diverse students in higher education (Bensimon, 2005). Despite their previous academic successes, many Black students are entering college classes with professors, like the previously mentioned Georgetown Law professor, who deem them incapable solely based on preconceived notions and the color of their skin.

Having an awareness of a raciolinguistic identity was a central part of this particular research question. All three of these young women appeared to have that awareness, and it appeared to be a prominent theme throughout their narratives. This was evident in remarks like Kai's, "We don't talk like this,"; Asha's, "I'm not going to change the way I speak to make you feel better,"; and in Naomi's, "I'm not saying black people don't talk proper. It's just like, I don't want to be talking like this all the time." These declarations really emphasized and illustrated their knowledge of the associations between their language, or their use of language, and their racial identities.

Another common theme in the individual interviews and the focus group was the prevalence of the "collective we". When asked what being a Black woman meant to them as individuals, all three young women responded using the collective we as a representation of Black women. For example, Kai mentioned, "We're strong. We do what needs to be done." I listened as each one of them responded in such a manner, and I shared this with them during our focus group discussion when I presented them with the question again. Naomi, having had more time to come up with a response since our individual interview, shared that Black women are,

"…extremely versatile, but hated by so many, including Black men," to which Kai agreed. She said:

> I don't know. It just seems like nowadays, well always has been, that black women are not protected, not even by our own kind…black men. Because, you know, females get abused, raped, and murdered, etc., by a partner or someone they don't even know. And we're hated by whites…it doesn't even matter whatever race…whoever feels like they have an issue with us or a personal vendetta against our skin and whatever they choose not to like about us.

Kai's words struck me in a way that I did not know they could. As a survivor of sexual assault in my adult life, I too, shared their sentiment of not being or feeling protected. I could have used that moment to share that with them (Kai already being aware due to past conversations), but I withheld that contribution to the collective "we" for reasons that are still unknown to me. Her remarks also correlate with Dr. Angelou's (1983) words that lead this chapter. The "tripartite crossfire of masculine prejudice, white illogical hate and Black lack of power" (p. 3321) are all present in Kai's words. While it may appear that this particular analysis has shifted off-course as it aimed to address how Black women navigate and narrate their raciolinguistic identities in particular college courses, I wanted to point out here that in these conversations and through my own critical reflections, it is evident that *we* carry with us this burden of not feeling protected or heard, in addition to the demands of coursework, into academic spaces where we are required to speak and write a certain way. This often results, as these young women shared, in an exhaustive effort just to fit those molds and standards. In short, we tied ("standard" English meaning → we are tired).

**4.4.2 "I Ain't Even Gone Say Dat": Silencing in Higher Education**

2. *In what ways does the rejection/acceptance/ambivalence of "non-standard" English in academia impact Black women students' linguistic agency in academic discourse?*

I included the words "rejection, acceptance, and ambivalence" in this research question in an effort to move away from any preconceived assumptions that the rejection of "non-standard" English would be the only outcome or experience. However, after having these in-depth conversations with these three young women, it was evident that they did feel elements of their culturally specific dialects and languages (accents, pronunciations, etc.) are not accepted in a variety of social spaces, including higher education. None of them expressed feelings of their known ways of speaking and writing in which their teachers in composition and/or communications courses that were accepting or ambivalent. Asha did, however, share with me that an instructor for a course in another academic area does in some way fetishize her accent; often asking her to repeat phrases for their pleasure or entertainment and often using terms she explains out of context.

Each young woman shared that they have suffered from anxiety largely due to not wanting to "sound stupid" when it comes to speaking in academic settings. As they shared their experiences, I often pictured them seated in the classroom, identical to the one with the orange walls from the beginning of this text, with duct tape placed over their lips. My imagination, perhaps, was getting the better of me, but it was a startling visualization no less. Had I played a role in silencing them? Had my compliance with the rules and regulations of "standard" English stifled them? Would they forgive me? Essentially, prior to participating in this study, they did not feel as if they did have a sense of linguistic agency at all, or at least not one that would not result in punitive consequences when it came to a grade. While Asha shared feelings of

disappointment regarding points being deducted for being told she was not pronouncing words correctly, it was not entirely clear if these were internal grievances, or if they were conversations she actually had with her instructor.

For these young women, speaking in the ways in which they choose in academic settings is something they believe will result in harsh judgement from their peers, their instructors, or both. This was prevalent in all of their stories, but dominantly illustrated in Naomi's recollection of her early aversion to speaking at school due to the bullying that would follow based on her accent. This is something that has remained with her as a college student as well. While I do believe she is inherently introverted, I also think a large portion of her knowledge of the power of her voice was lost early on. Kai concluded her participation in this study with new knowledge about what linguistic agency is with a huge sense of "If I knew then what I know now…" as it pertains to how she has conducted herself in academic spaces.

