THE RHETORIC OF BLACK ENGLISH VERNACULAR: A STUDY OF THE ORAL AND WRITTEN DISCOURSE PRACTICES OF AFRICAN AMERICAN MALE COLLEGE STUDENTS

DISSERTATION

Submitted in Partial Fulfillment of the Requirements for the Degree Doctor of Philosophy in the Graduate School of The Ohio State University

By

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The Ohio State University
1993

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To My Parents
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CHAPTER I
INTRODUCTION

I am an invisible man. . . . I am invisible, understand, simply because people refuse to see me. . . . When they approach me they see only my surroundings, themselves, or figments of their imagination—indeed, everything and anything except me. Then too, you're constantly being bumped against by those of poor vision. Or again, you often doubt if you really exist. You wonder whether you aren't simply a phantom in other people's minds. Say, a figure in a nightmare which the sleeper tries with all his strength to destroy. It's when you feel like this that, out of resentment, you begin to bump people back. And, let me confess, you feel that way most of the time. You ache with the need to convince yourself that you do exist in the real world, that you're a part of all the sound and anguish, and you strike out with your fists, you curse and you swear to make them recognize you. And, alas, it's seldom successful.

—Ralph Ellison, *Invisible Man*

Over the last three decades, linguists have demonstrated the linguistic validity of nonstandard dialects such as Black English Vernacular (BEV).¹ While the pedagogical effects of this legitimization have been encouraging—especially as regards the way in which most educators now view the educability of linguistically diverse students—dialect continues to be a major issue in literacy instruction. For African American male speakers of BEV, the acquisition of academic or mainstream literacy has

¹ Other labels for this dialect have been used by linguists, including Negro Nonstandard English, Black English, Ebonics, African American English, Vernacular African American English, etc. I later explain my choice of Black English Vernacular.
been extremely problematic, even in spite of the linguistic and cognitive versatility they exhibit in many forms (e.g., the rap poetry/music genre). This dissertation study seeks to redress that imbalance through an ethnographic description of the oral language uses of African American male speakers of BEV and the influence their language uses may have on their academic writing. More particularly, I wish to argue that, along with its own grammar and lexicon, BEV has its own rhetoric--its system or body of discourse practices--which may influence BEV speakers' writing in standard edited American English.²

The study has three specific objectives: 1) to describe the oral discourse practices of five African American male college students; 2) to describe the ways in which these discourse practices influence the students' academic writing, that is, their uses of standard written academic English; and 3) to explore the relationships between rhetoric, language (i.e., dialect), and literacy--particularly as they apply to a vernacular theory of African American rhetoric.

² I borrow the concept of a BEV rhetoric from Valerie Balester, who originally proposed the idea in her 1988 dissertation. However, I find the idea more fully conceptualized in A Rhetoric of Motives by Kenneth Burke, where Burke demonstrates the operation of rhetorical discourse in everyday language.
Re-conceiving, Re-contextualizing BEV

Now that the inadequacy of the language deprivation model has been well documented and linguists have rigorously described and analyzed various phonological, lexical, semantic, and syntactic features of BEV (e.g., Labov; Wolfram; Fasold; Folb), scholars must begin investigating aspects of the dialect that might demonstrate its resourcefulness in literacy instruction. Some fifteen years ago, Mina Shaughnessy wrote that

... the dialects of the economically poor are rarely credited with the same complexity and resourcefulness as the dialects of the middle and upper classes, and the young, no matter how hard they try to resist the interpretation that the world imposes on them, tend eventually to absorb negative views of their language that in turn make it even more difficult to learn formal English. The black student has probably felt the bite of this prejudice more persistently and deeply than anyone else. . . . (157-158)

Seemingly, in direct response to Shaughnessy's charges, scholars (see Brooks, and Farr and Daniels) have affirmed the resourcefulness of BEV (and other nonmainstream dialects) for literacy instruction. Indeed, the oral discourse practices BEV speakers bring with them to the writing classroom offer a rich resource for their acquisition of academic literacy. Limited, however, to the ritualized discourses of the inner-city, studies describing these practices (e.g., Abrahams, *Deep Down*; Labov, *Language in the Inner City*) often overlook the less ritualized,
more everyday forms of discourse used by BEV speakers in other contexts. Thus, it is clear that at this stage in our study of BEV what is needed is more research on BEV at the level of discourse and rhetorical function in academic as well as non-academic contexts.

The contexts of the school present a set of discourses largely centered on print and the processes of reading and writing. By contrast, the contexts of vernacular culture present a set of discourses, though not exclusive of the written word, centered on the spoken word and the processes of listening and speaking. At least since Ferdinand de Saussure and Leonard Bloomfield, linguists have attempted to define the relationships between the spoken and written word. Divorced from particular social and cultural contexts (and the particular uses language is put to in these contexts), so the Hymesian linguistics model goes, speculation about the relationships between oral and written language bears little practical or realistic import. Neither a dichotomous relationship between oral and written language or a continuum can adequately represent the rich oral and written traditions that many of our African American students are heirs to.3 As anthropological linguist Shirley Brice Heath has stated

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3 African American culture is often touted for having a rich oral tradition. Less acclaim, however, is given to its literate tradition perhaps because it is believed that writing hasn't played as vital a role in the grass-roots African American community. Nevertheless, I include it as part of students' linguistic heritage because it has since the earliest slave narrative served
concerning the black and white working-class communities in her study, "in the terms of the usual distinctions made between oral and literate traditions, neither community may be simply classified as either 'oral' or 'literate'" (230). Or, as Mike Rose, in his provocative book *Lives on the Boundary*, puts it,

The literacy backgrounds of people who end up in remedial, developmental, or adult education classes are more complex than that: they represent varying degrees of distance from or involvement with printed material, various attitudes toward it and skill with it, various degrees of embrace of or complicated rejection of traditions connected with their speech. (292-293)

Hence, a second objective of this study is to provide a description of the ways in which vernacular speech influences formal writing—a description that is free of specious claims about the primary orality of inner-city black adolescents (see both Ong and Farrell for a discussion of this claim as it applies to writing instruction).

The need to understand the impact of spoken dialect on literacy (and the impact of literacy on dialect) has not been altogether ignored, however, by educators and sociolinguists (see, e.g., Whiteman). But few of these scholars have taken into account the crucial role of rhetoric in making sense of this impact. Likewise, very few rhetoricians have attempted to articulate
theories of rhetoric that would account for certain uses of nonstandard dialect in spoken and written discourse (see Bizzell and Herzberg for a fuller critique of this neglect). In this respect, our field appears to be marred by a kind of disciplinary self-indulgence, that is, marred by a rigid maintenance of certain disciplinary boundaries. Part of our failure as educators has been, it seems to me, the lack of clearly defined relationships between the various subareas of English studies: literature, linguistics, composition (creative and expository), rhetoric, and folklore. In this study, I have hypothesized a rhetoric implicit in the vernacular language of African Americans, a rhetoric that could enrich writing theory and pedagogy. Crossing such disciplinary boundaries in this way thus allows for the third objective—specifically, to explore the relationships between rhetoric, literacy, and language. Much like Houston Baker and Henry Louis Gates, I take the vernacular language of African Americans as central to an understanding of black verbal expression in most, if not all, of its forms.

As Viewed Through Screens

Given the disciplinary nature of this study, I necessarily make use of certain terms through which linguistic and social phenomena are viewed. Kenneth Burke calls such use of nomenclature *terministic screens*, by which he means that the same object or phenomenon is subjected to "a different color filter,
with corresponding differences in the nature of the event as perceived, recorded, and interpreted" (The Rhetorical Tradition 1035). Here I wish to discuss a few major terms that constitute the color filters for this study.

_African American and Black English Vernacular_

For a long time, there has been much ambiguity about what Americans of African descent should be called--whether Negro, Colored, Black, Afro-American, or, more recently, African American. Just as ambiguous has been the proliferation of terms used to refer to the dialect many (but by no means all) African Americans speak: Nonstandard Negro English, Black English, Black English Vernacular (or Vernacular Black English to shift the emphasis), Ebonics, or African American English. In this study, I have chosen to use, whenever possible, the term "African American," where many authors are still inclined to use "Black American." I have chosen the former term not merely because it's now _en vogue_, but because I believe that it better signifies the African identity, heritage, tradition, and culture deeply submerged beneath the American experience of "black" people. In fact, an important objective of this study is to ground an analysis of black vernacular discourse in Afrocentric culture and ideology.

The choice of "Black English Vernacular" over other terms stems from my desire to maintain scholarly consistency. Since we already have a workable definition of this term in the research of
William Labov, the introduction of another term might create confusion where clarity is essential. In this study, Black English Vernacular thus refers to

the relatively uniform dialect spoken by the majority of black youth in most parts of the United States today, especially in the inner city areas of New York, Boston, Detroit, Philadelphia, Washington, Cleveland, Chicago, St. Louis, San Francisco, Los Angeles, and other urban centers. It is also spoken in most rural areas and used in the casual, intimate speech of many adults. (xiii)

Furthermore, I have chosen to use "Black English Vernacular" (especially over "Black English") because I wish to emphasize that this study focuses on the vernacular uses of English spoken by African Americans, not on the more "standard" varieties of English they may possess in their speech repertoires (see Garner and Rubin for a discussion of these varieties). Labov and Wendell Harris distinguish the two terms as follows:

We use the term Black English to describe all the forms of English illustrated here and more: that is, the full range of language used by Black people in the United States. The term Black English Vernacular [BEV] is a linguistic term, not a social term. It refers to the highly consistent grammar, pronunciation and lexicon that is the first dialect learned by most black people throughout the United States, and used in much the same way by adults in their most intimate home settings with family and friends. (4)
Rhetoric

I have entitled this dissertation "The Rhetoric of Black English Vernacular." The phrase the (or a) rhetoric of is today a common one (e.g., Burke's A Rhetoric of Motives, White's the Rhetoric. . . of the Law, McCloskey's The Rhetoric of Economics, and Hawisher and Seife's "The Rhetoric of Technology. . ."), but what could be meant by the rhetoric of BEV, a "nonstandard" dialect? Doesn't rhetoric already involve language? If so, how could there be a rhetoric of an aspect of rhetoric? The sense I have from the use of the phrase "the rhetoric of" is that authors mean it to refer either to the use of certain rhetorical devices within, for example, a discipline or to the persuasive uses of something (e.g., motives). The same can be said of BEV, that in certain instances it is used to persuade or to indicate that BEV speakers use certain rhetorical devices. However, I use rhetoric as a theory of oral and written discourse, as a way of conceiving and accounting for the various dimensions of BEV use. Specifically, rhetoric embodies for me a system of discourses or discourse practices employable within given sociocultural contexts.

4 For further elaboration of this approach see Patricia Bizzell and Bruce Herzberg's introduction to excerpts from Kenneth Burke and Henry Louis Gates. Also see Dell Hymes's notion of "comparative rhetoric" in sociolinguistics and the ethnography of speaking.
Discourse Practices

Typically, the relationship between rhetoric and discourse is a confounding one. Some modern scholars (e.g., Molefi Asante) seem to use the two terms synonymously, while more traditional scholars (e.g., James Kinneavy) consider only persuasive discourse equivalent to rhetoric. Here I draw a distinction between the two terms because I see rhetoric as the theory of the contextual uses of language, especially language at the level of discourse.

As in modern linguistics, "discourse" in this study generally refers to any utterance (oral or written) larger than the sentence. Yet where others have referred to such utterances as language use (Labov), stylistic uses of language or style (Kochman; Smitherman), modes of discourse (Smitherman), ways of using language (Heath), rhetorical strategies (Gates), discourse strategies (Collins and Michaels), language or discourse patterns (Scott), and speech acts and speech events (Hymes; Mitchell-Kernan), I refer to them as discourse practices. Based on his reading of orality and literacy studies, James Gee sees literacy as "a set of discourse practices" that "are tied to the particular world views (beliefs and values) of particular social or cultural groups" (719-20). In mainstream American culture, for instance, explicitness in language use is a

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5 The term (albeit not radically different from many of the others) derives from a TESOL Quarterly review article by James Gee entitled "Orality and Literacy: From The Savage Mind to Ways With Words."
privileged convention for expository prose. Yet within other cultural or subcultural groups impliciteness or indirection (as is seen, for instance, in some forms of BEV signifying) may be a more favored discourse practice.

Invisibility, Racial Fragmentation, and The Rhetoric of BEV

When Ellison wrote *Invisible Man*, African Americans were denied many of the democratic rights and freedoms endowed to every American citizen, even in spite of their proven loyalty and valor during a second world war. Ellison called this kind of treatment "invisibility"—a boldfaced denial of African Americans' very existence as humans, as equals. In more recent times, the invisibility of African Americans, especially men, is also literal. The sheer number of African American men has dwindled, particularly at universities throughout the nation. Because this study intends to investigate the language uses of today's invisible men, or of a population of students who are rapidly becoming, at least by some estimates, an endangered species (see both Gibbs and Madhubuti), one of its principal values is its exigency. The urgency of existing circumstances demands that we look more closely at the African American male student experience at predominantly white institutions—experience that has been characterized by many African American students, including those in this study, as isolating and alienating (see both Allen and
Fleming for details of this finding). While this study certainly does not provide a complete account of that experience, it does help us to see some of the difficulties facing this select group of students and, more specifically, the role language and cultural background play in the students' college experience.

According to several recent reports, African Americans are encountering the highest attrition rates in American colleges and universities. The February 1987 issue of Newsweek On Campus reports that African American undergraduate enrollment during 1984-85 declined 2.2 percentage points, meaning a 20% proportional decrease in the number of African Americans in college. In addition, the magazine reports that African American "dropout rates are abysmally high at most predominately white schools" (11). Coupled with these estimates is the rise in racial incidents between blacks and whites at predominantly white schools. Alabama University, the University of Massachusetts, Duke, and, more recently, Harvard, the University of Texas, and Ohio State are just a few schools that have received national media coverage of campus racial incidents like "name-calling, scapegoating, accusations, and recriminations" (Newsweek May 6, 1991). According to Walter Allen, such incidents have arisen in response to higher education's complacency on the issue of high attrition and lower achievement among African American students at predominantly white schools. Others (see Stevens), however, see the rise in campus racial incidents as further evidence of
increased social and linguistic segregation between blacks and whites.

The statistics on African American male matriculation in college are even more abysmal. "While Black men and women finish high school at approximately the same rate," reports Jason DeParle of the New York Times, "many more women go on to college. In 1988, 443,000 black men were college students, while 687,000 black women were" (June 9, 1991). The severity of this and other issues pertaining to African American males prompted the former governor of Ohio, Richard Celeste, and State Senator William F. Bowen, along with other key Ohio legislators, to establish a commission to address a variety of problems, including education, facing socially disadvantaged African American males in Ohio. According to national statistics cited in the Commission's report, only 31% of all African American males who entered college in 1980 graduated by 1986 (v. 2, B-2). And even though overall minority enrollment increased between 1976 and 1986, college enrollment rates of African American males ages 18-24 declined from 35% to 28% (B-2). The Commission's report on Ohio indicates that as of 1989 only 2.7% of all Ohio four-year college attendees were African American males compared to 10% of the African American population in Ohio (B-2).

Reasons for these declines, as cited by the Commission, include four fundamental barriers: Educational--i.e., students' preparedness through elementary and secondary school; financial;
cultural/psychological--i.e., students' negative perceptions of the college environment; and organizational/structural--i.e., university policies pertaining to affirmative action and academic support that may affect student access and retention (12). In addition to these barriers, Donald Deskins mentions a resurgence in the philosophy of elitism at American universities (College in Black and White 37). Just when universities were beginning to make a commitment to "diversity," Deskins claims, the emphasis shifted to a quest for "excellence"--particularly as this quest is vindicated in Alan Bloom's The Closing of the American Mind and E. D. Hirsch's Cultural Literacy (36-37).

What we see occurring at the national and state levels is also reflected in local education statistics. Although retention programs (e.g., the Academic Support Program, Teaching for Black Student Retention Program, and Mentoring Program) have been established at The Ohio State University, for example, the attrition rate among African American students remains high. The Teaching for Black Student Retention program reports (1985) that 61.7% of the African American students who enter Ohio State as freshmen leave without a degree within four years. Surprisingly, according to their 1987 report, attrition has been high even among those African American freshmen who ranked near the top of their high school classes (e.g., the highest first year attrition, 60%, occurred among those students who ranked in the top 6% and 9% of their class).
This growing invisibility (both literal and metaphorical) and the rise in campus racial incidents together seem to suggest a gradual fragmentation of society along racial lines. Whether they are the cause or the result of such a society may be impossible to determine, or beside the point. What is most evident is that education for young African American men is suffering, even somewhat moreso than in the 1960's when a barrage of literature purporting the linguistic and cultural deprivation of African American children entered the public domain.

