Repositioning the Profession: Teaching Writing to African American Students

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I begin this essay by urging writing teachers of all backgrounds to face higher education's continuing inability to meet the needs of African American students (see both Brooks and Ogbu for a sense of some of these problems as they relate to literacy). Because literacy—in the form of placement and proficiency tests and required writing courses—frequently works to exclude African American students, our greatest obligation is to transform literacy education for these students. Incumbent in this transformation is the reconception of African American literacy and writing pedagogy in more deeply understood cultural and historical contexts. Afro-American literary theory provides fertile ground for this reconception to begin.

Literacy and African American Students
Literacy issues for African Americans have been obscured, unfortunately, by a focus on a narrowly understood black English, despite the efforts of Labov, Smitherman, and others to place the language of African Americans in a more fully understood social and historical context. And despite Labov's early and thorough argument against the deficit theories of the 1960s, such theories are resilient and return in new forms (see Smitherman-Donaldson, Fox). The emphasis on discrete grammatical features of black English has diverted attention from more serious issues, among them the separation of literacy instruction in school from the literary history of African Americans.

African American students do not usually leave school because they fail to master an academic discourse. Instead, as the research of John Ogbu suggests, schools have failed to make good on the promise that literacy instruction in the schools will reward African American students socially and economically. Equally serious is the fact that schools have failed to change the perception (and reality in most cases) that for African American students literacy instruction entails "deculturation without true assimilation" (151). That is, schools have failed to integrate literacy instruction with the experience and history of African Americans, and we have failed as a society and a profession to prove that literacy will result in a more rewarding life. African Americans have known all along that a casual and easy relationship between
literacy and economic success does not exist. J. Elspeth Stuckey, in The Violence of Literacy, states bluntly what Ogbu's research suggests, "Perhaps one of the consequences of literacy is its failure to end the violence of an unfair society" (124).

Writing teachers who recognize the urgent need to reconceive writing pedagogy can look to Afro-American literary theory for strategies of reading and interpreting African American student writing that are free from a narrow understanding of dialect "interference," strategies free from the residue of deficit theories of language that still govern the reading of African American student writing, strategies that instead see African American literacy in social, economic, and historical contexts. Recent literary and composition theories have conceived of writing as dialogic, as invoking stances towards institutions, history, and culture. Particularly useful for this essay is the concept of "position." As characterized by Houston A. Baker, Mae G. Henderson, Cheryl A. Wall, and others, position refers to political relationships between the literary critic and culture, history, and institutions. This geographic metaphor has the advantage of ridding concepts of race, class, and gender from determinist and essentialist associations. So while African American student writing is informed by its position in the history of what Du Bois calls "race rituals," a unitary concept of "race" does not determine or characterize that writing. Instead, a series of intersections between race and history, race and institutions, race and gender, and so on, informs it. This sense of position as "intersection" avoids reductive and simplistic accounts of African American writing and more generously accounts for its multiplicity and diversity.

"Position" as a central concept in the exploration of African American student writers requires a pedagogy that would investigate the ways in which history, culture, institutions, social relations, and race intersect and influence writing. Min-zhan Lu argues in "Writing as Repositioning" that such a pedagogy "would require that both we and our students see writing as a process in which the writer positions, or rather, repositions herself in relation not to a single, monolithic discourse but to a range of competing discourses" (18). Importantly, Lu includes the teacher in this process. Such a disclosure of position on the part of the teacher would help particularize and "locate" the teacher's authority. To paraphrase Cheryl A. Wall's discussion of critical practice, particularizing the teacher's position would "not claim a 'privileged' status," and would help guard against the "false universalism" that has "rendered black women and their writing mute" (2).

Authentication: Demonstrating Literacy
Afro-American literary theory can help writing teachers and their students map cultural and historical positions toward literacy. Representing the diversity of opinion among Afro-American literary theorists is beyond the scope of this article. (See the exchange between Joyce, Gates, and Baker in
New Literary History for an indication of the truly complex issues facing these writers.) The theorists I have chosen to discuss seem most relevant to teachers of writing. Robert Stepto's 1979 study, From Behind the Veil, is a good place to begin because it most directly addresses ideas about literacy. Ostensibly, Stepto's study attempts to expose the intertextual relationships among literary texts, to deal with literary relations rather than relations between history and literature or society and literature. Fortunately, as Houston Baker points out, history and society creep into and enrich his study (Blues 94-97).