I also found their sense of choice to be intriguing as well. For me, it suggested that there was some form of agency, after all, agency by definition means having the freedom to choose. In their cases, choosing silence or conformity both yield higher rewards in academic discourse. All three young women have an awareness of the differences in the ways they speak at home compared to the ways they are expected to speak in college classrooms. They know that they are expected to sound like they, as Asha would say, "know a great much", but the reality in their stories is that they all tend to choose silence in the same way that I did on my academic journey. In hearing their stories, I could see myself, sometimes a younger me from grade school, sitting in class literally on the brink of bursting with the answer to the question the teacher had posed to the class. Anxiety, the same anxiety all three young women shared in their stories, crippled me

for many years, and in many ways, still affects me today. Like me, for them it seems better to not say a thing or utter a thought than to be judged for how the thing or thought is said.

Kirkland's (2013) text, *A Search Past Silence*, discusses ways in which young Black men navigate their high school experience. Using ethnographic research, Kirkland (2013) is able to present many dominant narratives of how young Black men can often construct their own complex, detailed, and unique forms of literacy narratives. As I met with the young women in this study, their narratives also illuminated a quiet struggle. It appears as though Black women college students have constructed a method for literacy engagement that moves beyond codeswitching, which simply implies moving from one way of speaking to another, to a multifaceted approach that involves constant internal and on-the-spot translating, masquerading, making the switch, and/or choosing to remain silent. In not saying something, they are saying something. While the research question I am currently addressing does suggest that I was seeking to find plural ways the coveting of "standard" English impacts their linguistic agency, their narratives place silencing, and the anxiety that accompanies it, as the most prevalent.

### 4.4.3 "We Cain't Win for Losing": The Double-Edged Sword

3. *How does the hegemonic positioning of "standard" English in collegiate composition assessment influence the written work of collegiate Black women?*

The key theme present when it comes to this research question is that these young women all expressed the widely-known expression of a never-ending "lose-lose" situation. As Asha shared, it is a 50/50 gamble. You can risk losing your voice or you can risk losing points. For young women like them, the desire to excel academically becomes a priority, so they choose to avoid losing points with the hopes of achieving a higher grade. In doing so, they often lose their own sense of voice. All three women admitted there were times in the revisions process for

written work that they would make changes not because they understood why the change was suggested or that they agreed with it, but rather so that they could do what the teacher wanted. However, in courses like creative writing that do not require the same structuring and referencing requirements that are often outlined in composition, when given the opportunity, students like Naomi not only thrive, but they can also leave the class with a sense of having actually enjoyed it due to the ability to use their own voice without fear of negative assessment consequences. Additionally, the structure of composition assessment often fails to present opportunities for students to talk about personal experiences utilizing a first-person narrative since composition instruction often calls for the use of research-based, third-person perspectives (Matsuda, 2006). When given the opportunity, in courses like creative writing for example, students like Naomi often do see those assignments as a way to express their thoughts and feelings in a way they choose without fear of assessment penalties.

Due to the positioning of "standard" English in higher education, students like these young women find themselves limited in terms of expression in their writing. To address this particular research question, it seems as though this has a negative impact on their written work when it comes to how they are assessed. Kai and Naomi both expressed the disheartening feelings when work is returned that they felt as if they did a good job on, be it rough drafts or final drafts. All three young women expressed the notion of their writing "making sense" to them in the way in which they chose to write, but this resulted in grading penalties in many of their courses. The prompt for Figure 2 below was a prompt in a creative writing course that simply challenged students to write about any educational experience of their choosing. While this work was submitted for a class that I was teaching, Naomi submitted this essay prior to being asked to

participate in or had any knowledge of this study, yet her experiences with language and education are what she chose to emphasize.

**Figure 2.**

*Excerpt from Naomi's Creative Writing Essay*

> I started elementary school as soon as I got here but did not really understand the subjects that were being taught. I would always have to retake finals because I never made the mark the first time and because it was hard for me to understand the method of teaching here. In elementary school, I got bullied because of where I was from mostly by the same people who look me which was humorous. My initial thought was that when I got here, I would not be accepted by Americans, but I actually was not accepted by my own race. This continued throughout my middle school and high school years. Being bullied really changed me in ways I did not think it would, I was constantly depressed and would always keep to myself to avoid people. During my middle school years, I finally got the hang of the education system here and was excelling in all my classes. I took the same energy to high school and was still excelling in my classes. The bullying did not stop till my senior year in high school because that was when I finally had the courage to stand up and speak for myself. Throughout my high school years, I kept to myself and I was very quiet because I was still self-conscious of my accent. The reason why I did not speak up back then is because I had a very thick accent so I will just break down if I talk and messed up.