Of course, there is much that could be done to better education for African American men. As one example, the Governor's Commission has set forth several thoughtful recommendations for the state of Ohio. The general thrust of these recommendations is conveyed in the Commission's introductory statement:

In order to address these problems, programs and proposed activities to improve the status of the African-American male must include Afro-centric self-esteem teaching. Through such teaching, African-American males will learn who they are and what their heritage is. They will understand that they are descended from a proud and knowledgeable people that have made tremendous contributions to history. Raising African-American males' consciousness of their history will negate the results of miseducation that has damaged their self-esteem, expectations, pride, and self-worth. We must equip African-American males with survival skills that will counter the biases and stereotypes they meet in their growth and development. (2)
In so far as literacy instruction is concerned, however, something else could be done. Scholars could begin to describe, as they have done with BEV grammar, the rhetoric of BEV. I can see no better form of "Afro-centric self-esteem teaching" than to have as the basis of our writing, reading, and speaking pedagogies a conceptualization of BEV as a rhetoric. Thus, a second value of this study is the rhetorical dimensions it adds to what we already know (and have yet to learn) about the social and cultural uses of language and literacy. In general, as part of the tradition of twentieth century rhetoric, this study illustrates the growth of rhetoric "to encompass a theory of language as a form of social behavior, of intention and interpretation as the determinants of meaning, in the way that knowledge is created by argument, and in the way that ideology and power are extended through discourse" (The Rhetorical Tradition 899). More specifically, this study shows how the relationship between nonstandard dialect and academic literacy is not merely signaled by differences in grammar but as well by differences in rhetoric--that is, differences in culturally-based ways of using language and ways of making meaning through language.

Finally, this study provides a pedagogical resource for teachers of English composition to African American male speakers of BEV. It provides teachers and curriculum designers insight into some of the larger language patterns BEV speakers use with great facility in non-academic contexts and into how such language patterns
CHAPTER II

LANGUAGE, LITERACY, AND AFRICAN AMERICAN STUDENTS: A REVIEW OF RELATED LITERATURE

There is obviously no unrhetorical "naturalness" of language to which one could appeal; language itself is the result of purely rhetorical arts. The power to discover and to make operative that which works and impresses, with respect to each thing, a power which Aristotle calls rhetoric, is at the same time, the essence of language:

--Friedrich Nietzsche, "Ancient Rhetoric"

We are taking language not as a system of abstract grammatical categories, but rather language conceived as ideologically saturated, language as a world view, even as a concrete opinion, insuring a maximum of mutual understanding in all spheres of ideological life.

--Mikhail Bakhtin, The Dialogic Imagination

J. L. Dillard, linguist and author of Black English: Its History and Usage in the United States, once credited William Stewart with having made possible the serious study of Black English Vernacular (BEV) in America. Stewart's 1964 article entitled "Urban Negro Speech: Sociolinguistic Factors Affecting English Teaching" indeed pioneered what came to be an extensive body of literature on the teaching of oral standard English to speakers of BEV. In this research, educators--some trained in linguistics, others trained in psychology, sociology, and other fields--have
attempted to explain why BEV speakers encounter difficulties learning and/or using standard English. They have offered several explanations, each typically a revision of the one that preceded it.

Arnetha Ball has neatly traced the evolution of BEV research over the last three decades. Research of the 1960's, she claims, was dominated by a language deficit perspective; a difference perspective in the early 1970's (suggesting that there is nothing at all deficient about BEV, only that it is different); a dialect proficiency perspective in the late 70's (affirming that African Americans are proficient in more than one dialect); and a divergence perspective in the 1980's (suggesting that BEV is diverging from standard English) (1). I should caution, however, that the evolutionary stages Ball traces are not as distinct as they first appear. As a case in point, the orality/literacy research I alluded to in the previous chapter has been viewed by some as a residual deficit theory.6

Although none of these perspectives (except perhaps for the linguistic differences perspective about which I'll have more to say later) has any real validity for writing,7 it's interesting to note the

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6 Thomas Fox has argued that the deficit theories of the 1960's have, through linguists' speculation about so-called oral and literate cultures, appeared again in new form. The Social Uses of Writing: Politics and Pedagogy. Norwood, NJ: Ablex, 1990. I discuss this issue in greater detail in chapters 5, 6, and 7.

7 In a paper presented at the 1992 Conference on College Composition and Communication, Geneva Smitherman claimed that due to the increased popularity of BEV through rap music the divergence hypothesis may indeed be valid for speaking. However, her ten-year study of African American
negative implications they pose for literacy instruction.

Concerning the divergence perspective, for instance, linguist William Labov has made the following statement in the New York Times:

The results of our analyses show a black English vernacular that is more remote from other dialects than has been reported before. . . . We also believe that Philadelphia reflects a national trend in the black community towards continued linguistic divergence. The differences appear to us to be increasing. . . . There is evidence that, far from getting more similar, the Black vernacular is going its own way.

(March 15, 1985 A14)

The article goes on to mention the type of linguistic divergence Labov and his colleagues find occurring between BEV and Standard English (SE). They claim that vernacular words are "taking on new meanings and being combined in new ways to produce idioms not found in any white dialect or in standard English" (A14). Specifically, grammatical features like third person singular /s/ and its absence in expressions like "runs and tell me" (i.e., instead of runs and tells me, or, in its absolutely correct form, he ran and told me) and the copula usage in such expressions as "I be done go upside your head" are taken as evidence of increased divergence between BEV and other dialects of English, most notably SE. While the use of these rather peculiar idioms may be

student writers suggests that in so far as writing is concerned there has been greater convergence between BEV and SE.
cause for some concern, the social and educational implications drawn from them are even more alarming. Labov speculates that

The more we study and analyze, . . . the more it shows the signs of people developing their own grammar. We're looking at this as a danger signal that our society is being split more and more, and we're not ruling out the possibility that it is contributing to [the] failure of black children to learn to read. How much a little child has to do to translate!

(A 14)

Before we wistfully grant the veracity of Labov's claims, I should point out that not a few reputable linguists have criticized his research, among them Faye Boyd Vaughn-Cooke, Walt Wolfram, and John Rickford. Violation of the time depth principle in the study of linguistic change and the failure to examine critical results from cross-generational studies of linguistic change in BEV are two of the major criticisms of Labov's work (Ronald Butters, ed. 15, 21). Perhaps more important than these criticisms, however, is the counterevidence Vaughn-Cooke cites regarding the interference of BEV on the learning of SE by African American school children. She refers to Lucas and Borders's study of children in kindergarten, fourth, and sixth grade. The major finding of the study is cited below:

Our study demonstrated that while the issue of interference [resulting from dialect differences] may be fundamentally a language issue, it is clearly not an issue of the production and comprehension of language forms. The production of
dialect forms did not impede interaction in the classrooms that we studied. To the contrary, our examination of dialect diversity revealed that the children had a fairly sophisticated sociolinguistic competence. Specifically, they clearly demonstrated awareness of and capacity for situationally appropriate language use. Furthermore, there was no conversational repair work relating to comprehension of language forms. (31)

As the above quotation suggests, the key question in the literature has been whether African American children's failure to acquire or use standard written English is primarily due to linguistic differences or differences beyond language such as differences in culture. Although language and culture are hardly separable (and indeed we'll see that in some research one is but an extension of the other), the reported impact of each on students' acquisition and use of academic literacy varies from study to study. Thus, in what follows, I discuss linguistic and cultural differences as two generally opposing hypotheses. I then propose a third hypothesis which integrates language differences with differences in culture through a concept of BEV as a rhetoric.

**The Linguistic Differences Hypothesis**

Researchers supportive of the linguistic differences hypothesis see the differences between students' native dialects (in this case, BEV) and standard English (SE) as posing difficulties in their learning to write academic prose. That is, some argue that students' dialects may interfere with their writing in SE. The
concept of dialect *interference* derives from the language interference model in bilingualism, which states that a speaker of two languages will at times use features of one language while speaking a second. Dialect interference is the interference of one linguistic system, such as BEV, with another, SE. As evidence of this interference, researchers have especially noted a lack of inflectional suffixes (such as "ed" and "s" in third person) in the writing of BEV speakers in high school (e.g., D. Briggs, and Wolfram and Whiteman) and college (e.g., O. Briggs, Collins, Sternglass, Goppert, Weaver, Funkhouser, and Taylor).

But other BEV features have also been identified in student writing. In her study of remedial college students, Barbara Wright found seven dialect features used by African American students: negative deletion, confusion between participle and infinitive construction, resumptive subject pronoun predicate marker, the coordinating conjunction *which*, deleted relative pronoun in subject position, inverted word order of embedded clauses, and transitional devices. John Holm, studying a range of Creole and post-Creole language varieties (e.g., Haitian Creole French, BEV, Gullah, and others) among students enrolled in remedial writing courses, found both syntactic and lexical interferences in student writing. Examples of syntactic interferences include the lack of subject-verb agreement, inappropriate use of the present perfect tense, different words used for the verb *be*, treating adjectives as
verbs, unusual features of the noun phrase, and unusual word order.

Interference between spoken BEV and written SE, however, is by no means a given in empirical research. The findings of Sandra Wright's study of African American community college students suggests that there are nonstandard English patterns in written language that do not result from oral language interference. Similarly, Marcia Farr (Whiteman in studies during the 70's and early 80's) and Mary Ann Janda's case study of a college-level basic writer reports that BEV patterns in the student's oral language did not account for his writing problems. Indeed, some researchers discredit the dialect interference hypothesis because it assumes two separate linguistic systems. Marcia Whiteman states that

When we are dealing with the use of features from one dialect in the attempt to produce another dialect (SE), however, we cannot assume two separate systems. Two languages may more clearly be spoken of as two separate systems, but given the evidence from linguistic variability studies, it is very difficult to conceive of two dialects as distinct systems. (155)

Whiteman proposes the term dialect influence over interference in order to avoid the implication that there are two separate systems interfering with each other, and to allow the recognition that the speaker of a nonstandard dialect already knows and uses many of the rules of standard English, and that there really may be only a limited number of features
out of his/her total language competence which are unacceptable in written standard English. (155)

The stress in the change from interference to influence seems at first merely academic—that is, from a strictly theoretical perspective, a dialect can never be a separate system from the language of which it is a part. But the change in terminology also better affirms the practical fact: a limited number of nonstandard grammatical features actually affect students' writing of standard English prose. Dialect influence refers, then, to the "use of nonstandard features in writing which are traceable to the oral language competence of the writer" (155).

BEV features (only one set of nonstandard features) which influence students' writing most frequently are identified by Whiteman (1981) as the following:

1. Verbal -s absence. The omission of the standard English -s suffix to indicate present tense with third person singular verbs (e.g., He walk to school every day) is a characteristic feature of VBE [i.e., BEV].

2. Plural -s absence. The omission of the standard English -s suffix to indicate plurality is also a characteristic feature of VBE; (e.g., They walk down the street with their radio - in their hand -).

3. Possessive -s absence. The third -s suffix characteristically omitted in VBE (e.g., Then we went over to my girlfriend-house).
4. **Consonant Cluster -ed absence.** This feature (e.g., He *miss the bus yesterday so he walk- to school*) also occurs rather frequently in the writing of nonstandard speakers, but only in certain linguistic environments.

5. *Is* and *are* absence. These two conjugated forms of the English copula (the verb *to be*) are characteristically absent in VBE (e.g., *She so calm and look so at ease* and *They tring to get away front the fire*). (156)

While the shift from dialect *interference* to dialect *influence* might have satisfied linguists concerned with preserving clear distinctions between language and dialect, researchers in composition have been less appeased. Patrick Hartwell, for instance, sees "all apparent" dialect interference in writing as reading-related, revealing partial or imperfect mastery of a neural coding system that underlies both reading and writing. He explains that "writers turn to the surface features of the phonology and grammar of their spoken dialect when they do not have available mental equivalents of the print forms" (108). Critical of what appears to him as little valid empirical evidence to support the view that nonstandard dialects are a significant cause of error in student writing, Hartwell ultimately calls into question current assumptions about the relationship between speech and writing. With regard to the dialect interference or influenced hypothesis, Hartwell states that the point of entry of speech into writing for nonstandard dialect speakers is at "the level of phonological and syntactic coding." The *print code* hypothesis, on the other hand,
"posits a high level of entry: speech enters at the level of written 'voice,' rhetorical strategy, authorial purpose, and social context" (114). If what Hartwell states here is true, then one would expect a study of the writing of BEV speakers to reveal the various discourse features he has delineated: written voice, rhetorical strategy (though it is unclear what precisely he means by it), authorial purpose, and social context. Yet, the print code hypothesis described in Hartwell's study doesn't appear to reveal such mismatches, that is, how vernacular discourses contribute to the way in which students' write. Similarly, the dialect interference (or influence) hypothesis fails to show how discourse features (or what I'm calling discourse practices) are linked to the influence of nonstandard grammar. Both of these hypotheses, at best, only partially account for the influences of nonstandard speech on standard written English. Thus, what is needed is a more holistic approach, one which investigates the hypothesis that grammatical and discourse features are integrated, an approach that examines individual grammatical features in the context in which they are used.

The Cultural Differences Hypothesis

In contrast to the linguistic differences hypothesis, sociolinguists and anthropologists have proposed what is called a cultural differences hypothesis to account for nonstandard dialect speakers' failure to use and/or acquire standard English. Beyond
the mere grammatical differences between standard and nonstandard dialects, they claim that students from nonmainstream cultural backgrounds possess *ways of using language* quite different from those of the school, which many scholars consider to be a microcosm of mainstream culture.

In his studies of inner-city African Americans and the West Indian peasantry, for instance, Roger Abrahams has suggested that there is "no inability to learn the standard language--only a continuing social resistance to its use in everyday discourse" (215). In addition, Labov has concluded that for some inner-city adolescents resistance to SE is due to a conflict between the school and the street culture in which they are firmly grounded. Since, according to Labov, peer-group status among adolescents is associated with vernacular dialects, such status exerts substantial influence on school performance. In spite of Abrahams and Labov's findings, studies of resistance to school or academic ways of using language, especially in writing, are lacking.

Although children in Trackton (a working class black community) and Roadville (a working class white community) did not reject school culture, they, according to Shirley Brice Heath, failed to become literate by school standards. Heath explains that for these children differences in oral and literate traditions at home and at school made socialization into the school's ways of using language difficult. She comments on the use of talk brought from community (Trackton) to school:
Most of these formal differences [i.e., phonological and grammatical] among the dialects caused relatively little difficulty in communication. More troublesome were differences in the uses of language the children brought to school, a topic rarely discussed in the research literature. Some teachers expressed repeatedly that their problems were not in understanding or accepting the forms of the children's language, but in comprehending how and why the children used their language as they did. Such differences were initially noticeable in naming practices, types and uses of politeness formulae, and habits of questioning. (278)

The literate traditions of the two communities also differ markedly from that of the school.

In Trackton, the written word is for negotiation and manipulation—both serious and playful. Changing and changeable, words are the tools performers use to create images of themselves and the world they see. For Roadville, the written word limits alternatives of expression; in Trackton, it opens alternatives. Neither community's ways with the written word prepares it for the school's ways. (234-235)

From the cultural differences perspective, then, literacy instruction becomes a process of acculturation into the school's patterns of thought and language (including its attitudes and values toward such patterns). That some students find this process difficult, even impossible, may be, as Marcia Farr and Harvey Daniels claim, a reflection of the complexity of the differences between students' home (or peer) culture and the school culture (31). Because "ways of using language" are
inextricably linked to worldview, we're speaking here not just of the influence of one dialect on another (e.g., the influence of "nonstandard" on "standard" grammar) but the influence of a rhetoric, a body of discourse practices within the tradition of African American culture. Indeed, as Smitherman comments, mismatches between BEV and standard English "seem to occur on the larger level of rhetorical patterning and discourse rather than being simple points of [structural] interference" ("What Go Round" 49).

Yet only a few studies have looked at the influence of linguistic features that could be classified as rhetorical. Two of these are cited in Cronnell's review: Constance Weaver's "Black Dialect? or Black Face?" and Grace Cooper's "Black Stylistic Features in Student Compositions." Although Weaver makes a strong case for seeing a link between the derivational morphemes used by African American college students and the oral "fancytalk" tradition in African American culture, her study appears less an analysis of discourse than it does an analysis of grammar (8).

Cooper's study, on the other hand, does analyze discourse features in student writing. She identifies three stylistic features used by African American college students: extensive use of imagery in expository and argumentative writing; presentation of a rhythmic pattern in writing; and a tendency toward personal involvement in the content of the writing (4). Examples of these features appear in the following excerpts from student papers.
The first derives from an expository essay, while the other two derive from research papers.