One of the most useful parts for writing instructors is Stepto's exploration of "authentication," the means by which African American writers guarantee the "credibility" of their text. Guaranteeing credibility was of obvious and primary concern with narratives written by former slaves, whose act of literacy itself cast doubt on the authenticity of the text. Early slave narratives were framed with "authenticating" documents, letters and prefaces written by white guarantors. William Lloyd Garrison's preface to Frederick Douglass' autobiography is a handy example. Garrison assures readers of the authenticity of the text, stating that Douglass wrote "his own Narrative, in his own style, and according to the best of his ability" (qtd. in Veil 17). Stepto is most useful when he presents authentication as a rhetorical problem, involving audience and purpose. Although authenticating documents appear to bolster the author's credibility, "the issue is really the audiences'—white America's—credulity: their acceptance not so much of the former slave's escape and newfound freedom, but of his literacy" (8). This is the heart of the authentication problem; white audiences were quite willing to believe that slaves escape but unwilling to believe that slaves write.

Stepto moves from the authenticating documents of slave narratives to show how authenticating strategies have become part of the tradition of African American literature in the twentieth century. For instance, Stepto argues that Richard Wright's Black Boy is an after-the-fact authentication of Native Son, validating the latter work as fiction and artifice. Black Boy, he says, differentiates Wright from his main character Bigger Thomas, primarily through demonstrating "profound differences in degrees of literacy" (130). The great moments of learning to read in Black Boy are noticeably absent in Native Son, for instance.

A central strategy of African American writers is to seek authorial control and legitimacy in the face of an audience that seeks to deny the very literacy that African American authors demonstrate. Demonstrating literacy, in this context, is an act of liberation, an extension of the famous example of Frederick Douglass' writing his own pass to freedom. Our nation's race rituals have shaped the way African American writers—and white readers reading African American writers—understand literacy, and these attitudes have defined what Stepto sees as the predominant quest in African American writing: the quest for literacy and freedom.
In what way do African American students feel obliged to authenticate their writing in the classroom? An African American student at my university described her university experience as

a good training ground for blacks. On campus the racism is covert, but in the community it’s blatant—the people out there feel no need to hide it. If a black wants to learn how to get along in hostile America, this is a good place to start. This is our “Green Beret” training place.

Part of “hostile America’s” attitude towards African American students is the association of illiteracy with African American language. One of the means by which African American student writers authenticate their texts is by “proving” their literacy. Sometimes, in the first three weeks of first-year composition, I see a literacy story. Consider the following excerpt from Joe’s response to Richard Rodriguez’s *Hunger of Memory:

One day my family was sitting in the living room watching T.V. and my mom said, “Joe, how are you doing in school?” I replied, “Just fine,” then she said, “Read to me.”

I didn’t know of anything that I hated more than reading. I had to get my little book and stumble through the words, paragraphs, and pages. I would get so irritated that I would lie, cry, or just say, “No, I’m not doing it anymore!” I knew my friends’ moms didn’t make them read out loud, so why was my mom doing this to me? She finally told me that she was doing this to help me. “I don’t need your help,” I told her, and like a woman she explodes. Then she gives me a choice. She put the book on one end of the table and a belt right next to it. We’re standing on opposite ends of the table and she says, “You better get to the book before I get to the belt. The one off the table first will be the one used tonight.” That night I read for the first time without complaining.

Joe uses this story to open his discussion of Rodriguez, attesting to his English teacher and his classmates his family’s longstanding commitment to literacy. He goes on to state how his changed attitude toward his parents differentiates his educational experience from Rodriguez’s. He concludes,

I learned to put my hate and aggravation away. Once when I picked up a newspaper and watched the news, the subject was illiteracy. People who can’t read. I thought, how did they grow up not knowing how to read, getting past the teachers and most of all their parents? Some of them didn’t go to school but some of them did. That was the first time I was thankful that my parents made sure I could read.