The notion of a double-edged sword denotes a feeling of knowing one will be negatively affected in some way based on the choice they make. These young women, and many students just like them, submit work for composition and communications courses writing knowing the way they choose will allow linguistic freedom, but will also result in lower grades. At the same time, if they choose to attempt to write based on the use of mainstream English (without exhibiting what is considered "mastery"), they still run the risk of grading penalties during assessment due to grammatical and structural infractions (see Appendix).

The word cloud that WebEx produced at the conclusion of the focus interview provided a way for me to use textual analysis. On one hand, this could be viewed by some as a "flawed" tool for data analysis. For example, some of the words that appear on the cloud could be misspelled which could lead to them being taken out of context (Examples: my last name "Dervin" appears on the word cloud as "Durbin" and "Bahamian" often appeared on Asha's word clouds as "Bohemian"). An additional reason why a researcher might choose not to use this as a form of data is due to the fact that it includes the words spoken by the researcher as well. However, since as I previously mentioned, I considered myself a participant in this study and since my role was not merely to ask my interview questions to them but to myself as well, I felt using this a textual analysis of the word clouds helped to support my findings. I utilized this feature as yet another way to clearly see the frequency of words used during our conversations and draw conclusions from them as well. In Figure 3 below, words like *people*, *speaking*, and *black*, are represented in a larger font than the majority of the other words. In a way, this served as a means of confirmation for me at the conclusion of data collection as my primary goal from the onset was essentially to explore "black people speaking".

**Figure 3.**

*Focus Group WebEx Word/Tag Cloud*

CHAPTER 5: DISCUSSION

If we had no language, we'd have nothing.

-Toni Morrison

**5.1 Discussion: "It's Gone Be What It's Gone Be" – Or Is It?**

As outlined in chapter two, there is a wealth of information and existing literature of the experiences of school-aged children with varying home and/or native languages and dialects in American public schools. A substantial amount of that work focuses on the ESL experience, while more contemporary scholars have started to unveil the experience of other student demographics as well. However, very little research exists that focuses specifically on language use for Black women and their experiences in college composition and communications courses. While calls for inclusion and diversity in language like the CCCC (2020) Demand for Linguistic Justice do exist, dissemination of such information is sometimes limited to a relatively small group of professionals who are already willing to, or possibly even already embracing, the challenging of these existing systems and structures. Seldom does it make it into the hands and minds of the teachers, professors, administrators, and other stakeholders who need to hear it most. Because of this, greater strides must be made toward linguistic inclusivity in higher education. This chapter will revisit the concepts that were previously discussed in the first two chapters and outline how they align with the experiences of the young women who participated in this study. Additionally, I will discuss the structure of narratives and how I saw fit to present those stories in this work. Finally, this chapter will draw attention to the connections between these findings and existing literature, then conclude with recommendations for future research and proposed, applicable solutions toward language inclusion in college composition and communications courses.

It is important to ensure that these renewed cries for equity, diversity, and inclusion are not reduced merely to skin color, and to ensure that they reach beyond the scope of primary and secondary education. Simply put, linguistic diversity should be an inclusive literacy practice in college classrooms, and specifically college classrooms that for decades have focused solely on the use of "standard" English, or "standard" American English. This study was specifically designed to not only begin to fill the gap of missing literature that focuses on the experiences of Black women across the diaspora who are enrolled in college courses and who live in linguistically diverse worlds, but to also highlight the many ways in which this dismissal of home or native languages and dialects impacts their lives and to illustrate how existing literacy pedagogical practices in higher education could be more closely examined as well.

Arguably, the prevalence of a "standard" English ideology in schools, regardless of grade level, is and perhaps always will be a key component of schooling. This became even more clear to me during a recent virtual meeting with my colleagues at Northern Point. When asked what instructors were doing in their classrooms to promote the now popularized phrase of "equity, diversity, and inclusion", one instructor mentioned they were being less strict when grading for grammar due to language differences. Another colleague quickly interjected with comments about how doing so leaves students with "poor writing skills". For me, it seemed as if this previous statement was incomplete. Perhaps if my colleague had said, "It leaves students with poor writing skills per standard English language requirements," I may have felt differently about their response. However, that was not the case.