Fate like pain holds no barriers, sets no limitations, and touches everyone. Kwesi is dead, killed by a poisonous snake. Is it an act of mercy from God or a cruel hand of fate? The numbness that results from novacaine can only slightly touch the depth of Maami Ama's pain.

How can Black music be described best? What is the meaning of this approach that will not be kept within stifling restraints? Black music is the story of Black people, the relating of life a They have to live it, to themselves as well as the rest of the world. Their lot has been anything but common and so has their music. They are a love people and their music is love. They are a spiritual people and their music is spiritual. They are a strong people and their music is strong. They are a colorful people and their music is colorful.

This same name company informed one of its biggest stars a few years earlier that if she persisted with her plans to tour Europe with a well-known rock group, she would not record for anyone else. She went. That was around ten years ago. I haven't heard a thing recorded by her for about ten years. Wonder where she is today? Going from nabob to nonentity overnight is a real case of the blues. Have you ever had the blues?

Although Cooper doesn't provide a detailed analysis of the above excerpts (or, indeed, any indication of how frequent such stylistic features occur, whether the draft from which the excerpts were taken is a first or final, or what the requirements were for
the writing assignments), the imagery of the first excerpt, rhythmic pattern of the second, and personal involvement of the third are more than evident. Given her view that these stylistic features may enhance rather than interfere with students' writing, she, in a way, predicts the perspective that this study sets out to explore, that is, BEV as a rhetorical resource for writing.

Since Cronnell's review in 1981, other studies of discourse features have emerged. However, most of these have focused on primary or secondary school students, not on college students, as is the case in this study. These studies (e.g., Erickson; Ball) have also focused on the organization of discourse (at best, Arrangement in the classical canon of rhetoric) rather than actual discourse features (which suggests Invention and/or Style in classical rhetoric). Denise Troutman-Robinson's 1987 dissertation study focuses on specific discourse features, only ones that seem minute compared to Cooper's or the "ways of speaking" Heath and others have documented for nonmainstream cultural groups. Troutman-Robinson found that the use of direct address and basic connectives in "oral Black English" transferred to her subjects' writing. Valerie Balester's dissertation on the spoken and written discourse of two African American college students, albeit not directly focused on the influence of BEV on SE writing, implicates some degree of rhetorical influence in that it examines the ethos (one of the artificial proofs of classical Invention) presented in both spoken and written forms of discourse. This influence is not,
however, reflected in a distinctively BEV style of discourse as in Cooper's study, but, in one case, a "hyperstyle," and, in the other, a flat prose style.

Studies like these, but ones more focused on the uses vernacular forms of discourse are put to in different socio-cultural contexts, could reveal models of rhetorical practice quite different from mainstream, academic ones. Concerning the task of the anthropological version of such kind of research, Dell Hymes remarks that "[it] could be described as that of providing a truly comparative rhetoric, drawing on, but transcending and establishing on a different basis, the insights of rhetoric and poetics in his own civilization" (114). Investigating the rhetoric of students' language may provide the best resource for their instruction in writing.

**The Language Resource Hypothesis**

The third hypothesis, which I call the *language resource* hypothesis, is not so much an explanation of BEV speakers' problems with literacy as it is an approach or a way of viewing BEV in the context of the writing classroom. Ball's recent work on the organizational patterns of African American expository discourse assumes such a perspective. My investigation into the oral and written discourse practices of African American Male college students likewise assumes BEV as an untapped language resource--only a resource in terms of its function as a rhetoric.
Admittedly, the concept of BEV (or nonstandard dialects in general) as a language resource is not strictly a contemporary trend. Since the 1970's, if not earlier, scholars have remarked on the resourcefulness of BEV in literacy instruction (see Labov, *Language in the Inner City*; Linn; Sternglass, "Dialect Literature"; Brooks; and Farr and Daniels). Michael Linn, for example, correctly classifies several BEV discourse forms (e.g., *shucking, rapping, the dozens*, and *stylin' out*) as examples of "black rhetoric," suggesting that students be permitted to write themes based on such forms as a way of building on the skills they already possess. However, he, like so many others, fails to show how some of these forms are embedded in students' academic prose and could be utilized in the context of, not as compensatory preparation for, "formal writing" (153).

It's in this juxtaposition of vernacular and academic discourses that I believe students' dialects become so resourceful--that is, resourceful in the sense that contrastive vernacular forms of discourse suggest the operation of a distinctively black rhetoric that has yet to be fully conceptualized for speech, let alone writing. Thus, while we do have some models of the rhetorical practices of African American people, few, if any, of these could appropriately serve as guides to writing teachers.
Studies of African American Rhetoric

Rhetoricians have performed very detailed analyses of African American oratory and have described what they consider to be a "black rhetoric;" however, they have paid almost no attention to BEV--an omission that I believe seriously distorts a conceptualization of African American rhetoric. James Golden and Richard Rieke's lengthy text entitled *The Rhetoric of Black Americans*, for instance, provides very perceptive commentary on the rhetorical strategies used by African American social leaders but no insight on their uses of BEV, and this in spite of reference in the text to such adept vernacular language users as Malcolm X and H. Rap Brown.

Other texts purporting to describe African American rhetoric suffer from the same inattention to the use of vernacular language in speech-making. Almost an exact replication of the Golden and Rieke study, Robert Mullen's *Black Communication* (originally entitled *The Rhetorical Strategies of Black Americans*) describes the three persuasive strategies of assimilation, separatism, and revolution but make no mention of language use. Perhaps the only rhetoric text that takes into account such concerns at all is James Payne's *The Anatomy of Black Rhetoric*. The book includes a linguistic component in its "Model of Black Rhetoric," subdivided into a comprehensibility factor and a style factor. Of the two factors, the style factor appears to come closest to a consideration of variation in language use. Still, Payne limits style of
presentation to what amounts to a superficial distinction between writing and speech: the literary and the oratorical.

One of the more cogent attempts by a rhetorician to describe black rhetoric has been the writings of Molefi Asante (who goes by the name of Arthur Smith in publications of the 1970s). His chapter entitled "Markings of An African Concept of Rhetoric" in *Language, Communication, and Rhetoric in Black America* and his discussion of rhetoric in *The Afrocentric Idea* do some justice to the role of language in black rhetoric. Although neither piece specifically discusses BEV in connection with rhetoric or rhetorical theory, they do provide a crucial philosophical base for understanding the oral tradition in African and African American culture. In *Language, Communication, and Rhetoric in Black America*, for instance, Asante (or Smith) remarks on how the traditional African regard for *Nommo* contributed to the development of alternate communication forms such as Black English:

During slavery communication between different ethnic and linguistic clans was difficult, but the almost universal African regard for the power of the spoken word [Nommo] contributed to the development of alternate communication patterns in the work songs, Black English, sermons, and the Spirituals with their dual meanings, one for the body and one for the soul. (297)
For Asante, *Nommo* is central to African rhetoric, and, in *The Afrocentric Idea*, he links *Nommo* to *signifying*, one of the major forms of BEV discourse in the United States. Few rhetoricians have discussed the significance of this or other vernacular discourse forms for a theory of African American rhetoric. Indeed, even in Asante's work such forms receive cursory treatment.

Besides *Nommo*, there are other general features that characterize African American Rhetoric. These features have been discussed in several places, the earliest perhaps being in a 1970's article by Roger Abrahams entitled "The Advantages of Black English." Abrahams observes that the distinction made between "dramatic-type performances and other types of interactional behavior like conversations" in the standard English universe of discourse is not made in Black English (65). In the BE universe of discourse, "all expressive behavior is judged as a performance--that is, in terms of its ability to affect onlookers, drawing them into some type of sympathetic participation" (65). Stylized performances using forms and tropes may appear in informal conversation and, conversely, casual conversation may appear in more formal speech events, like a sermon or political speech.

The other distinguishing feature of what Abrahams calls SE and BE expressive systems concerns the relationship between speaker and audience. In contrast to speakers of SE, speakers of BE engage in a "high degree of complementary audience participation"--that is, in what has come to be known in the African American
community as *call-response*. The speaker of BE attempts to establish a dialogue with the audience to the point of turning the dialogue into playful competition (66).

In *Language, Communication, and Rhetoric in Black America*, Asante (i.e., Smith) identifies the two characteristics mentioned by Abrahams, but also includes the following: 1) the traditional African emphasis on the creative process of the artist (in contrast to the neo-Aristotelian emphasis on audience in the judgment of discourse); 2) the tendency toward holism and functionality in the African view of the arts; 3) and the belief that public discourse convinces not through syllogistic reasoning but through the power of images to fascinate.

In their review of the sociolinguistic and anthropological literature, Bizzell and Herzberg add to this corpus of African American rhetoric the idea of setting. They identify three main settings of speech interactions in the African American communities studied by sociolinguists: the church, where speaking includes both sermons and responses by congregants; the street, where talk is an interaction between equals; and the home where talk is dominated by the mother (1187). Within these settings, they explain that the relationship between the speaker and audience in black rhetoric differs from the speaker-audience relationship in "white" rhetoric. As mentioned earlier, in black rhetoric, the audience not only listens to the speaker's message but
also responds to it with "set responses, encouragements, suggestions, and nonverbal signals" (118).

These general rules for black rhetoric are, however, governed by context—that is, by the settings previously described. Speech interactions in the home generally do not include *call-response* and verbal play; by contrast, the street is the scene of verbal play, the locus for ritual games of insult. In *Talkin' and Testifyin*: *The Language of Black America*, Smitherman contrasts the street or "secular" style with speech interaction in black churches, that is, the "sacred" style. The sacred style, having its origins in the rural South, takes place in traditional black churches where the sermons of a preacher may include any number of speech acts, except the *dozens* and *toasts*. The secular style, largely a product of the urban North, occurs on the streets corners, poolhalls, and barbershops in African American communities, manifesting itself in forms such as "the dozens, the toast, the blues, and folk tales" (88).

Still, the two styles share so many features that context alone will not likely determine what kind of language is used. Indeed, during several recent public lectures I've attended—those given by Haki Madhubuti, Ivan Van Sertima, Leonard Jeffries, and Byllye Avery and Angela Davis—I've witnessed the *call and response* that is so endemic to the sacred style, though not quite so emotionally charged as occurs in that style. According to Smitherman, the unity of the sacred and secular is fundamental to
the traditional African worldview, which means that "Each discourse mode is manifested in Black American culture on a sacred-secular continuum" (103).

Bizzell and Herzberg, however, suggest that the most complex conversation-performance exchanges take place on the street and have three purposes: simply to exchange information; to enact social relationships, those of friendship, kinship, and business; and to establish the speaker's social status (1188). Given the complex dynamics of "street" exchanges and the fact that they're largely male-dominated, this study investigates whether similar exchanges occur among groups of male BEV speakers at the university and what influence these exchanges may have on their writing of academic prose.

**Vernacular Forms of Discourse**

The importance of the above characteristics (namely, context, speaker/audience dynamics, and performance) notwithstanding, it is vernacular discourse forms like *signifying* that give shape and substance to African American rhetoric in general, and black vernacular rhetoric in particular. Indeed, anthropologist Alan Dundes suggests that the origins of signifying quite possibly lie in African rhetoric (310). Moreover, literary critic Henry Louis Gates considers signifying as the "black trope of tropes, the figure for black rhetorical figures" (51). Although this view may appear
little more than a reincarnation of Ramism, Gates's notion of signifying as the embodiment of (or architectonic term for) black rhetoric has a good deal more theoretical merit than much of the work done thus far by rhetoricians. On the surface of it, the classification of tropes (i.e., figures of speech) as the sum total of black rhetoric seems to ignore Invention, perhaps the greatest of the five parts of rhetoric. Viewed in this way, black rhetoric becomes mere ornamentation—the mere "dressing" of thought—lacking any substantial epistemic function. However, because Gates's analysis is located "at a juncture of culture, linguistic operation, social interaction, and political marginality," Bizzell and Herzberg claim that tropes are to be regarded as cognitive and epistemic forms of language (1191-92).

But long before Gates conceived of signifying as a rubric for black rhetoric, sociolinguists had considered black rhetoric as "figurative language"—that is, as Style in the traditional canon of rhetoric. Figurative language is generally discussed by

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8 Ramism was a method of the Renaissance university curriculum derived by Pierre De La Ramée (or Peter Ramus). Ramus discredited the rhetorics of Aristotle, Cicero, and Quintilian and proposed the separation of Invention and Arrangement from rhetoric. Thus, in Ramus's view, the sole province of rhetoric was Style—especially tropes and figures. For further discussion of the Ramist method, see Carole Newlands's translation of Ramus's Arguments in Rhetoric against Quintilian.

9 A related view of tropes or figures of speech is discussed by Edward P. J. Corbett in Classical Rhetoric for the Modern Student. He indicates that the classification scheme of Sister Miriam Joseph in her book Shakespeare's Use of the Arts of Language demonstrates that the three schools of rhetoric during the Renaissance (Ramists, traditionalist, and figurists) saw the figures as being intimately connected with the topics of invention (424).
sociolinguists in terms of "forms of discourse." Smitherman, however, uses the term "modes of discourse," while Bizzell and Herzberg prefer the Bakhtinian term "speech genres." Others, particularly those doing work in the ethnography of speaking, tend to use the terms speech acts, events, and situations (e.g., see Labov; Mitchell-Kernan).

In Smitherman's model of black rhetoric, there are four general modes of African American discourse: *Call-response* (which I referred to earlier with regard to Abrahams's speaker/audience dynamic in the BE universe of discourse), *signification, tonal semantics*, and *narrative sequencing*. In terms of actual discourse features that may have a bearing on writing, signification and narrative sequencing are especially noteworthy. Signification, the standard English form for what is often dubbed by BEV speakers as *signifyin* or *siggin*, refers to "the verbal art of insult in which a speaker humorously puts down, talks about, needles--that is, signifies on--the listener" (118). According to Smitherman, in addition to a sacred or black church form, signification can assume a secular, "streetified" form called the *dozens* or *sounding*.\(^\text{10}\)

Narrative sequencing refers to the rich story-telling tradition in African American culture--but not, Smitherman cautions,

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\(^\text{10}\) The differences between signifyying and the dozens are discussed below. However, depending on the community, city, region, generation, or time, names for these forms can greatly vary. Names like *crackin’, raggin’, rankin’,* as well as *signifyin’* and *playin’ the dozens* can all refer to the same art of verbal insult.
ritualistic story-telling, rather "narrative speech as a characteristic register of black communication generally" (147). Interestingly, according to Smitherman, such speech "becomes a black rhetorical strategy to explain a point, to persuade holders of opposing views to one's own point of view, and in general to 'win friends and influence people'" (148). Teachers who grow exasperated by students who aren't direct and don't get to the point of their stories would do well to remember this strategy.

Signification and narrative sequencing in the Smitherman model apparently subsume a great many vernacular discourse forms. However, as a model or classification of forms, it blurs subtle distinctions between the various kinds of discourse. A slightly more comprehensive approach is Bizzell and Herzberg's list of speech genres, which include the following:

- sounding (direct insult and boast)
- signifying (indirect insult and boast)
- rapping (general ability to use rhetorical devices)
- toasting (narrative verse)
- hipping (exposition; running it down)
- sweet-talk (courtship rapping)
- poetry
- testimony
- standard (white) English (often used ironically)

nonverbal forms: singing
dancing (1189)
This list, while not exhaustive, covers the major BEV discursive forms, or, at least, those that appear so from their heavy treatment in the research literature. The ritual insults, sounding (or otherwise called the dozens, the dirty dozens, or playing the dozens) and signifying, have appeared in numerous linguistic studies since the 1930's (e.g., Dollard, 1939; Abrahams's folklore studies of 1962 and 1974; Labov's work in New York City, 1968 and 1972; Kochman's research in inner-city Chicago, 1970; and Mitchell-Keenan's work in inner-city Oakland, 1974). In terms of discourse function, sounding and signifying exhibit that both directness and indirectness have their place in black vernacular speech. As direct insult to someone or someone's relative (especially "yo mama"), sounding, thus, plays upon directness for verbal one-up-man-ship. Signifying, on the other hand, plays upon indirection for insult. It displays the speaker's clever use of indirection and metaphor to convey a message.

Rapping, aside from its general treatment in Smitherman's Talkin and Testifyin, has been discussed elsewhere by Kochman ("Rapping' in the Black Ghetto") and Abrahams ("Rapping and Capping"). Given rapping's more general disposition, it would seem to be a better rubric for vernacular forms of discourse than Gates's Signifyin(g) (see Talkin' and Testifyin', 79-80, for such implications). But, according to most descriptions of the art, rapping (especially sweet-talk rap) tends to characterize the more persuasive aspects of vernacular speech--albeit not so much in
terms of persuading an audience to act or to some type of conversion, but in terms of its expressive function—that is, in terms of persuading (by way of performance) an audience of one's verbal agility.