All student writers authenticate their texts in one way or another. But as Stepto shows us, African American writers have an intensified need to authenticate their texts by stressing or “marking” their own literacy. Joe differentiates himself quite effectively from “people who can’t read,” even those who went to school. And he locates the source of his literacy squarely and securely in his family.

Here’s another example, this one written in the second week of class in response to a childhood memory question. Marsha opened with the following paragraph:
When I first said, “Da Da,” I believe that was when my mom decided I was a genius. She began molding me to be an academic achiever. I was well prepared when I started school at the age of three. My mother had already taught me kindergarten basics such as numbers, the alphabet, etc.

She goes on to describe first grade:

I started first grade at Martin Luther King Elementary School. Despite the fact that I had a really good teacher, all the work seemed really simple. I already had all the little yellow and red series books and the fun with Dick and Jane books at home, and I had read them all.

By citing and describing their experiences in literate households, both Marsha and Joe authenticate more than the narratives they write for English class. They authenticate their place in the classroom in the eyes of the white teacher and the mostly white classmates. Ultimately, in part because these students were enrolled in a non-credit basic writing workshop, they seek to authenticate their place in the university.

Literacy and Economy
Houston A. Baker, in *The Journey Back*, has this to say about the university and literacy for African American students:

The type of literacy guaranteed by the academy today is still not calculated to provide anything approaching an adequate definition of black life in America. Instead, the university remains a bastion of racism, complacency, and incompetence, striving desperately to maintain the status quo. (130-31)

What are the effects of authentication on African American student writers? For the authors that Stepto discusses, authentication is but a necessary fact and is sometimes even a beneficial one, leading an author like Douglass, for instance, to discover and chart the relationship between literacy and freedom. Baker sees the relationship of the author to this kind of literacy more problematically. Considering Douglass, for instance, Baker states,

The angelic Mrs. Auld, however, in accord with the evangelical codes of the era, has given Douglass the rudiments of a system that leads to intriguing restrictions. True, the slave can arrive at a sense of being only through language. But it is also true that, in Douglass's case, a conception of the preeminent form of being is conditioned by white, Christian standards. (*Journey* 36)

In *The Journey Back*, but especially in *Blues, Ideology, and Afro-American Literature*, Baker seeks an understanding of literature grounded in culture, defined anthropologically in *The Journey Back* and economically and socially in *Blues, Ideology, and Afro-American Literature*. He sees literacy and language more as Paulo Freire sees education: as either liberating or domesticating. More accurately, Baker shows that acts of literacy can be both liberating and domesticating. Literacy has the potential to constrain African
American writers even as it liberates them. Both of Baker's books offer much to the teacher of African American writers by positioning African American authors not only in a literary tradition (as *From Behind the Veil* does), but in a cultural, collective one. Most original, and to my mind most applicable to writing teachers, is Baker's economic analyses of African American narratives in the first chapter of *Blues, Ideology, and Afro-American Literature*.

Drawing on the work of Frederic Jameson and Hayden White, Baker seeks to "reinvent" the relationship between the literary work and its "social ground." By understanding writing as a "commodity," something of economic worth, Baker seeks to disclose both the "deprivations of material resources that have characterized African life in the New World" and "the profoundly brilliant expressive strategies designed by Africans in the New World" (*Blues* 31).

To take Douglass, again, as an example, Baker states that there is a "bifurcation of voices" in Douglass. One voice, the result of "the deprivations," speaks a "developmental history that leads from Christian enlightenment to the establishment of Sabbath schools" (*Blues* 43). The other voice, a "sotto voce," is Douglass' brilliant ability to read the culture, especially economically. Baker reads Douglass' path to freedom as the path to becoming a "salaried spokesman, combining literacy, Christianity, and revolutionary zeal in an individual and economically profitable job of work" (*Blues* 49).