This constant tension I feel as an English instructor at Northern Point that centers on my desire to allow and advocate for linguistic justice and agency while knowing that students will be labeled, as my colleague suggests, "poor" writers and/or speakers, lies at the very heart of this

study. After my conversations with these three young women, in addition to analyzing the data, I also had to challenge myself to analyze what is and has been taking place in college classes, like the ones I teach, when it comes to the positioning of American English as the standard. Chapters one and two addressed this in the scope of K-12 education, as that is what the majority of the existing literature emphasizes. It is evident in that research that this matter is often approached in one of two ways. Primarily, students are often penalized in some way due to a lack of "standard" English proficiency. These penalties sometimes take the shape of point deductions, failing grades, being held back, or – as was the case for two of the young women who participated in this study – they are often labeled as "struggling" students. The secondary approach is that students are taught to codeswitch from their native or chosen language to "standard" English. Existing literature on the detriment of teaching students to codeswitch includes notions of the devaluing and dismissal of home language.

In many ways, these two approaches that are present in K-12 continue in higher education. Students with what are deemed to be poor literacy skills can be placed in developmental reading and English courses prior to being allowed to enroll in traditional curriculum courses that count towards a degree. Secondarily, as evident in the work that I do in preparing students for written assignments and in markups for drafted work, students are still encouraged to codeswitch to meet academic standards. This unending cycle will continue unless both students and instructors feel empowered enough to truly assert and embrace linguistic diversity in higher education. As outlined in the literature review presented here, codeswitching is a common pedagogical practice that occurs in schools for children as young as the age of three or four (Lee, 1995). This is often presented in a manner in which the home or native language of a student is *converted* or *translated* to meet "standard" English rules of grammar, spelling, and/or

pronunciation. What often is not emphasized or addressed is the effects such practices can have on students, and as illustrated in these findings, their ability or willingness to participate in academic discourse or, in layman's terms, participating in class.

To reiterate the presentation of Black girl literacies in Chapter 2 of this study, the assertions of Price-Dennis et al. (2017) suggest literacy experiences play such a crucial role in the formation of identity, particularly with how they view themselves as students and scholars. Black girls' aversion to literacy and literature-based coursework is evident in studies like Carter's (2007) study, *Reading All That Crazy White Stuff*, where the findings report that Black girls have grown increasingly exhausted by the prevalence of Whiteness in the curriculum. As illustrated by these findings, and those presented here, the connections between literacy, learning, and identity do not dissipate when these young women leave K-12 grade levels. The feelings they have about themselves as scholars when they make it to the college classroom follow them into the courses like the ones I teach, and where they find themselves verbally stifled by their previous experiences.

The relationship between previous educational experiences and identity was something that appeared to be present in many of the narrative clauses, or small stories, each young woman shared with me. De Fina and Georgakopoulou's (2012) concept of small stories suggests that the researcher focuses on narratives that take place in specific moments when using a narrative research design. They posit the use of small stories, as opposed to grand narratives, enables the researcher to gain greater insight regarding the identity of participants (De Fina & Georgakopoulou, 2012). Since this study did use a narrative approach and since the overall scope of the study and the research questions pertained to identity, utilizing this concept of small stories seemed ideal. However, I would argue that this study used both small stories and grand

narratives. Each of their individual stories from each interview could be viewed as small stories under De Fina and Georgakopoulou's (2012) definition because they include "tellings of ongoing events, future or hypothetical events, and shared (known) events". Under these standards, small stories emphasize the "smallness of talk". I felt like each individual interview positioned itself in this research as a small story that contributed to a larger narrative. The larger narrative here, also known as a grand or dominant narrative (Lyotard, 1984), is one that suggests, when told together, the experiences of these young women is a story of strength, survival, adaptation skills, literacy and early learning experiences, linguistic diversity, and the prevalence of language in the lives of Black women.

## 5.2 Recommendations for Future Research

This study focused on the experiences of three women who identify as Black and who are ethnically tied to three specific groups across the Black diaspora. However, this diaspora spans much further and wider than three demographics. Future research on this topic could expand to include the voices of additional Black diasporic groups that include but are not limited to: Afro-Latina and multi-racial identities, as well as those from other African continents. Research could also be conducted using the experiences of other racial/ethnic groups. Additionally, while this particular study focuses on the voices of young Black women, research about the experiences of young Black men as it pertains to this topic could be explored as well. Including participants from various regions of the United States could also serve as an added layer of depth to such studies as this in an effort to see if there are any similarities and differences in the collegiate experiences of young Black women from other areas when it comes to the use of language in college composition and communications. An evaluation of quantitative data, such as the first

attempt success rate of Black women in college composition and communications or a quantitative analysis of assignment grading, could strengthen this research as well.