Traditional narrative poems like toasts are cited in a variety of texts (e.g., Smitherman's Talkin and Testifyin; and Abrahams's Afro-American Folktales); however, analyses of toasting as a form of black vernacular discourse are limited to two major studies: Volume II of Labov's A Study of the Non-standard English of Negro and Puerto Rican Speakers in New York City, and Abrahams's Deep Down in the Jungle. Of course, it is from the toast of the "Signifying Monkey" that Gates derives his theory of "Signifyin(g)" as the master trope of black rhetoric. Toasting functions to display a speaker's narrative/poetic skills, to display his or her ability to improvise variations to a familiar tale and to do so in rhyming couplets.

Finally, hipping (or running it down), in spite of its obvious links to expository writing, has received the least amount of treatment in the research literature. The most detailed discussion of it can be found in Kochman, 1969 and 1970, and in Abrahams, 1974. Yet, even in these studies hipping hasn't reached the scholarly magnitude of sounding, signifying, or, for that matter, toasting; nor has it been compared to the oral and written expository discourse that students are asked to acquire when they come to the university. Since the function of hipping is to convey
information (though not without some degree of personal style), it would behoove us to know just how much, if at all, this street vernacular form resembles the kind of tasks we want students to learn in the classroom.

Bizzell and Herzberg's list of speech genres is, one should keep in mind, based on what they have gleaned from their review of the many sociolinguistic and folklore studies of BEV. As such, theirs is not the most authoritative statement on the disposition of the various language forms in the BEV speech community. Rather, the merit of their work lies in their view of these forms as constituting a rhetoric--one similar to, but also quite different from what they deem as "white rhetoric."

Unfortunately, however, the list of speech genres does little in the way of formalizing black rhetoric.11 Abrahams's taxonomy of ways of speaking, which actually (though scarcely represented by Bizzell and Herzberg) predates Smitherman's model, may serve as a more fitting formalization of this rhetoric. In an effort to preserve its visual effect, below I have reproduced Abrahams's taxonomy as it appears in "Black Talking on the Streets." Some aspects of the taxonomy were, however, impossible to reproduce. Thus, the original version differs from the one printed here in

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11 Here, I prefer to use the term black vernacular rhetoric or black English vernacular rhetoric because, as I've indicated in the previous chapter, black rhetoric encompasses a whole range of language uses of which street vernacular is but a part.
three ways: 1) the words signifying, running it down, talking smart, talking shit, putting down, putting on, playing, and sounding are all italicized, marking their status as key rhetorical terms; 2) three brackets (which were impossible to reproduce) appear at the bottom of the configuration, pointing to each of the three statements on the conversational aspect of the various ways of speaking; and 3) an arrow proceeds from the top to the bottom of the diagram marked by the label "Going deep; talking bad."

While, like the previous models, Abrahams's taxonomy consists of some of the standard vernacular terminology (e.g., running it down, signifying, and sounding), it differs, however, in that it is "described with regard to the distinctions in speaker-to-speaker relationships and strategies" (250). The importance of this difference cannot be overstated, for it directs attention from distinctions in mere terminology (which don't always exist in certain African American communities) to distinctions in actual practice (which often do exist in these communities). Thus, while the term "talking smart" may not surface in a community's descriptions of its ways of speaking, talk that can be described as serious, clever conflict talk with a "Me-and-you and no one else" relationship between speakers will surface. The same holds true for "talking shit"; non-serious contest talk involving an "Any of us here" relationship between speakers would be classified as "talking shit."
These distinctions are impressive not only because as generic categories they encompass a wide variety of discourse forms (such as, in this case, *putting down*, *putting on*, *playing*, and *sounding*) but also because they reflect two subsurface-level varieties of the witty performance talk called *signifying*. In this way, the taxonomy suggests a continuum that increases both in depth (as graphically illustrated by the arrow pointing downward when one is "talking baad") and breadth. Unlike Smitherman's continuum between sacred and secular styles—that is, between the two contexts of church and street—the horizontal axis of Abrahams's taxonomy shows that street talk has its own continuum of style. It moves at one end from a primary focus on content (i.e., *running it down*) to an increasingly stylistic focus at the other (i.e., *talking shit*). Abrahams explains that

> With the former the style is buried in favor of the message; the interaction to be effective must seem relatively spontaneous. With the latter, the message is subordinated or disavowed (since it is all just play) while the intensity and effectiveness of presentation become most important.

(251-52)

Between these two polar ends are "interactions in which stylized devices are introduced—and call attention to themselves—but in which message remains as important as style" (252). This continuum between the greater focus on style and the greater
focus on content in vernacular speech demonstrates the variability of vernacular forms of discourse, not unlike the high, middle, and low styles in traditional rhetoric. The unfortunate disparity, however, is that vernacular writing is rarely touted for the stylistic variability that standard English writing is. Thus, as regards writing as well as to a lesser extent speech, we have no adequate models of black rhetoric.

**Vernacular Tropes**

From their reading of Gates's *The Signifying Monkey*, Bizzell and Herzberg classify a group of black vernacular tropes in addition to their speech genres or forms of discourse. In theory, tropes differ only slightly from forms. Indeed, the forms might be considered "large-scale tropes" and the tropes "small-scale figures of speech" (1189). *Playing the dozens*, the authors claim, could as easily be a form as a trope (1190). But, unlike forms, tropes represent "a turn" of words from a literal to a metaphorical meaning. Bizzell and Herzberg provide an extended list of the black rhetorical tropes. Some of them (e.g., hyperbole and repetition) are no different from white (or traditional) rhetorical tropes, but the uses they are put to often differ dramatically.

**Verbal Tropes**

- signifying (as a master trope)
- playing the dozens (insulting someone's mama)
- naming/nickname-using
jargon (e.g., of music, cars, drugs, sex, clothes, and so on)
speech-action metaphor \((run\ it\ by\ me;\ run\ it\ down)\)
hyperbole
repetition
rhyming
meaning reversal \((bad = good)\)
defiance (low-status usage to needle whitey)
marking (mocking, imitation)
tomming (as accommodation or irony)
woofing (lying)
yo' mama (or "ask yo' mama"--stock responses)

**Nonverbal Tropes**

pitch
cadence
emphasis (accent shift on big words)
loaf-talking (stage whisper to convey innuendo)
giving skin (an approving response)
marking (imitating by gesture) \((1190-91)\)

Note that, in addition to being listed as a "form," signifying is also listed by the authors as one of the verbal tropes. They do so primarily because literary critic Henry Louis Gates, Jr. views Signifyin(g) as the "master trope" of black rhetoric. The authors write,

Gates makes *signifying* a master trope in the sense that it embodies indirection or turning in black rhetoric (just as metaphoric comparison is the master trope of white rhetoric). \(1190\)
In Gates's model of black rhetoric, all tropes and forms are subsumed under Signifyin(g). These include "marking, loud-talking, testifying, calling out (of one's name), sounding, rapping, playing the dozens, and so on" (1199). He derives the model from his understanding of the Signifying Monkey tradition in African American culture. The "Signifying Monkey," Gates claims, "stands as the rhetorical principle in Afro-American vernacular discourse" (44). If what Gates remarks is indeed true, then one might say that the Signifying Monkey is the Dame Rhetoric of black vernacular language and culture. And even though Signifyin(g) may not be logically considered the sum total of black rhetoric, Gates's cognitive and epistemic view of tropes would seem to suggest that in black rhetoric representing meaning is not passive (as it tends to be in traditional rhetoric); rather it is, in the words of Bizzell and Herzberg, "the greatest trickery of them all" (1192).

**Conclusion**

The BEV discourse practices—e.g., toasting, rapping, running it down and signifying—described by linguists represent, at best, a very small segment of the BEV universe of discourse. Indeed, an adequate descriptive model of the rhetoric of BEV would most certainly include many more discursive forms, at least enough to
demonstrate the consistency of certain speech patterns in the everyday lives of African Americans. As John Baugh puts it, "there is a neglected perspective [in the study of ritualized speech acts], one that looks in detail at the actual linguistic behavior as it adjusts to various contexts in day-to-day life"(24).

Even more neglected is a detailed look at oral as well as written linguistic behavior as it makes similar adjustments. That is, research detailing the effect of oral discourse practices on writing (and vice versa) is greatly lacking. This study argues that such an undertaking is necessary to devise adequate models of African American rhetoric. Although such a model is beyond the scope of this study, I can lay the groundwork for one by taking into account the function of both language and literacy practices in the daily lives of African Americans. That these African Americans are male and "at-risk" students of a large predominantly white university makes the study of the language and literacy of daily life even more essential to the development of theories of rhetoric. The axis of difference between vernacular language and culture and the language and culture of the academy is substantial enough to warrant a re-vision-ing of current rhetorical theory. Furthermore, the politics surrounding African American male students' access to and participation in the university makes for a peculiar site for the study of rhetoric. After all, as Nietzsche said, rhetoric is the essence of language, the essence, I would add, of the
language and literacy we use in whatever situation we find ourselves.
CHAPTER III

"IF HE AIN'T BLACK, WHAT IS HE THEN?": A GRAD STUDENT DOING ETHNOGRAPHIC RESEARCH

Folklore is not as easy to collect as it sounds. The best source is where there are the least outside influences and these people, being usually under-privileged, are the shyest. They are most reluctant at times to reveal that which the soul lives by. And the Negro, in spite of his open-faced laughter, his seeming acquiescence, is particularly evasive. You see we are a polite people and we do not say to our questioner, "Get out of here!" We smile and tell him or her something that satisfies the white person because, knowing so little about us, he doesn't know what he is missing. The Indian resists curiosity by a stony silence. The Negro offers a feather-bed resistance. That is, we let the probe enter, but it never comes out. It gets smothered under a lot of laughter and pleasantries.

The theory behind our tactics: "The white man is always trying to know into somebody else's business. All right, I'll set something outside the door of my mind for him to play with and handle. He can read my writing but he sho'can't read my mind. I'll put this play toy in his hand, and he will seize it and go away. Then I'll say my say and sing my song."

--Zora Neale Hurston, Mules and Men

The title of this chapter is intended to foreground the ethnographic nature of the project I describe in the ensuing pages. The question I've quoted comes from an African American male student athlete who, during a tutoring session with me and other student athletes, had this reaction to some doubts raised about my cultural identity. The student who raised such doubts considered that although I was obviously black racially speaking, I was not black culturally speaking because I didn't talk like the "black
brothers" who say "nigga." I found the occasion rather amusing at first, but, as I have pondered over it since then, the incident has come to symbolize for me the ambiguities of language and identity that mark the African American experience, including my own, within predominately white universities.

Indeed, what I have found most fascinating (but also challenging) about doing this research is that it has, in an indirect way, allowed me to explore aspects of my ethnic language and culture that I have hitherto simply ignored or (sub)consciously severed from my present (though constantly) evolving identity. What I mean is that my disposition as both an insider and outsider\textsuperscript{12} of the BEV speech community has allowed me to put into perspective my relationship to the dialect as well as to the community of people who identify (as the students do) intimately with it.

Such a perspective on language, community membership, and identity cannot likely be gained (at least not adequately) through quantitative methods, though for many a linguist these methods, bearing the weight of scientific truth, are anticipated if not required. By comparison, qualitative (in particular, ethnographic) studies focusing specifically on BEV are rare among linguists. Rarer still are ethnographic studies that focus on vernacular

\textsuperscript{12} An insider because I can, to some degree, speak and understand the dialect; an outsider because I more frequently use standard academic English and, as a graduate student, represent much of what the academic community stands for.
writing or the relationship between the speech and writing of BEV speakers. Among the BEV studies that assume an ethnographic approach (e.g., Labov, *A Study of the Non-standard English of Negro and Puerto Rican Speakers in New York City*; Abrahams, *Deep Down in the Jungle*; Kochman, "Toward an Ethnography"; Mitchell-Kernan, *Language Behavior*; Bell, *The World from Brown's Lounge*) none give particular attention to the writing of BEV speakers.

By contrast, in this dissertation, I use qualitative methods to describe oral and written language forms among African American speakers of BEV. The methods include ethnographic techniques from modern anthropology, namely participant observation, audiotape recordings of peer-group speech interactions, writing samples (academic and, occasionally, non-academic), and ethnographic interviews.

I hasten to caution, however, that in spite of my use of these ethnographic techniques, the study is not purposed to be what's called in sociolinguistics an *ethnography of speaking* (see Bauman and Sherzer) or *of writing* (see Basso, or Szwed on the ethnography of literacy). Rather, this study simply borrows from true ethnography two fundamental objectives: 1) a detailed description

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13 Exceptions are Hurston’s folkloric studies, Shirley Brice Heath’s research on oral and written language, and Amy Shuman’s study of adolescent storytelling, though none specifically highlights features of BEV in both speech and print. Balester also seems to take an ethnographic approach in her study of *ethos* in the oral and written discourse of BEV speakers.
and analysis of the patterns of language (or, in this case, dialect) individuals use in specific settings or activities; and 2) a detailed description and analysis of the meaning these patterns hold for those individuals who use them.

According to Dell Hymes, descriptions of 'ways of speaking' should provide data along four interrelated dimensions:

1. the linguistic resources available to a speaker--how many different styles he can choose from;
2. supra-sentential structuring--how many differently structured linguistic events, like trials, religious ceremonies, debates, songs, are recognized;
3. the rules of interpretation by which a given set of linguistic items comes to have a given communicative value;
4. the norms which govern different types of interaction. (cited in Coulthard 34).

Although the first dimension, speech styles, is relevant to the study of BEV (especially with regard to students' uses of the two major varieties, BEV and SAE), this study provides data primarily along the second dimension, speech events. In contrast to the Bakhtinian concept of speech genres that Bizzell and Herzberg apply to BEV discourse forms, Hymes prefers the terms speech event and speech act to distinguish between genre and the doing of a genre, that is, performance (Coulthard 42). An examination of some of the social situations (i.e., speech events) BEV speakers find
themselves in, thus, allows for a detailed description of the contextual uses of BEV.

**BEV in the University**

In this study, the general context for the description of the uses of BEV is the 1991-92 fall and winter quarters at The Ohio State University. The largest public institution in the state and indeed much of the country, Ohio State annually enrolls upwards of 52,000 students. Sadly, though, African Americans have accounted for not more than 3% of the total student enrollment, despite the fact that African Americans account for more than 10% of Ohio's residents.\(^{14}\)

Because this study takes place in an academic setting and not in an urban setting where the vernacular thrives, it does not represent a full description of students' uses of BEV or a full description of BEV as a rhetoric. What it does represent, though, is a description of vernacular use (oral and written) in a set of contexts far different from those traditionally studied—that is, the street corner and church. Or, looked at another way, it represents an account of what happens when the vernacular cultural forms students bring with them from those settings enter the academy and confront elite forms.

\(^{14}\) Houghton Mifflin's 1993 *Almanac* references this information on state population provided by the U.S. Census Bureau, July 1, 1991.
The Folk

Ethnographers typically study whole cultures or communities instead of specific individuals as case studies do. To allow for a detailed description of individual language variation and yet maintain focus on social context and verbal interaction within particular social contexts, however, I chose five African American male students for this ethnographic study. I focused on the language uses of African American male BEV speakers because, as indicated in chapter one, African American male college students have the highest drop-out rate among college students nationwide—a statistic which is often linked to literacy. But since not every African American male (including those enrolled in basic writing courses) necessarily speaks BEV, I analyzed initial samples of students' speech and determined that the five students chosen for the study used BEV at least some of the time. For this preliminary analysis, I relied on intuition and descriptions of BEV grammatical and phonological features found in the works of Wolfram and Labov. Two of the more outstanding examples I observed were the following: 1) invariant be—"They be dogging everybody"; and 2) copula absence and double negative—"They not there neither?"

To protect the identities of the five student informants, I have given them all pseudonyms. I do, however, give each of them a nickname or alias in order to add some character to an otherwise arbitrary cognomen. The aliases are based on some particular
characteristic about the students that I or others have observed. The names of teachers, counselors, classmates, and places that appear in chapter four were also invented to protect informants' identities. In spite of this deliberate falsification, however, all else concerning the informants remains true to fact.

Three of the five students (Jimmy, Paul, and Demetrius) were university athletes, two football and one basketball. One of the football players was recruited from an inner-city high school in the state, while the other, though originally also from the midwest, was recruited from a high school on the west coast. The basketball athlete entered Ohio State at nineteen years of age, having attended another university after graduating from a high school in the southwest. The two other students (Patrick and Gary) were from the same city in Ohio, but one having graduated from a private high school and the other from a fairly large public school.