Recent explorations of education, like Aronowitz and Giroux's *Education Under Siege*, or slightly earlier ones like Richard Ohmann's *English in America* or Paulo Freire's idea of the "banking concept" of education in *Pedagogy of the Oppressed*, have made it possible for us to understand the classroom in economic terms. The classroom is a "free market" where enterprising students compete to earn the grade that we reward them with. Especially for African American students from economically disadvantaged backgrounds, the economic metaphor carries extra force. Demonstrating literacy is crucial to their financial situations; continued financial aid is but the most obvious manifestation of the fact that university education represents hope for economic freedom for many African American students. One of my favorite students, Kathy, wrote the following essay; she was asked, in a final paper, to analyze the essays that she had written during that semester. Here is an excerpt:

The form that my essays take is very simple if you haven't already notice. I was taught all my life in writing any kind of paper always have an introduction, body, and conclusion. I tried to stay with this pattern and sometimes I do if I'm trying to impress somebody.... While growing up I use to love to write. I wrote down all my feelings and thoughts. This was the best way I could express myself. I use to take my time and make sure that all my commas were in the right place and all my sentences were complete ones and not run ons... Since I've been in college my whole outlook has changed. Its gotten to the point where instead of me actually sitting down, thinking the situation or problem out that I have to write about, I just write what I feel the teacher might want to hear. Yes I even done this in my class for you.... Writing has become like an enemy to me lately.
Kathy’s paper is interesting because she articulates her own sense of oppression at the hands of literacy through the currency of literacy. On one hand, this writing is liberating; she has come closer to naming her oppressor than most first-year students. Elsewhere in this essay, Kathy shows that racial issues underlie her “enemy.” That “somebody” that she has to impress is her white teacher—if not actually me, then her white sociology teacher or her white history teacher. Frankly, this writing was also rewarding. Kathy knew me well enough to know that I could take the bad news and appreciate the candor. She “earned” a good grade, received “credit” for the required course, and continued on her presumed path to getting a good job by getting a good education. In a sense, she did what she said she does: she just wrote what she thought the teacher wanted to hear, and it was a commercial success. But there is a trace of what Baker calls the vernacular, the *sotto voce,* and the missing past tense markers are but a speck of the trace. The commercial success of this essay is what also allows her to speak those haunting words, the ones I didn’t want to hear, “Writing is like an enemy to me lately,” and to include me in her critique of writing in the university.

Finally, and most importantly, she can articulate the consequences of the dilemma that contemporary race rituals put African American students into, the sense of anger and sadness at having to submit to the economic demands of the university classroom. Kathy was an exceptionally courageous student, one willing to use literacy, in the classroom, if not as a means of liberation at least as a means of exploring the relationship between self, race, language, and education.

**Defining Self; Reclaiming History**

Defining “self” is a central concern of literary theorist Barbara Christian, whose collection of articles, *Black Feminist Criticism,* appeared in 1985. Christian opens her book with a description of a conversation between her ten-year-old daughter and herself. She is sitting at a table surrounded by books, a pencil and a pad of paper in front of her. Her daughter begins to ask, as my children do, simple, direct questions about her mother’s vocation. She eventually asks what Christian calls “one of her whoppers”:

“What good does it do?” Knowing that the reading will turn into writing, she looks at the low table, books, pen and pencil: “What are you doing?” (xiv)

The anecdote works beautifully, for Christian suggests that the task of the African American feminist critic is to explore and create definitions, definitions of the self made necessary by the damaging and dangerous definitions of African American women imposed by a white, patriarchal society. Christian argues for the specificity of the task of defining for African American women writers:
Of course, many literate persons might say that the commitment to self-understanding . . . is at the core of good fiction and that this statement is hardly a dramatic one. Yet, for Afro-American women writers, such an overtly self-centered point of view has been difficult to maintain because of the way they have been conceptualized by black as well as white society. The extent to which Afro-American women writers in the seventies and eighties have been able to make a commitment to an exploration of self, as central rather than marginal, is a tribute to the insights they have culled in a century or so of literary activity. (172)

This perspective is echoed by Gloria T. Hull and Barbara Smith in one of the more well-known collections of African American feminist research, *But Some of Us Are Brave:*

The opportunities for Black women to carry out autonomously defined definitions of the self in a society which through racial, sexual, and class oppression systematically denies our existence have been by definition limited. (xviii)

The point is not so much that African American women write from a vacuum so much as from an erasure, for a vigorous history of African American women's literacy does of course exist (see Gates). So Smith's groundbreaking article, "Towards a Black Feminist Criticism," begins, "I do not know where to begin." And she goes on to explain that the invisibility of African American women, "which goes beyond anything that either Black men or white women experience," makes it difficult for her to begin. First, there is the "numbing" "massive silence"; second, there remains such a great deal of truly groundbreaking work to do: reconstructing a history of an erased literature. While not excluding the common oppression that both African American men and women endure, composition instructors will benefit from paying specific attention to the "double oppression" that African American women face.