### 5.3 Suggestions for Linguistically Diverse Pedagogical Practices

In recent years, the topic of language in higher education has shifted from a focus of solely seeing the languages of others as courses students are required to take in order to fulfill degree requirements to one that emphasizes the use of language in all classes, including courses like college composition and communications that have so often practiced linguistic homogeneity. According to Matsuda (2013), this is a "new frontier" in college composition. This includes the use of innovative technology-based tools like the digital badges for online learners outlined by Hasty et al. (2020). Hasty et al. (2020) write, "To provide the scaffolding for instructors to implement pedagogies that both value students' home language while helping them leverage their language proficiency to learn the practices and expectations of more formal and academic audiences…sociolinguists developed [sic] badges specifically addressing these issues" (p. 246). While this new approach was proven to be successful in the Hasty et al. (2020) study conducted at Coastal Carolina University with regards to giving them an "opportunity to address students' negative attitudes toward different language varieties and to actively celebrate and invite the use of their home language into the classroom," I believe this approach is slightly flawed as it has not addressed the lack of a correlation between the terms "language diversity" and "academic".

To move toward a truly linguistically inclusive pedagogical approach in higher education, there must first be a removal of the pedestal on which "standard" sits. This can be done through the use of introductory lectures, lessons, modules, and activities at the start of the semester that outline the ways a student's home or native language can be used in such a course and still be

viewed as "academic". One example of such a practice would be as simple as an ice breaker assignment called "How Do You Say…?". During this activity, the instructor would create a word chart via white board or Learning Management System that includes the way students say certain terms based on the responses the students in the class provide. It must be established early that despite the differences in how the words or phrases are said, they all have valid meaning. In communications courses, students should not be required to present in a language they do not feel they have proficiency in. With all of the advancements in technology that are often readily at the disposal of teachers and the other students, there are ways to include translations without the need for an actual translator to be present. This is not a practice that can take place at the individual level in order to be effective. Departments, deans, and the like must all be on the same proverbial page in order for all students to have access to a more inclusive educational experience in college composition and communications.

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Appendix: Snippets of Kai's Marked Drafts

*—no ital.*

(3) Wesley, Alexa. "*Scholars with Strollers: The Need to Provide On-Campus Childcare*

*write out* ?

*Services.*" NASPA, 14 June 201AD, www.naspa.org/blog/scholars-with-strollers-the-

need-to-provide-on-campus-childcare-services. This blog explains the need of on-campus

childcare services for student parents. This blog presents that on-campus childcare will be

*awk. Revisit.*

helpful to student parents while they are focusing on their studies and does not receive

the proper help that needed. This blog relates that childcare in colleges campuses are

needed for student parents and their children/child. This blog reveals the help and balance

for young parents in need for childcare while in school. This blog describes the chances

taken against student parents to fulfill their degrees. Meanwhile, student parents are

truanting due to no help for them and their children/child. This blog reports that student

< Childcare on College Campuses > *Stronger title needed.*

Policies regarding no childcare on college campuses still remains an ongoing issue for

*According to Tessa Holtzman et al.,*

student-parents in the U.S. There are 3.8 million parent-students who are raising children while

in college, according to ("Institute For Women's Policy Research"). The proper recognition for

students who are parents often stands irrelevant to the government and colleges worldwide.

*Not on wcp.*

According to *Alamance Community Colleges,* "Child Care Grant is a grant funded by the North

*Citation*

Carolina to assist currently enrolled students with their daycare expenses." Although, in order to

access a Child Care Grant, a student often has to be eligible for the childcare grant. This requires

qualifications such as a GPA of 3.0, they must be a NC resident, at least half of their credits have

to be acquired on campus, not online. Many believe these requirements are excessive and should

be given to a student-parent just by attending college and having a child. Over the years, student

parents have struggled to succeed and graduate from college. This obstacle prevents this

population from elevating in their career choice which can provide a successful future for them

and their child. Studies show this ongoing issue has not been relevant to many people that can

(1)

make this change. Student-parents could continue to struggle academically, due to financial

(2)

constraints and not being able to attend classes. *Very strong intro. & thesis here.*

a

According to 2017 Institute of Women's Policy research report, "parents of dependent

children make up to 26 percent or 4.8 millions of undergraduate students in the united states." (Holtzman et al.)

*

~~In conclusion,~~ student-parents struggle on a day to day basis with school and caring for their child. Student-parents are not given the correct care as far as childcare while focusing on their studies. With the information that has been placed there are numerous issues as far as childcare and no care for student parents in school, maintaining a job and taking care of a child. Help for student-parents will help them in more than one situation. Giving them the hugest weight lifted off of their shoulders and maintain their stress.

Let's chat about this para.