These students were all placed into Ohio State's Academic Support Program (ASP), a retention-based program designed primarily for students who have ranked lowest on verbal and quantitative sections of the ACT/SAT and on a placement essay. During their first year, students enrolled in two quarters of basic writing, three quarters of math, and one quarter of speech.

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15 An ACT verbal score of 10 or below, or a SAT score of 32 or below places students in English 052. A writing placement exam score of 6 can also place students in English 052. The records of students' ACT/SAT score were unavailable; however, I obtained a copy of each of their exams, indicating their placement in English 052.
communication, in addition to other courses they were required or opted to take.

Although sometimes labeled a program for "at-risk" students, ASP, according to its director, is conceived of (and thus presented to students) as having a more than remedial role. Indeed, there are many advantages to being an ASP student. ASP students are guaranteed benefits uncommon to most students such as priority registration, small class sizes (which indeed is an advantage at a school like Ohio State), tutors, and special ASP advisors who make every effort to see that the students make steady progress academically as well as socially.

I met most of the 134 ASP students during the first week of the 1991 fall quarter classes. I visited each of the classes and introduced myself as one of the two English tutors for ASP. The reception I received in one particular class was very telling with regard to the identity issue I mentioned earlier. In fact, the meeting involved, among others, the very same students (Ronnie and Gerald) who, several weeks afterward, had a dispute over my racial origins. Almost as soon as I entered his classroom, Ronnie, one of six black male student athletes in the class, introduced himself to me and shook my hand. Though taken aback somewhat by this direct expression of cordiality, I introduced myself and shook his hand in return. Soon, another athlete, Randy, introduced himself and charged the other athletes to do the same. I don't recall the actual words he used to exhort them, but it was quite
obvious that most, if not all, of them responded favorably. I suspect that they all did so because they recognized that, like them, I was both black and male; African American male teachers and tutors are rare in ASP and in the athletic department's tutoring program.

For me, on the other hand, the reception bore a bit of ambiguity. Since in African American culture gestures can often reveal an individual's identity just as much as words can, I faltered over what kind of handshake I should give to my welcomers. Initially, I was tempted to give them a black handshake to show my solidarity with African American vernacular culture, but I failed to go through with it because I questioned my current ties to the culture. Was I really one of them? I thought. Or was I instead quite unlike them—a man more white than black? Of course, there's some middle ground here, but the point is that such perceptions figured into this graduate student's entree into the students' discourse community.16

In addition to this class, there were five other English 052A classes offered during fall quarter. With only minor variation between them, all of the classes were modeled after David Bartholomae and Anthony Petrosky's basic reading and writing

16 By discourse community, I don't mean the students' basic writing class. Rather, I mean the vernacular-language-community membership they bring with them from the street to the classroom. Though perhaps not as problematic as gaining access to the street vernacular communities themselves, my entree into the students' discourse community, such as it was within the academy, was by no means a given.
course. For my teaching associate appointment, I was assigned to tutor four of these classes, which meant that I was required to attend one class session for each of the four and, if need be, schedule weekly appointments with students for tutoring. All but one of the five students I studied were in one of the four classes I was assigned to. Two of the students were in the same eleven o'clock class, one in a twelve o'clock class, and another in a class held at one. The other student who took part in the study, Jimmy, was enrolled in another eleven o'clock section of English 052A—one of the two remaining courses that were assigned to the other ASP English tutor. I became interested in Jimmy when I learned from his teacher that he was rather articulate during class discussions and was one of six black male athletes in the class. Classes, in general, were not always evenly distributed according to race and gender. Paul's class of eleven students, for instance, consisted of only two females and, including him, two black males. The various class make-ups made for quite interesting social dynamics.

During the first week, all of the teachers of 052A formally introduced me to their students as one of the tutors. It wasn't until some two to three weeks later that they became aware of my interest in doing research. I solicited each of the five students privately, telling them that I was interested in how they interacted verbally with their classmates and how they wrote their essays from draft to draft. Because I didn't want them to be
overly self-conscious about their speech, I avoided expressing to them my focus on BEV. All of the students agreed to participate in the study and signed the university consent form that I presented to them. Aside from the interviews, there was no agreed upon number of sessions that they were to attend. It was understood that I would observe and tape-record them in class and in tutoring sessions and obtain copies of their written work. No one dropped out of the study, though one student never requested tutoring outside of class and held only one brief interview session with me. Still, I was able to observe all of the students in some kind of tutoring session at least twice and was able to interview them at least once.

**The First Time Around**

Prior to my selection of the five students referred to above, I piloted this project the previous year. During the fall and winter quarters of 1990-91, I worked for the first time as an English tutor in ASP. Having been informed by English department faculty that the students in the program had serious writing problems and that a substantial number of them were African American, I secured the position in hope that I could observe student writers who exhibited features of BEV in their speech and writing.

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17 According to 1990 autumn quarter statistics, 57 out of 119 students recruited for ASP were African American. The remaining 62 students comprised Caucasian Americans (46), Hispanic Americans (13), and Asian Americans (4).
In this preliminary investigation, I made extensive fieldnotes on students' speech interactions and behaviors in their writing classes and in their English and Math tutoring sessions. I also recorded my observations of the writing that students brought in to me for tutoring sessions and, occasionally, collected samples of this writing. As one of three ASP English tutors, I was assigned three classes and held walk-in tutoring hours from 7-9 pm on Wednesday evenings. This evening tutoring time was established primarily for the convenience of athletes who could not often schedule appointments during the day. It also worked well for many students since the math tutoring they were required to attend was held at the same time and in the same place. Thus, my presence once a week in each of the three classes, in the walk-in tutoring sessions, and in the individual tutoring times with students, provided me a wealth of data to record in fieldnotes.

The fieldnotes I recorded took the form of daily journal entries. I wrote down nearly everyday the more outstanding events I encountered. Entries covered a variety of topics--missed tutoring appointments, what I did to compensate for the missed appointment, personal encounters with other individuals in the university community, as well as what went on in class, in tutoring sessions, in the lives of individual students--and ranged from a few short sentences to well over half a page or more. Except for the notes I recorded during much of the winter quarter, all of them were typed at a computer usually at the end of the day. To
help trigger my recollection of the day's events, during a class or tutoring session I jotted down a few words or statements. These brief notes I later transformed into short narratives which described what I had seen and heard.

No rigorous attempt was made to collect samples of students' writing. Rather, I obtained writing samples from students with whom I had worked extensively and from teachers who thought that I might be interested in a particular student's writing. All of the samples were either initial or final drafts of essays assigned in class. None of the samples included journal entries or other types of informal writing.

Some Patterns

After some twenty weeks of meeting with students to talk about their essay drafts--listening to them relate to me the various stages of their lives and how these stages resembled or differed from others', it became quite clear to me that the students were in ASP not because of any real cognitive or linguistic deficiency (i.e., vis-à-vis their mainstream counterparts). The stories they told about themselves were too complex for so benighted an assessment. Rather, these were students who, in some respects, gave up on school because it couldn't do for them what "hangin'" with their peers could--that is, it couldn't provide the feeling of excitement, spontaneity, and, most of all (at least for some of the African American male students), belonging that
teenagers often crave. And even though some ASP students graduated from well-to-do high schools, the common denominator for almost all of them was their general disinterest in and lack of effort put forth toward academic work in high school. When asked at various times about their high school experience, several of them said that they found it boring.

This sort of tentativeness toward academic work unfortunately also manifested itself in students' matriculation to college. A number of students didn't think that college was for them but were persuaded by others or themselves that it was their best option for a prosperous future. Needless to say, many of these students lacked confidence in their academic abilities, in particular, their ability to write. In fact, somewhat exasperated over the amount of revision that can go into writing a satisfactory final draft, one African American female told me that she hated writing. Others echoed these sentiments when they remarked that they never liked writing or were never any good at it.

Although such attitudes toward writing aren't at all new to seasoned writing teachers and researchers (see, e.g., Shaughnessy), I found them especially troubling because it signaled students' resistance (often without realizing it) to readily available counterevidence. That is, students' perceptions of themselves as writers (and their actions based on these perceptions) worked against the kind of mutual inquiry (teacher/student, student/student, or tutor/student) that evidenced their
competence as language users, as speakers and as writers. And for reasons that remain unclear to me this resistance seemed to be most indicative of the male students I observed. In a class held on October 5, 1990, for example, I noted that a peer-responding group of about five male students (two African American, two Hispanic, and one Caucasian) had little to offer in the way of substantial writing and speaking. Nearly all of them had written less than a one page draft of their first essay and, each having read to the other members of the group however much they had, they virtually had no suggestions for revising the essays. Perhaps, as they wanted or expected it, that task fell to me, the designated leader of the group.

Some of these same students and other male students (especially African American) whom I tutored demonstrated another pattern in their writing. They tended to write interesting, detailed narratives of their experiences but fell short of reaching the explicit goals of the assignment. One essay of this kind I remember quite vividly. An African American male student read to the class an essay he had written about his experience of a change from being a class clown in high school to the more serious role of section leader in choral music class. He gave enormous detail about his school, about the courses he took that term, and about the expectations he had for himself as a member of the choir. However, he didn’t describe, as the essay prompt required, his role as class clown and the transition or change he had to
undergo to assume the role of section leader. Such writing patterns were not exclusive to African American males, or male students in general. Indeed, as the many student placement essays testify, a common feature of basic writer prose is the disjunction between an essay prompt and what's produced in response to it. What's perhaps unique about African American male students who follow this pattern is that it may be a reflection of oral storytelling skills, skills that are central to black cultural identity but have little place in academic culture.

One of the six student papers I collected was especially interesting with regard to linguistic patterns that were traceable to his oral language competence. Most of these patterns were not, however, at the discourse level. Instead, they were grammatical or semantic features some of which resemble Whiteman's features of dialect influence. Below, I list several examples of these features. The specific features are italicized, but in every other respect the examples have been typed according to the original essay draft.

"Look over there fellows see that girl with that big butt I bet I can get her number before any of you." That was all me, Dion, Ronald, Tod, Marvin, and Tony use to do whenever we were together in school or out on the street.

The reason was that I was wanting to break up with Michelle but I did not know how to tell her it was over so I plan this surprise. Before I could get to the dance I seen Michelle talking to a guy in the hall of our shcool, . . . .
Billie was just as stupid as Michelle but *one thang* about Billie she played around too.

*Tammy reputation* was so bad if you went out with her on Friday you knew something was going to happen Saturday between the two of you.

Why Mary was busy trying to call me I was moving on to two girls that I was *checking out*.

In two of the excerpts, the student omitted the past tense morpheme "ed," and in another he omitted the possessive marker "'s"--two common nonstandard dialect features. The verb form "seen" in the phrase *I seen Michelle* is more a characteristic feature of BEV than of other nonstandard dialects. Likewise words like "thang" and "checking out" tend to be common in BEV, the former, however, more for its phonology than its semantics. What all this means is that in certain instances (or under certain linguistic conditions) the student used features of BEV in what was otherwise standard English prose. But until I brought it to his attention by having him read the draft aloud, he was not aware of his use of such expressions. One could reason that the student could have been so absorbed in the telling of his story that some of the most natural ways of expressing it necessarily came into play.

With regard to spoken language, two other patterns emerged from my analysis of data I recorded in fieldnotes: 1) Not surprisingly, Black English Vernacular use among BEV speakers varies according to context and audience. Although students may
use some vernacular phonological, lexical, and grammatical features during general class discussions, these features are less pronounced than in the informal contexts of peer interaction. Yet, even in the more formal contexts of the classroom, students may, for certain purposes (e.g., as an attention-getting device), use several features of BEV. Discourse features like the oral storytelling mentioned above were less apparent, though not entirely absent. For instance, I witnessed two African American female students make vernacular jokes not unlike Abrahams’s informants (see *Deep Down*), only in the context of the classroom and tutoring sessions; 2) when allowed to select their own group for classwork, students will often choose partners of similar racial (and sometimes gender) backgrounds to their own. Speech interactions in homogeneous groups tended to differ from those in heterogeneous groups, especially interactions involving personal or non-academic subject matter. Vernacular speech patterns tended to be more frequent in racially homogeneous groups where such patterns were, perhaps, deemed appropriate.

These preliminary data raised the following questions for an in-depth investigation of the BEV as rhetoric hypothesis:

1) What are the BEV discourse practices (or ways of using language) of African American male speakers of BEV enrolled in college?
2) On what occasions, for what purposes, and for and to whom are these discourse practices appropriate (or inappropriate)? And to what extent are these practices used in certain contexts?
3) Do these discourse practices influence the students' writing of standard academic English?

This Time Around

Collecting the Lore of the Folk

Oral Lore

In an attempt to answer these research questions, I secured permission from four teachers to observe students' speech interactions with them and with peers. The observations were recorded in fieldnotes that I wrote in condensed form (see Spradley) during or immediately after a class and converted into expanded form at home later that afternoon or evening. (At times, attending two or more classes in one day, it, however, became increasingly difficult to expand condensed notes on the very same day they were recorded. In such cases, I resorted to expanding the notes one or two days later. Needless to say, this method presented some problems with the accuracy of recordings.)

And since accuracy of linguistic descriptions is an essential aspect of any language study, whenever possible, speech interactions were audio-taped. During the third or fourth week of
autumn quarter, I requested from students in three classes permission to tape record some of their class meetings. However, I didn't do so for the twelve o'clock class because another graduate student conducting research on the class used a tape recorder. To avoid added obtrusiveness from the natural flow of things, I elected not to audio-tape the class. Instead, whenever I found it useful (e.g., a group discussion which included my informant), I borrowed the other researcher's tape-recording and made a copy of my own. There were obvious disadvantages to this approach, for one my not getting recordings of material (casual conversations between a small group of students before class began, for example) I would have found most useful.

In the classes where I was able to use a tape recorder, however, I announced to the students that I was interested in how they talked about the assigned readings and essays during peer-responding sessions. Each of these classes agreed to let me audio-tape them, but some of them apparently thought that it was something to make sport of, for if ever my back was turned someone would make noises into the recorder or hide it. The majority of the time, though, I kept the recorder near me as I situated myself in the proximity of my informants.

Although the primary context for the aforementioned observations was the basic writing classroom, other contexts included tutoring sessions which generally took place at a tutoring facility operated by the basic writing program and at athletic
study tables. Effort was also made to observe the students outside the context of school or school related activities. Although there was nothing systematic about these observations, I was occasionally able to observe one or more of my informants interacting with peers while waiting for a bus, while standing at a campus street corner, and while playing basketball. Other attempts at observing such kind of activity (e.g., an informant playing computer games with his friends, or the student athletes lounging around or "chillin'" in the dorms) were unsuccessful. With regard to the computer game event, I suspect that one of the reasons I was never able to observe it is because my informant and his friends were being evasive. Although I never discussed the matter with them, Patrick's willingness to invite me and yet his not showing up when I came suggests the kind of feather-bed resistance Hurston describes. In all likelihood, however, I was not perceived by Patrick or any of my informants as the white person who knows so little about African American culture. Still, my status as a tutor and researcher—as someone closely associated with the university and one who, for the most part, uses the university's language—I think, marked my distance from informants in non-academic contexts. One ASP student athlete did, on the other hand, provide me with some data on speech interaction in non-academic context. Because his research project required that he tape-record a group of guys discussing different topics and because he could only do so during athletic study tables
with my supervision, I was able to participate and observe students' speech in a relaxed, albeit somewhat contrived, environment.

Thus, as a participant (tutor) and observer (researcher). I collected several bits and pieces of data on students' speech interactions. Among Spradley's types of participation, my involvement "both with people and in the activities" I observed could best be classified as moderate (Participant Observation 58). Inasmuch as my duties as a tutor required me to interact with students, I was involved with them and in what they did. During class sessions, for example, I often took notes of information teachers wrote on the blackboard, but I made no effort to do any of the course assignments, as an active or full participant might have. The advantage of the moderate approach is that it allowed me greater opportunity to observe linguistic interaction. The disadvantage is that I wasn't able to view this interaction more fully from the point of view of the participants.

The fieldnotes and audio-taped recordings (some eighteen or more) focus on specifically, though not exclusively, peer group interaction as a speech event. The focus on peer groups is justified, in part, by Labov's claim that for inner-city adolescents peer group status is associated with vernacular dialects. While the students in this study cannot all be classified as "inner-city adolescents," peer groups tend to be the locus of vernacular speech. In this study, therefore, I give account of students'
language uses in various in-class groups (e.g., self-selected, teacher-assigned, or arbitrary) as well as out-of-class groups (e.g., study, social, or recreational).