This perspective on African American women’s writing may help composition teachers understand the contexts from which African American student writers, especially women, write. Alice wrote the following paper in class. We had just finished discussing the scene in Malcolm X’s autobiography in which he learns to read in prison and concludes that he had "never been so truly free." The class created a writing topic about the "prisons" we face:

The prison I have is my own fault. It deals with me pressuring myself to succeed in life, because I don’t want the problems of being unable to do what I want and when I want. If I didn’t think negative of myself not being able to succeed in life my new life would not be such a headache. I’m coming to the problem where I really don’t know my captivity, it could be me, trying to get myself ahead in life without having the patience I need to really get ahead in life. If I didn’t go through the problem of bewildering myself then maybe it wouldn’t be so rough for me to be patient and wait for the future ahead. But no not me I see such a bright future ahead for myself that I don’t know how to pace myself in waiting for it. I picture in my mind everyday on how I see my future. It’s good, but I’m tired of dreaming, that’s all, I’m just tired and I want reality in my hands right now.
Baker’s ideological analysis works well with this essay, too, especially since Alice goes on later in the paper to explain that one of the reasons she feels so pressed is that her parents are paying for her education. The economic freedom of “being able to do what I want when I want” contrasts with the headache of reality. But the story of the self coming to terms with dreams that are difficult to achieve and a reality that induces headaches seems to me to be the real story. The gulf between the self existing in the “bright future” and the one in the bewildering present motivates her to work toward a self-definition that may lead to a greater sense of self-determination. More than anything else, I sense a person who is defining herself. She seems engaged in what Smith, Christian, and other African American feminists argue is necessary and important: the process of defining herself centrally, not marginally.

Toward A More Inclusive Literacy
These explorations of texts by African American student writers suggest changes for the writing classroom. For African American students, the presence of African American literature by women and men is a special necessity. African American students will benefit from exploring the way African American writers have wrestled with the problem of authentication, struggled toward freedom through writing, overcame or were overcome by economic demands, and worked toward writing themselves into the center of American culture. For many African American students, writing themselves into the history of African American literature is no easy task, for that history has been kept from them. The following essay was read at a public reading by Ray Fed, a first-year student at California State University, Chico:

Disappointed
I’m mad! Do you know why I’m so mad? Good! I’ll tell you why I’m so mad! Well, for one thing I didn’t know about Frederick Douglass, W.E.B. Du Bois, Malcolm X, Nat Turner, or Sojourner Truth. Doesn’t that piss you off? It pissed me off for the simple fact that it wasn’t until now, at the age of eighteen, that I hear of some famous African-Americans who didn’t take any bullshit from slavemasters or any other racist organization. What? You don’t understand? Dammit, I’m mad because all my life I’ve been denied the truth of my heritage because of the education system in America.

Writing instructors need to present literacy as something that includes the contributions of African Americans, and, I argue, there’s a special urgency to include pre-twentieth century writing by African Americans. Jacqueline Jones Royster argues that for women students, African American literary history confirms that “there has been more going on in what black women write than just novice beginnings, practice or five finger exercises in thought and expression.... They have established themselves not just as readers and writers but as master artisans and visionaries” (104). Yet, the history of literacy for most African American students means solely a history of
oppression (as Ray's essay makes plain); the central symbol is of the slave who was prevented from reading and writing by the master. Rarely are students shown the history of remarkable resistance and the use of writing not only to gain one's own freedom (as in Frederick Douglass' case) but for the collective fight against injustice. And although imaginative literature has played a special role in African American intellectual history (as Barbara Christian points out in "But What Do We Think We Are Doing?"), powerful examples of nonfiction help fill out the variety of writing: Ida B. Wells-Barnett's fiery and eloquent essays against lynching, autobiographical slave narratives such as Harriet Jacobs' *Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl* or Frederick Douglass' autobiography, or (just past the twentieth century) W.E.B. Du Bois' *The Souls of the Black Folk*. These texts function more than as prose models for students to copy; they work to provide historical and political contexts within which African American student writers can position themselves. African American literature, presented in the context of these cultural issues, argues forcefully against the separation of school literacy from the traditions of African American writing, against the notion that learning to write is learning to be white.