*Written Lore*

Samples of informants' academic writing were taken from their coursework in English 052A, 053A, and occasionally in other courses which required writing. The samples include formal papers, drafts of these papers, journal entries, and essay exams, in effect, almost all written coursework done by each of the informants. However, multiple drafts of essays and journal entries were not always available because students would either misplace them or never get around to giving them to me. Still, I have much of what they produced in the two courses. And with one student, Patrick, I obtained additional items like rap lyrics he had composed and a psychology paper. These items were important for developing a more complete picture of the student's writing abilities.

Since the basic writing program at Ohio State is modeled after the Bartholomae and Petrofsky method, students were given a theme for the course and asked to engage in intensive reading and writing that centered on that theme. For the students in this study, the class theme was "Growth and Change in Adolescence," although for one or more assignments (especially in 053A, the second quarter course) teachers would use another theme, that is,
"Language and Community." Jimmy's class had at least one assignment of this kind, one which was quite illuminating with respect to students' strong links to linguistic communities outside the mainstream.

According to the "Growth and Change" theme, students had to write formal essays on three topics: 1) an experience of some life change; 2) an experience in which a change was expected but didn't occur; and 3) an experience in which there was a deliberate attempt, whether successful or unsuccessful, to change. As is readily apparent from each of the topics, the essays were, in large part, personal or autobiographical in nature. But, in addition to writing about their personal experiences, students are asked to generalize from them—to derive a theory of growth and change in adolescence applicable to their peers and the literary characters they read about. In a sense, it's a kind of exercise in inductive reasoning whereby the students look at specific individual life experiences, compare and contrast them, and propose some general statement about them.

The mechanics required for the essays were six hundred words or more in length and typing with double spacing. Writing drafts and making revisions were a major part of the course; thus, in a variety of ways much of the class time was spent on getting students to move from one stage of development in their writing to another, getting them to be responsive to the needs of a reader by adding things that a reader might look for. Since class sessions
were held in the English department computer labs once a week, revising drafts was for students an unconstrained and efficient task.

*Askin' Questions, Gettin' Answers*

As a validity check on the data I gathered from participant observation and recorded samples of informants' speech and writing, I also conducted ethnographic interviews with the informants, instructors, and advisors. These interviews were audio-taped and included questions, in the main, regarding the students' life history, oral and written language experiences inside and outside of school, and their progress academically and socially at Ohio State.¹⁸

I attempted to conduct two interviews with student informants; however, two students were unavailable for a second formal interview session. In the first interview, students were asked to give an account of their background and language learning experiences, especially as these related to their becoming aware of academic discourse practices. The second interview was to serve as a follow-up to the first, focusing in greater detail on students' experiences with reading, writing, and speaking. Students were asked to interpret or explain the patterns I observed in their interactions with their peers. These interviews usually took place

¹⁸ See Appendix A for a copy of the transcripts from Patrick's interviews.
at the tutoring room or at athletic study tables. With one student, Patrick, however, the interviews took place in a dorm room, and with another, Demetrius, an interview took place in the classroom as the day's class was ending.

Interviews with teachers and advisors (including the athletic academic counselor and a graduate student researcher who became a regular member of a class) accounted for eight separate interviews, one with each of the four teachers and the remainder with four individuals related to the program. While acting in my capacity as a tutor, conversations with instructors about students' academic performance naturally arose. These conversations, in addition to the one formal interview, served as informal interviews, helping me to gain a more complete picture of the students as language users. Since in their first quarter of study in ASP students are required to meet with an ASP advisor once a week, the informants' advisors were also a source of data. Interviews with ASP advisors provided a perspective of the informants as university students.

Making Sense of It All

Speech Samples

Speech samples were analyzed to provide a detailed description of students' uses of BEV in a variety of contexts (research question 2). To perform this analysis, I used Hymes's ethnographic framework for the study of speech events and acts. In its original
form, this framework or schema can include as many as sixteen or seventeen components, which Hymes lists as follows: 1) Message form; 2) Message content; 3) Setting; 4) Scene; 5) Speaker (or sender); 6) Addressee; 7) Hearer (or receiver, or audience); 8) Addressee; 9) Purposes--outcomes; 10) Purposes--goals; 11) Key; 12) Channels; 13) Forms of speech; 14) Norms of interaction; 15) Norms of interpretation; and 16) Genres. Hymes describes this schema not as a theory but as "an etic, heuristic input to descriptions," one that allows for more precise descriptions of speech acts than traditional divisions found in linguistics, semiotics, literary criticism, and even rhetoric (e.g., Aristotle's artistic proofs *ethos, pathos,* and *logos*) (53-54).

Since, according to Hymes, it's not possible for all components to occur simultaneously or in any given case, only a few of the sixteen components listed above were especially relevant to this study--namely, message content, message form, setting, scene, participants, purpose--outcome (or ends), key, and forms of speech (53-62). Although the terms for some of these components are self-explanatory, it may help to make a comment or two about them. *Message form* and *Message content* are standard analytical tools in literary criticism but are used in this case for a detailed analysis of speech. Obviously, these components, above all others, were essential for describing students' uses of BEV.

*Setting* refers to the time and place of a speech act, while *Scene* refers to the "psychological setting," to the cultural definition of an
occasion as a certain type of scene such as festive or solemn (55). These components were useful ways of illuminating the function of context in language use. *Participants* is a general descriptive term that, unlike the standard speaker-audience dyad, accounts for a variety of social roles played by the participants in a speech event. Ronald Wardhaugh gives the classroom situation as one such example. He explains that

> In a classroom a teacher's question and a student's response involve not just those two as speaker and listener but also the rest of the class as audience, since they too are expected to benefit from the exchange. (239)

The many class and tutoring sessions I observed often reflected this kind of triadic or multi-dimensional model of conversational relationships. Thus, *participants* should include components 5-8 in Hymes's list.

*Purpose--outcome* (or *Ends*) and *Key* were of minor importance to this study. The former refers to conventionally recognized and expected outcomes of speech events, whereas the latter refers to the tone, manner, or spirit in which an act is done such as mock, serious, or perfunctory. These components become significant when the content of a speech act (e.g., metaphorical signifying) contradicts its tone or outcome. *Forms of speech*, in Hymes's view, suggests "organizations of linguistic means at the scale of languages, dialects, and widely used varieties" (59). With regard
to this study, forms of speech generally refers to the dialects of standard English and black English vernacular but particularly to the forms of discourse or discourse practices in standard and vernacular varieties. In Bizzell and Herzberg's schema, these forms are termed "speech genres," and thus would be closely associated to Hymes's genres.

Writing Samples

The writing samples were analyzed to provide a description of the ways in which BEV influences students' academic writing (research question 3). For this analysis, I primarily relied on the literacy research of Heath and the composition research of Cooper, Linn, and Ball. Heath's work provides a comparative model comprising the social functions and uses of literacy in particular communities. Cooper, Linn, and Ball's research, on the other hand, provides illustrative examples of specific vernacular discourse features in student writing. Smitherman's and Gates's explications of the uses of vernacular forms of discourse in works of African American literature were additional resources for the analysis and interpretation of such uses in student writing.

Fieldnotes and Ethnographic Interviews

The fieldnotes and ethnographic interviews generally were analyzed to discover cultural patterns, patterns, that is, in
students' ways of speaking, writing, and behaving in particular social situations. Whenever applicable, I specifically used Spradley's four types of ethnomethod analysis: domain, taxonomic, compoential, and theme. Domain analysis refers to a discovery of the parts of cultural meaning. Taxonomic analysis involves a search for the way cultural domains are organized. Compoential analysis involves a search for the attributes of terms in each domain, while theme analysis involves a search for the relationships among domains and for how domains are linked to the cultural scene as a whole (87-88). The goal of these analyses was to move from descriptions of linguistic behavior to discover the cultural meaning of such behavior.

Language and Rhetoric

A final analysis of the data was performed to explore the relationship between language and rhetoric. If, as proponents of Afrocentrism suggest, an Afrocentric concept of rhetoric has language (i.e., the power of the spoken word) as its focal point, then hypotheses or theories of African American rhetoric should take into account the various discursive functions of BEV. Molefi Asante emphatically stresses this point when he writes

To understand the nature of African American communication means that one must understand that nommo continues to permeate our existence. This is not to say that all or even most of us, given the situation, can immediately identify the transforming power of vocal
expression. It is apparent when a person says, "Man, that cat can rap." Or one can identify it through the words of the sister leaving a Baptist church, "I didn't understand all those words the preacher was using, but they sure sounded good." Inasmuch as the *nemno* experience can be found in many aspects of African American life, one can almost think of it as a way of life. Therefore, the scholar, rhetorician, or historian who undertakes an analysis of the black past without recognizing the significance of vocal expression as a transforming agent is treading on intellectual quicksand. (85-86)

To explore the connections between language and rhetoric in the African American tradition, I relied on the work of several scholars, namely Smitherman, Asante, Gates, and Baker. Smitherman and Asante's understanding of *nemno* as an underlying principle of discourse alongside Gates and Baker's theoretical insights on black vernacular forms of discourse provided a critical resource for exploring the connections between language and rhetoric. Ultimately, however, it is my own perspective that comes through in the exploration of these connections. It is the perspective of one whose identity is, at times, on the margins of both black vernacular and academic discourse communities, language being the ostensible marker of community identity. For my informants, for instance, pronouncing "ask," "ax" (the BEV phonological form) and making bawdy innuendos constitutes membership in their community.
Membership in the university community, on the other hand, generally proscribes the use of such forms in favor of oral language forms that resemble standard written discourse. To get a sense of the nature of my informants' membership in the one community (BEV) and their entree into the other (SAE), in the next chapter, I describe their home communities and their university English classes.
CHAPTER IV

FROM INNER-CITY HOOD TO THE HALLS OF ACADEME: AFRICAN AMERICAN STUDENTS IN TRANSITION

I am a black college student [ro)m the ghetto who in all his life has seen people have their life messed up because of where they came from, their ethnicity, low self-esteem, and the powers brought upon them by the "system". These are just some more reasons why I know it is essential that I have an education and why I call this land AMERIKKA.

--Patrick "Dr. Dre" Ellis, Psychology 120

Gary Carter I am happy to tell you have been accepted to Ohio State University, I received this letter on January 22, 1991, I realize that I would have to save up on my money... When I first got my job I would get my checks and just buy clothes, or go out and party with friends, that all stopped in January well at the end of January, I had to save my money because I was going to college, and I had to prove to myself that I can make it out there in college.

--Gary "Kool" Carter, English 052A

Since language use is by necessity interwoven with actual lives and personalities, in this chapter I describe insofar as I can the five student informants, who they are and the communities that, at least in part, made them who they are. In addition, I provide a descriptive account of the university community as the students may have encountered it through their English classes. The circumstances of their communities and the expectations of the university make for these students a remarkable transition.
From the Hood...

All of the informants in this study grew up facing similar social circumstances, circumstances that almost certainly paint a composite portrait of adolescents bereft of things often taken for granted in middle class communities--such as peace, security, wealth, and power. However these items may have existed or been fostered within the nucleus of the students' families (e.g., in Paul Collins's family), the less hopeful world of their immediate environs was there to challenge, if not thwart, them. And though it's doubtful that any junior high or high school in the proximity of such environs was an utter failure in educating its students, for many of these students school was a part of that challenge--was at times more an obstacle to be circumvented than a clearly demarcated path upon which to tread. That they have survived and are currently making in-roads in a new and foreign environment is testimony to their individual conviction and fortitude.

Patrick--a.k.a. Dr. Dre

One of the most accessible students taking part in this study was a nineteen-year-old named Patrick Ellis. Because Patrick resembles Dr. Dre, co-host of 'Yo! MTV Raps, and because he does, on occasion, write raps, I've nicknamed him Dr. Dre. His wearing of a necklace representing the symbolic red, green, and black colors of Africa and his interest in Black Watch, an Ohio State
student publication promoting pan-Africanism, also reinforces the
hip-hop cultural image. Although Patrick sometimes failed to
make appointments or return telephone messages, he provided me
with a substantial amount of oral and written data. I committed
myself to soliciting Patrick's participation in the study only after
he was pointed out to me by his teacher, a middle-aged Caucasian
woman whom I've given the pseudonym Wanda Mitchell. Ms.
Mitchell thought that I might be interested in studying Patrick
because he had written about his experience with drugs and gangs
in the face of his parents' strong values for education. She also
thought Patrick would be a good person to study because of his
occasional use of street language in class.

Having questioned Patrick about his background, I verified the
information his teacher reported to me. Indeed, he had for a short
period of time dealt in the drug business, earning large sums of
money that he would sometimes dole out to his sister. Patrick's
parents were not aware of his involvement in such affairs, though
it's hard to imagine their not being suspicious of his increasing
self-sufficiency, especially given how strict he says that his father
was. Patrick's involvement with gangs was equally short-lived,
having broken off initiation when he heard that a close friend of
his was killed during a car jacking. In one of his essays Patrick
tells the story as follows. (Excerpts from students' text were typed
as they appear in the original unless otherwise indicated by
brackets.):
To get into the folks you have to either take six blows to the head, six hundred to the chest, or go one on one with three others. After that then you have to learn your literature and how to stack (throwing up gang signs). I learned all the lit first and the next day was going to take the ass beating. later that night while at work I got a call from one of my scoolmates saying that my friend Reggie King had gotten killed. He had got shot in the head, while someone was trying to take his mothers car. He had gotten jacked for his life and the fact that he was a future member of the folks, and was selling drugs.

The last sentence of the essay expresses Patrick's change of heart:

The lost of a good friend, the pride of my culture and way my family and friends felt toward gangs, helped my decision to not join a gang and to be a better man by going to college for me and my people as a whole in the ghetto of East Manville.

Clearly, the environment that Patrick grew up in posed a threat to mainstream values represented by school. With high unemployment and the modest aspirations (at best) of its residents, Patrick's neighborhood, in his parents' eyes, was a counteractive force to the kind of values they instilled in their children. According to Patrick, it was so much a force that his parents struggled to send him and his sister to private schools outside of the neighborhood. The first semester of his freshmen year (i.e., ninth grade), Patrick was bused to St. John's high school, a private school for boys located in an predominately white neighborhood. Though most of the students who attended the
school were from the neighborhood of St. John's, a fair number of black students were bused in from various parts of the city. Thus, Patrick estimates that of the five to seven hundred students the school enrolled 60% were white and 40% were black.

In spite of this rather large number of black students, however, not as many went on to graduate from St. John's. Patrick speculates that some the black students leave or get kicked out, because he recalls that there were forty of them in his freshmen class but only 25 in his graduating class. He believes that the major reason for the students' departure was the high tuition. Apparently, the school community had little reservation about consistently raising student tuition, for Patrick claims that it cost him $1700 his first year and $2500 his senior year.

But, in all likelihood, there were other reasons for black student drop-out at St. John's, namely the students' adjustment to the school's social environment. At least this is what caused Patrick to leave the school after his first semester. Because he only knew two or three other students at this school, Patrick says that he made friends by "acting silly" and "showing off" in class. During the interview, Patrick didn't give a lot of detail about his behavior, but in his autobiographical essay he wrote that he would "rank on others, tell jokes and act a fool for them to accept me." His approach was to make the other students laugh, winning their approval and acceptance through playful behavior. This frivolous behavior, however, had its drawbacks. Since, as the veritable class
clown, Patrick subjected himself to the whims of his pleasure-seeking classmates, he often neglected his classwork. Naturally, this neglect resulted in Patrick's receiving poor grades that first semester, although he didn't say exactly what grades he earned. The Ellises saw Patrick's poor performance as a waste of their hard-earned money, so they transferred him from St. John's to Wash High (Washington Senior High School), a public school in Patrick's neighborhood.

Wash High is the only public high school on the east side of Manville. Compared to St. John's, Wash High is enormous, enrolling as many as 3,000 - 4,000 students. The area surrounding the school being more than 90% African American, Wash High is predominately African American and, according to Patrick, "real run down." By "run down" Patrick meant that the mentality of teachers and students was one of hopelessness, was a conditioned belief that students who went there were bound, just like almost everyone else, to be on the "streets and stuff." According to Patrick's report, it seems that a kind of indifference pervaded the school and the classes at Wash High. Teachers gave students little individual attention and, given the class sizes, rarely took attendance. The large number of students along with the physical size of the school prompted Patrick to compare it to a jail. However, the physical size of the school wasn't the problem; not unlike many of America's inner-city schools (see Kozol), the real
and much more pressing problems were insufficient teachers and inadequate financial resources.

Ironically, however, the transfer to Wash High enabled Patrick to improve academically. He claims to have earned a 4.0 in his first semester at Wash. When asked how he was able to do so well at Wash and not at St. John's, he explained that since he already knew many of the other students he didn't need to act silly to win friends. Instead, he was able to take on a more serious attitude, especially since he had felt guilty about disappointing his mother and wasting his parents' money the previous semester at St. John's.

Because of this change in attitude and performance, Patrick's parents allowed him to return to St. John's the following semester. Though, like other students, he could still have made it to Ohio State by graduating from Wash High, he felt that St. John's was better for him. Thus, he returned to St. John's with the same determination to succeed that drove him at Wash. He didn't, however, earn quite as high a grade point average, obtaining about a 2.9 or 3.0. Patrick's return also was not without incidence. His peers expected him to behave as he had before, so he literally had to fight to avoid indulging in his old habits. In his essay, he writes

Kids at John's thought that I was crazy and thought I thought I was the best thing in the world and that I was trying to dawg everybody. This brought me into a lot of fights, like one time this guy name Steven was telling me a joke and I told him to get the fuck away from me. He got mad and
called me a bitch, he swung at me and then we got into it. I never got kicked out though because my grades were up to par. People wanted me to get silly and get the class hyped up, but I would just shun them off and just take care of my own business (doing my class work and working at my job).

Over time, Patrick learned to balance serious and playful dispositions appropriately—thus mitigating against potential problems with classmates. Yet, he hadn't quite learned to resist peer pressure and to keep his focus on succeeding in school, for in his junior year at St. John's he claims to have skipped classes, as I mentioned earlier, to "run" drugs for his friends. Earning as much as five hundred dollars and upwards for runs was exceedingly tempting and, according to Patrick, "felt good," so much so that prosperity through schooling seemed to him like the greatest farce. Consequently, during the second term of his junior year, Patrick received "all D's and one F."

Judging from Patrick's less than consistent academic performance in high school, one might reason that it was solely because of drug activity that he was placed in Ohio State's at-risk program. On the contrary, however, (that is, if all that Patrick says is true) St. John's surprisingly non-rigorous curriculum ill-equipped him for academic reading and writing. Be it general classes or college prep, Patrick reports that he mainly watched movies, read poems, and learned vocabulary words. And, ironically, while students at Wash High actually read Shakespeare's MacBeth, Patrick's college prep English class instead
watched a movie about it. Even more ironic is his claim that many of the students who graduated from St. John's ended up, like he did, in an 052 course. Perhaps regardless of relative opulence, in the end, the worth of a high school is determined by how well it prepares one for college.

**Gary--a.k.a. Kool**

A second student who took part in the study is Gary Carter. Since an English 052A classmate of Gary's has referred to him as "kool" ("or cool"), I use it as a nickname to suggest something of his disposition and attitude toward life. Gary's not an easily excitable person; he takes life pretty nonchalantly and keeps everything under control. Towards his friends, like Terry and Darren, he tends to assume the role of someone mature and wise. In fact, his teacher and I discussed his possibly being a responsible adult figure in Terry's life at that particular time.

Like Patrick, Gary is nineteen years of age and from east Manville. Gary's description of his neighborhood also closely resembles Patrick's, only he considered it strictly lower class, not a mixture of middle and lower classes as Patrick did. Yet, Gary explains that his neighborhood wasn't lower class in the sense of being a series of housing projects, at least not where he lived, which was a two story house that his family had owned for three years. Drug pushing, gangs, and what Gary calls "crack kids," proliferated the area, so much so that it sparked his mother to
become a community activist to rescue the neighborhood. As community president, she successfully fought to close down drug houses and keep drug pushers off of the streets. Gary (as well as, of course, other members of the community) helped her in this endeavor, a small indication of their strong bond.

Patrick also had a close relationship with his mother, but since Gary's father and mother separated when he was three years old he depended on his mother somewhat more than Patrick did his. The whole story of his parents' relationship (or relationships) is somewhat murky to me, but it seems that Gary may have been born out of wedlock because he said that his mother gave birth to him at age seventeen and, at the time, lived with his grandmother.19 Once his mother had broken up with his father, some two years later she began seeing another man--one who would after another three years also give her a son. Gary had turned eight by this time and was, in his own words, "jealous about having a new baby around the house." And since the house that Gary lived in during his high school years was shared by his mother and his aunt, one can infer that there existed little in the

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19 My uncertainty about this matter reflects an ethical decision I made in the data collection process. Since my focus in this study was on language use, I didn't want to delve too deeply into the personal affairs of my informants. While, in Gary's case, key aspects of his background did come through in the interview, other aspects are sketchy depending on the amount of information he volunteered at the time. I mention the estranged relationship between Gary's mother and father only to highlight his strong ties to his mother--an individual who, as we'll see in the following chapters, plays a key role in his written narratives.
way of a father figure to offset the attention that Gary's mother had to devote to the baby. This is not to say, however, that Gary's father was neglectful of him, for he did bring Gary out to his home on the west coast and did give him money for major expenses like a car. On a daily basis, however, the two boys must have competed for the one parent's attention. Accordingly, Gary wrote in one of his essays a rather humorous anecdote about the arrival of the new baby:

And then I used to get everything cause I was spoiled until my brother came along. Because I remember my mother asked me do I want another brother. I had this robot I used to sleep with, my buddy. I used to sleep with him, everything. I used to beat up on him. It was like do you want another brother. I was like yeah. And the next thing you know and stuff she comes home with a baby. And you know I got spoiled and I didn't like him.

As for school, Gary, like Patrick, was voluntarily bused to a high school outside of his neighborhood—that is, one on the west side of town, a racially mixed area comprising Puerto Ricans as well as blacks and whites. Gary’s reasons for opting to be bused resemble Patrick’s. Because all the black kids went to one school on the east side, Gary states that there would be fights all the time. Confrontation over clothes, grades, or money were customary. And even though Gary's school, Marcus Jameson, was also predominantly black (95%) and had gang fights, he says that it wasn't as fearsome as public schools on the east side. Without any
explanation as to why schools in the two areas differed, Gary simply but confidently says "it was like we got along." Given Gary and Patrick's descriptions of life on the east side (including, in particular, the fact that they both were, at some point, propositioned for the drug business there), one might conclude that the difference had to do with the environment surrounding the schools as much as it had to do with the schools themselves or the students who attended them. Still, without a description of social life on the west side, any explanation is at best tentative.

Gary actually liked Jameson very much because he knew everyone there. A group of these people, however, were not the best influence on him, for they frequently skipped classes, fought, and did other things that caused them to fall behind in their school work. Apparently, it was during this time (Gary's tenth grade year) that drugs began to hold sway with some students at Jameson. Gary writes about this event as follows:

The following year drugs started to be a big issue from selling it, doing it, and I had no part in either if I wanted money I would call up my father, or go to my mother, but that school year was hard for me I had to stand up on my on two feet, continously my friends would cut school to go sell crack to make some money, but after that they had to buy some more to make a bigger profit to sell more by standing out on the corner, or selling it from some house made no sense to me, so I figured it would be nice to make my on money so I got a job at this country club which turned out to be a nice move for me, . . . .
As far as English is concerned, Gary's performance was fairly consistent. He reports that after the failing grade he received in seventh grade, he raised his average to a B and continued to do well throughout junior high school. In high school, though, he maintained a C average in English, except that in eleventh grade he averaged a B. The level of Gary's performance seems to have depended most notably on the help he received from teachers. While the same teacher taught him eleventh and twelfth grade English, she rendered more help to him in the former and, as a result, noticeably affected his performance.

It isn't exactly clear what kind of work Gary did or how his teacher helped him, but he does mention that during that time he began to associate with a new group of friends. He remarks,

And they, like, in a way motivated me because, like, yeah, got to start getting ready for college. I was, like, what's going to happen to me after I graduate. I can't work at the same country club makin', you know, five dollars an hour. That's nothin'. You know I just got to do what I got to do. Go for it.

When asked more specifically what he did, Gary said that he started going to school every day, to do his work, pass more of his exams, and get along with teachers. And while, on the one hand, Gary was motivated to go to college, on the other hand, he was also motivated not to remain at home after graduating from high school. In words amusingly (but also painfully) reminiscent of my
mother's words to me during those high school years, Gary's mother and aunt would exclaim:

She used to say get out here man, getting on my nerves. You're not going to be depending on me all your life. I'll be depending on you because I raised you. Started going off. She would say I love you but you got to get the hell out of here. When I walk that aisle and get that diploma my mother just be like ahhhh, cheering and stuff. Ah man! Her and my aunt. They go crazy.

The source of this way of thinking is difficult to trace. It could be part of the tradition of African American southern culture or a black inner-city, single-parent thang. But this concept of dependence (child on mother), independence (child making it on his or her own), and, because of having given birth and having raised the child, reversed dependence (mother on child) is surely an important factor in Gary's upbringing. In fact, as I hope to show later, it may reveal alternative forms of discourse that play a part in Gary's overall language use.

In contrast to Gary's report of his eleventh grade English class, twelfth grade English was "like a laid back class"--a class in which he wasn't pressured to work hard or do better than average. Much of the work in the class was performed orally through discussion and debate because the teacher "liked people to talk." According to Gary, the only required written assignments were a research paper and readings out of something he called an "English
book," which I suspect was a collection of works of literature. The class read *Macbeth* and other Shakespearean dramas like *King Henry VIII*, along with some poems, but never, it seems, were asked to write essays or journals about what they read.

It's difficult to say just how much of an effect Gary's "laid back" twelfth grade English class had on his placement in English 052A. Certainly, additional writing assignments during his last year of high school wouldn't have hurt his preparation for (and transition to) college English. But even though Marcus Jameson was a "better" school than those on the east side of Manville, Gary's four years there didn't prove to be altogether profitable. That is, much like Patrick, Gary was encumbered by groups of peers who had little interest in succeeding in school or who had affairs that they considered more valuable than school. As he tells his story, Gary had to find the strength within himself to resist these influences because the benefits were not without risks (e.g., jail or death in the case of drug trafficking; flunking out of school in the case of skipping classes). Thus, Gary's placement in English 052A likely involved a great many factors that aren't revealed in the essay and the standardized test score that placed him in the course.

**The Student Athletes**

One of the most noticeable differences between these two students and the other three who took part in the study is the substantial role athletics played in the lives of the latter. Although
Gary wrestled and tried out (albeit unsuccessfully) for the baseball team in high school and Patrick played football, for Jimmy Graves, Paul Collins, and Demetrius Roberts sports was a major part of their lives in and out of school. Indeed, because Paul participated in three different sports (football, basketball, and track) during high school, he admits to not having time for any of the trouble that Patrick (albeit temporarily) took part in.

But while being active in sports at times preserved these young men from potential danger, it also at times displaced the reason for their being in school; that is, it sometimes interfered with their successful academic performance. While I need not delve into the history behind the National Collegiate Athletic Association (NCAA) ruling on academic performance of athletes, it is important to note that America’s academic institutions have made it clear, and painfully so for some athletes, that students' excellence as athletes isn't enough to get them through the system. That is, while these students must be good athletes (i.e., in order to earn athletic scholarships and play college sports), they must first be, at least, moderately good students before they can even step out onto a basketball court or football field for practice. Demetrius was just such a case. Because he didn't score high enough on the Scholastic Aptitude Test (SAT), he was prohibited from playing basketball at Ohio State the year after he graduated from high school. Fortunately for him, he was able to enroll in a college preparatory school that better prepared him for the exam the following year.
Paul--the head hunter

I call Paul "the head hunter" because several times during the football season he managed to get a concussion from hitting a teammate too hard during practice. His quiet demeanor yet aggressive style of play suggest that he is a man of few words but, at least when necessary, much action. Born November, 1971 in Boyztown, Ohio, Paul is one of five children in a family of all boys. His parents are so well known and respected in their community that, according to Paul, their reputation alone keeps crime and drugs out of their immediate neighborhood. Still, his parents have little control over how crime and drugs might affect activity just two blocks away. At Paul's senior high school (Davis High), for instance, drug dealers have such influence that many students didn't take classes seriously but instead "acted a fool" in class. Disturbed by this inappropriate behavior, teachers did little more than attempt to keep students in check. Indeed, according to Paul, teachers didn't really even think that the students at Davis could learn anything worthy of their time to teach. This may be a bit of an exaggeration if applied to every teacher in every class at Davis. Yet, the crucial point is that in Paul's view there wasn't, on the whole, a classroom environment conducive to teaching and learning.

Davis is a predominantly African American public, but small, senior high school. Unlike Wash High, Davis enrolls only about five hundred students in grades nine through twelve. The school is
not financially well-to-do because, according to Paul, it offered little or no coursework in calculus, trigonometry, and physics. The neighborhood of the school is located on the north side of Boyztown, a midwestern city with African Americans occupying much of its eastern, southern, and northern areas.

With the exception of his tenth grade year, Paul claims that he didn't do much reading and writing. Students were assigned a number of books to read but weren't very interested in reading literature from the Middle Ages or some other remote time period. As a result, Paul says that many of the students just sat in class and "acted a fool." I, unfortunately, didn't learn from Paul why tenth grade was so much more rigorous than other grades, but however rigorous it was, he didn't think that it helped him improve his writing. The class worked on the standard composition components--grammar, paragraphs, and essays--but because of the lack of serious commitment on the part of both teachers and students such assignments were virtually ineffective.

Still, for Paul, tenth grade was the most productive of his high school years. During this time, one dedicated teacher helped him with reading and writing in preparation for the SAT. Although he took the exam twice, he attributes his passing the exam and his tenth grade classes to the assistance of this teacher. It isn't precisely clear how Paul fared in his last two years of high school, but he reported having two reading problems when, at nineteen
years of age, he entered the Academic Support Program at Ohio State:

I have 2 problems with reading. When I read words gets mixed up, also I fall asleep after a short period. About 5 minutes after reading.

The director of ASP, Ms. Diana Milton, suspected that Paul might have a learning disability, that he might suffer from dyslexia (which seemed to be a valid diagnosis for many athletes that year), but since Paul neglected to obtain the required parental permission, he was never tested. In tutoring him, I can't assuredly confirm this diagnosis, but, like the coordinator of Athletics' academic affairs, Mr. Robert Larson, I do believe with some certainty that Paul has had insufficient experience with reading. Had he been given reading material that intersected with his interests, he might have been inspired to read more. For instance, Maya Angelou's descriptive account of Joe Louis's championship bout strongly interested him and, I believe as a result, made the act of reading for him far less arduous than usual. For a student so engaged in sports as Paul obviously was, some narrative or expository reading material on the subject might have been the spark he needed to become an avid, or at least improved, prose reader and writer.
Jimmy--a.k.a. Little Malcolm

Unlike the very reticent demeanor Paul portrays, Jimmy Graves rarely denies himself the occasion to speak. For his outspokenness on issues of race and politics, he is referred to as Little Malcolm X by football teammates. Although Jimmy is not a member of the Nation of Islam, the black Muslim religion that Malcolm X was once a part of, he subscribes to many of the Nation's teachings, as evidenced not only by his discussions with me on the subject (see chapter five) but also his bold-faced denial of previously assumed facts. For instance, when a statement about the ancient Egyptians being Caucasoid came up in a class discussion of Catcher in the Rye, Jimmy, informed by the recent counterevidence, flatly disputed the claim.

One of the reasons I chose Jimmy for the study, in fact, was because of his general garrulousness, especially his seeming ease at shifting from academic and vernacular discourse styles. In spite of this stylistic fluency, like Paul, Jimmy was also suspected of dyslexia, at least he suspected himself of being dyslexic when it came to reading. I don't think that Jimmy was ever tested for a learning disability, but he complained to his 052A instructor that he had a difficult time comprehending what he read. When asked about his reading experience in high school, Jimmy indicated that he had never read an entire book, as he was required to do in 052A. While outside of school he had read what might be considered an Afrocentric book that his brother had given him, he
didn't read as much in school--testimony again, perhaps, to the importance of assigning students readings that are relevant to their interests and experience.

At the time of my interview, Jimmy had just turned twenty. Born January, 1972 in a moderately sized city in the Great Lakes region, he moved around quite often throughout his primary and secondary school years. As far as it can be ascertained, Jimmy's frequent migrations were due to his parents' divorce and his preference for a particular environment. He reports that he spent much of his early years with his grandmother and cousins in another, even smaller city in the state. But by the age of thirteen, he moved to a much larger city on the west coast, spent half a year there with his mom (who, I believe, at this point, if not earlier, was divorced from his father) before moving back to the Great Lakes region to live with his father. Shortly after this time, at the age of fourteen, Jimmy returned to his mom on the west coast and remained there until he graduated from high school and came to Ohio State. All of his siblings--a sister, two half-sisters, and two brothers--had preceded him in the settlement on the west coast, since for him the adjustment from a small to a large city was more gradual. Referring to the smaller city where he once lived, Jimmy explains that "Basically everybody like really knew each other. So it's like this whole big city is like, kind of like one big family."