Recently, I was told a story about Tim, a bright articulate student who failed a timed essay test on our campus. I know his writing and know it to be powerful, humorous, and intelligent. I know he's done well in our composition courses; I've heard admiring comments from his teachers. His response to the failure was this: "I better learn to write like a white man and fast!" It is a telling response. One thing it does not tell me is that we need to teach this student the conventions of academic discourse and fast! I'd argue, first, that he already knows them (at least well enough to pass the test), and, second, the failure of the test was not a failure of academic conventions; it was a failure on the part of my institution to demonstrate (before and during the test) that Tim's language and experience are already a part of the university. It was a failure of the test to assure Tim a position within the university from which to write.3

Teaching texts by African American authors teaches "positions" of literacy (social and cultural positions) that go beyond learning to write like a white man, from Ishmael Reed's "writin' is fightin'" to writing for freedom as explored by Frederick Douglass and echoed by many others (including Malcolm X's sense of liberation after learning to read and write in prison) to the brave and complex and varied explorations of gender and race by contemporary African American women writers. These "positions" are far more likely to encourage equality in universities than pedagogies that stress learning the master's voice.

Simply adding texts by African American writers is not enough. Composition teachers need to see these texts as forming the "social ground" from which African American students write. More than ever, writing teachers need to abandon a simplistic skills approach to writing, which for African
American students has meant an unnecessary concentration on the verb forms of standard English. Instead, we need to elaborate a model of classroom behavior informed by the central questions of race and gender relations suggested in this essay. The purpose of this classroom is to build articulate and powerful writers in the university, writers who can participate in and shape an academic culture that desperately needs their presence. The ongoing annoying questions of whether or not to teach standard English withers in its insignificance.

If recent literacy theory has taught us anything, it is that literacy—as an idea and as a practice—is defined by the social relations in which it occurs. It is therefore obvious that adding new texts alone will not change literacy instruction for African Americans (although it is one of the necessary changes). Additionally, and this seems especially crucial for the white teacher or the teacher of color who is unfamiliar with the cultural contexts of African American students, teachers and students both have to learn to enter into a dialogic relationship. Here again, the concept of "position" plays a central role. Baker describes the successful Afro-American literary critic as I would like to describe the successful teacher of African American students: someone who knows "where and how to listen" and "where and how to see" ("Beautiful" 147). Such a teacher needs to be informed about the social ground from which students write, a knowledge that needs to come from study of African American texts, but also through listening and "seeing" their own students. Explorations for such classrooms abound, most of them influenced by Paulo Freire's dialogic theories of learning, which demand of teachers that they constantly interpret and "unveil" their students' realities. Such productive relationships between white faculty members and African American students are rare and difficult; yet there is no other way than to disclose "position," show a willingness to listen and to change, and demonstrate, in overt ways (texts, assignments, and daily classroom demeanor), a desire to include and legitimate the experiences and language of African Americans.

Finally, to really change the power relations between faculty and African American students, we need to redouble our efforts to attract African American writing teachers, teachers who learned through their own experience the connections between literacy and African American culture. Along with supporting strong and effective affirmative action in hiring, we also need to increase the number of qualified applicants by vigorously recruiting and financially supporting African American students for our undergraduate and graduate programs in writing. Most of all, we need to become a profession that ceases excluding African Americans and begin welcoming the strengths and experiences of African American students and future teachers.

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Notes

1. The original passage refers to the position of black women critics and reads, "Making our positionality explicit is not to claim a 'privileged' status for our positions. . . . Making our positionality explicit is, rather, a response to the false universalism that long defined critical practice and rendered black women and their writing mute."

2. For a detailed discussion of this student's work, see Fox, chapter 5.

3. Clearly, Tim's response shows how crucial writing-across-the-curriculum programs are to innovative composition programs. Without the support of other teachers in other disciplines, progressive writing courses are isolated and insignificant.

Works Cited


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