Since after having settled out on the west coast Jimmy continued to live a life in transit, it's somewhat difficult to
characterize the kind of community and school that took part in shaping him. His first semester of high school (i.e., ninth grade) took place at Elkins where, he says, he was first placed into honors classes and, as a result, was encouraged to excel until he began to have family problems. It happened that around this time Jimmy's mother remarried, and to let her new husband know that he wasn't going to replace his father, Jimmy rebelled by not doing his schoolwork.

Precisely how Jimmy's mother handled this situation wasn't revealed in the interview; however, judging from what he writes in one of his 052A essays, it could have been at this time, or shortly afterwards, that Jimmy's mother sent him to live with his aunt and cousin in a town called Safehaven--for it was after this change in locale that he claims to have begun a new life from what he calls his "Rebel's Past." Actually, the reason for his being sent to his Aunt's had more to do with affairs outside of Jimmy's family. Some time between the ages of sixteen and seventeen Jimmy had gotten involved in a gun fight, whereby his life was threatened and he, in response, attempted to "maim" the person doing the threatening. Thus, he transferred from Delmar, the senior high school he was supposed to attend, and enrolled in Safehaven High.

Apparently, Jimmy only spent a semester at Safehaven before homesickness drove him back home to Splitsville and Delmar High. As far as I can tell, it must have been during the second half of his
tenth grade year that he entered Delmar. Delmar was a predominantly Mexican school which was located about five minutes away from where Jimmy lived. The community surrounding the school was predominantly African American and Mexican and was a fairly wholesome one until Jimmy's junior and senior years when rampant violence began to break out. During Jimmy's junior year, in fact, seventeen students from Delmar's senior class were killed in gang-related violence. Although his mom moved out of the neighborhood, Jimmy continued to attend school there.

Jimmy had actually been recruited to play football by another high school--one that was roughly in the same area but less safe than Delmar--but his mother refused to let him enroll. When Jimmy finally began school at Delmar, he reports that he was initially disappointed by it, especially the school's football and track programs, the latter of which he had really excelled in in ninth grade. Yet, in time, Jimmy settled in at Delmar and spent the rest of his high school years there. He relates the experience in this way:

I had my problems at first. I've always been outspoken, sort of like the little rebel, a rebel fire cracker just with a short wick. And every time somebody, you know, I was ready to go off. I learned just like, you know, just like you shut up and just sit there and be quiet and don't say nothing like you know when I get upset. Instead of saying something I didn't want to say.
This change in attitude and behavior led to a corresponding improvement in academic performance during Jimmy's tenth and eleventh grade years. Specifically, he reports that in English he earned a B+ and was told by his teacher that she enjoyed his writings. Yet, he admits, he never took writing seriously because he, for whatever reason, didn't consider himself a good writer. As it turned out, his beliefs were confirmed by his twelfth grade teacher. She, in his words, "didn't like any of my writing at all" and, thus, was a "difficult" teacher to learn from. When questioned more pointedly about his teacher's evaluation of his writing, Jimmy explained that he was told his grammar and general use of language were not good. He reasoned further that, because he had been mentally set back in his earlier school years (due to the change in schools and his own lack of effort), he possessed a "condensed vocabulary."

Oddly enough, though, it was in Jimmy's twelfth grade year that he gained the most extensive experience with writing. During the second semester of his senior year he was enrolled in a "comprehensive" English class in which students were assigned to write from six to ten essays. These essays included personal experience narratives, literary analyses, research writing, and at least three of the persuasive type. With so much in the way of available opportunities for writing in his senior year, one can only guess that, as with Paul, Jimmy's difficulty with improving his writing had more to do with the disposition of the teacher than the
inadequacies of the student. Still, he entered Ohio State with an academic placement in English 110W, an accelerated basic writing course that also counts as credit for the first-year writing requirement. Having written a second placement essay that was evaluated by two readers and having been recommended to ASP by athletic counselors, Jimmy, however, instead enrolled in 052A.

**Demetrius--Dominator of the Boards**

Of all my student informants, I was able to discover the least about Demetrius Roberts. When I first approached him about participating in the study, he seemed eager to assist me, but as time passed he seemed to be surprisingly less cooperative. At times, I even thought that I had said or done something to turn him against me. Having discussed my concern with his 052A instructor, I concluded that part of his change in attitude had to do with the pressures of the current basketball season. After all, it was his first year to play for OSU and, having graduated some key players the previous year, the team lost some games that they were not expected to. I suspect that some of these losses were something of a blow to Demetrius's pride. Demetrius tended to take the success of the team seriously, and he did his part primarily in the area of rebounding, thus the nickname, "dominator of the boards."

I also learned that up until his father died when he was in the eighth grade, Demetrius lived happily with both his parents, two
brothers, and one sister in a rather small town in the southwest. The town, called here Homestead, actually consisted of some 30,000 residents--60% black and 40% white. Demetrius characterizes Homestead as a decent city but "kind of in the country." The high school Demetrius attended roughly reflected the racial makeup of the city. There were predominantly black and predominantly white neighborhoods in the district where the high school was located, but Demetrius reports no major racial conflicts since he had black and white friends whom he mingled with in both areas. Demetrius didn't describe the overall quality of Homestead High but he commented that, although reading and writing weren't always emphasized, he had good teachers who helped him to understand class material. Perhaps, then, it was a lack in the volume, not the quality of reading and writing done in high school that contributed to Demetrius's failure of the SAT.

One of the most important events in Demetrius's life was the death of his father. In fact, in one of his essays (though he doesn't explain how his father died), Demetrius discussed how much the loss of his father devastated him. Since his father spent much of his spare time and money attending to him, Demetrius missed the close relationship they shared. For a time, the effect of the loss was strictly negative:

After my father's death my attitude and behavior got worse. I always felt I was right and if someone argued with me they were automatically my enemy. This way of thinking
came from my father. He taught us not to argue with him because he knew what he was talking about so I got that type of attitude from him. My mother would tell me something and my response was "yeah, right". My behavior toward my friends was much worse because their fathers were alive and they would always talk about them. It seemed like they wanted to make me angry by talking about their fathers when they knew my father was gone. I felt I always had to do something bad to relax and I never had time for my family. I [was] so angry one day I hit a guy in the head with a baseball and blamed someone else, because I loved being devilish.

Through his mother's persistence and the memory of what his father expected of him, Demetrius let go of his anger and "always tried to do the right thing." The young boy who depended so much on his father was now prepared to realize the responsibilities required of a young man. In the fall of 1991, this young man (by then almost twenty) entered Ohio State, having been placed by three test evaluators into English 110W. In spite of this placement, I suspect that, like Jimmy, Demetrius was recommended to 052A by the athletic department because they felt he might benefit from the overall academic program.

. . . To the "Hallowed" Halls

In so far as possible, in this chapter, I try to capture language use as it is embedded in its social context, that is, in the various settings I've identified. For this reason, before I begin my
description of vernacular discourse practices, I wish to describe the physical settings and the social dynamics of these settings. In all, I hope that such an approach reflects more fully the complex nexus between language and social context.

1 year, 5 months & 5 Days in the Life of . . .

This section covers one academic year, that is, five months and five days per week in the academic life of my informants. The title is modeled after rap group Arrested Development's album 3 years, 5 months & 2 Days in the Life of . . . to suggest a significant moment in the history of my informants. Specifically, this moment of history involves informants' in-class time, the most substantial part of their college life.

Since I had tutored in ASP the year before, it came as no surprise to me that the classes I was to observe for this study were quite different from most university classes. Besides the fact that students in ASP, a block program, were sometimes in classes together the whole day, few classes outside the program compared to its enrollment of large numbers of African American students in a single class. Certainly, first-year writing courses were typically devoid of many African American students. The largest number I had when I taught such a course was three. But even that number seemed to make little difference in class dynamics, since with a class of some twenty-three or twenty-four Caucasian students the three African Americans were overwhelmingly outnumbered.
Demetrius and Patrick's ASP English class presents a stark contrast to the typical English 110 scenario. On my first visit to their class on September 30, 1991, out of a total of fifteen students ten were African American—seven male and three female. The remaining five students consisted of one Hispanic male, three Caucasian males, and one Caucasian female. Given the collaborative nature of the class, seating arrangements often varied, but figure 1 shows how students were seated on this particular day. (Students are identified by race, gender, and, occasionally, by name. Thus, for example, "bm" represents black male, "wf" equals white female, and so forth. "T" represents the teacher and "Tu" stands for me, the tutor. These symbols are used consistently throughout this chapter.)

This early on in the quarter students hadn't yet become well acquainted enough to sit near a particular classmate, but even by this time a group of black males and females had begun to form in the center of the classroom. This group socialized consistently throughout this quarter and the next. The group's primary members were Patrick, Freda, Denise, Roger, and Monica. Occasionally, when he wasn't absent or late, Dante, a track student, would join in on their conversation. Over time, as figure 3 illustrates, other social groups formed. For instance, except for
Figure 2: Configuration of Wanda Mitchell's English 052A class on September 30, 1991.

Figure 3: Configuration of Wanda Mitchell's English 052A class on a typical day.
Dante, all of the athletes formed one group, while two of the white male students formed another.

The classroom was furnished with movable desks, which made it convenient to form peer-responding or full-circle discussion groups. Desks weren't often, it seemed, arranged in rows for any class period, so that the room as a whole had more the appearance of chaos and flux rather than order and conformity. What may have also contributed to this appearance of flux was the less than formal furnishings available for the teacher: a kind of picnic table which functioned as a desk; a chair that resembled the student desks only without desktop or arms; and a lectern that was scarcely ever used, at least not by Ms. Mitchell. Of course, there was the traditional blackboard, one located behind the teacher's desk and another fixed on the diagonally constructed wall (see figure 1). Three or four large windows spread along much of the west wall, overlooking the building's shipping dock and, at a distance of some sixty or seventy yards, the Ohio stadium. The classroom occupies the southwest corner of a modern brick building called Central Classrooms. The building houses the university bookstore, computer store, and convenience store on its ground floors, while classrooms and computer labs occupy its second and third floors. Ms. Mitchell's classroom was located on the third floor.

That there was a convenience store on the first floor of the building was significant, since it allowed students to purchase
snacks and, depending on the policies of the teacher, eat them in class. Ms. Mitchell and Ms. Kathy Simmons, Jimmy's teacher, were perhaps the most liberally minded about such things. They generally did not prohibit students from eating and socializing among themselves during class time. As we shall see in the next chapter, this kind of liberal atmosphere allowed for a degree of levity often unparalleled in other classroom settings.

Jimmy's class was also located on the third floor of the Central Classrooms building, only on the east side. From the north side elevator and stairwell, it was the second of about four classrooms along that side of the building. One of the more lively class sessions I was able to witness occurred on November 15, 1991. I discuss the linguistic interaction on this occasion in chapter five, but I wish to note here the series of events that led up to and encompassed that exchange. Minutes before the class had begun, I happened to meet up with Gerald, again one of the six black male athletes in the class. We took the elevator up to the classroom and chatted about the agenda for the day's class. Not appearing his usual carefree self, he told me rather indifferently that he didn't know what the class was doing that day. As we approached the classroom, I noticed that Jimmy was exiting, followed by Ms. Simmons. Jimmy said something to me when I saw him, but I wasn't able to catch it. I might have been distracted by implications of his having a private conversation with his teacher. About this time, with Ms. Simmon's permission, Gerald went off to
the computer lab on the west side of the building to print out the
draft of his paper. I, in turn, entered the classroom with this odd
sort of feeling one gets when he or she is out of touch with a
particular course of events.

As I entered the classroom, I observed Ronnie and Randy, also
black male athletes, exchanging walkmans and listening to
whatever music each had on cassette. I had never before seen
Randy interact very much with the other football players, so it
came as a bit of a surprise to me to see him exchanging walkmans
with Ronnie and even more of a surprise to hear him pronounce a
couple of profane words while listening to Ronnie's cassette. I
suspect that both students were listening to rap music tapes, the
significance of which I give some attention to in chapters five and
six. While Randy was listening to the walkman seated in his desk
near the door, Ronnie chose to sit at the teacher's desk as he
swayed back forth listening to music. Though I asked him why he
was sitting there, he didn't give me much of a response. I suppose
that he felt that in Ms. Simmons's absence, he could assume the
designated place of authority. The
other students in the class remained fairly calm conversing among
themselves in various clusters. Millie, a black female who was the

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20 Because the students' time in computer lab didn't yield much oral
language data, I haven't discussed the dynamics of those sessions. It is
important to note, however, that in general students were fascinated by the
macintosh computers, so much so that they were more motivated to revise
their first drafts than they would have been if they had worked solely by
hand.
Figure 4: Kathy Simmons's English 052A class configuration on November 15, 1991.

Figure 5: Kathy Simmons's English 052A class configuration on a typical day.
first to read aloud her paper that day, sat with another black female on the west side of the room. To the right of where I sat, there was a white male and female, Charles and Gail. And Russell, Jimmy, Gerald, all athletes, sat together near the windows on the east side of the room (see figure 4).

Once Ms. Simmons returned Ronnie, of course, took another seat. Actually he, Randy, and Leslie, an African American female, all went out in the hall because they preferred to respond to essay drafts in a small group, in contrast to the majority of students who wanted the entire class to comment orally on drafts. Less these three students, there were nine students present that day, two black females, two white males, two white females, and the four remaining black football players. Enrollment for the class totals fourteen; however, two white females were absent this day. Although, as I've mentioned, seating arrangements tend to vary, students positioned themselves in the circle nearest classmates they had begun to associate with (see figure 5). Jimmy, for instance, when he wasn't being aloof, typically sat with Gerald, his roommate, and with Ronnie. As we'll see in the next chapter, Jimmy and Ronnie's being in close proximity of one another often created playful and/or serious exchanges between them.

As figures 4 and 5 show, the decorum of the classroom differs only slightly from Ms. Mitchell's class. Most notably, this classroom lacks the diagonal wall of the other, thus conforming to the shape of a square. Also of some significance is the placement
of the windows on the east side, for there one could see students relaxing on a nearby sloped lawn or going to and from the Central Classroom building—scenes which were distracting at times.

The social dynamics of Paul's class were very different from the previous two. First, not all of the students were in ASP. Some, though it's unclear exactly how many, were students who had placed into the regular basic writing sequence (052 and 053). Paul and Shawn, another football player, at least were bonafide ASP students. They wound up in the class because their schedules only allowed for English at one o'clock. Second, the total enrollment for the class was smaller than the average. The class began with ten students, but after about the first two weeks one student dropped out, leaving a remainder of nine. Finally, the class differed from others because it was less racially and sexually diverse. Five of the students were white males, two were black males, and the remaining two were a black and a white female.

Except for Shawn and the white male student who dropped the class after about the third week, none of the students were very talkative. Thus, unlike Patrick's class, most of the students had little to say when it came to discussing a story they had read or responding to a classmate's essay. As a case in point, during a class session held on October 29th I recorded the number of conversational turns participants other than Mr. Taylor and Shawn, both of whom dominated the discussion, made. The two female students made absolutely no turns, one of the white male
students, Doug, made about nine turns, two other white male students made three turns each, and finally Paul made one turn at the very beginning of the discussion and another toward the end. Midway through this time, he was preoccupied with, among other things, getting the chewing gum from underneath his shoe. In future class meetings, almost all of the students' work took place in small groups. The one audio-tape-recorded class discussion I have took place in small groups. And it was rare for Mr. Taylor to ask the entire class to respond as a group to one or more student's papers.

As is somewhat evident, Paul was comparatively more reticent than Demetrius, who would on occasion offer a brief comment during class discussion. Paul rarely volunteered a response to a question, and whenever his response was solicited from the teacher he would quite often say that he didn't know. The black female student, Holly, thought that Paul was "slow" because of this, and she often was amused by his responses. I discovered, however, that there were a variety of reasons for Paul's behavior. Sometimes he was unprepared for the day's discussion, and, at other times, he really didn't have anything to say. Still other times, he was inattentive, often because he was exhausted by that time of day. Indeed, especially for the athletes, having English class at one o'clock in the afternoon was a great disadvantage. During the early part of the football season (e.g., September and October), their schedules began with having to arise at five or six
in the morning to attend a football practice session (or if not that, a seven o'clock tutoring session for math). Paul and Shawn would then go through a morning full of classes, have lunch, and finally attend their English class before they loaded the bus for practice again at two o'clock. Often by the time they reached their English class about all Paul and Shawn could muster enough energy to do was to fight off their drowsiness.

On one of the very first days that I sat in on the class, in fact, Shawn had his head down on his desk and Paul sat erect with his back against the wall and eyes shut. They sat next to one another in desks nearest the door, which was on the southwest corner of the room. The actual design of the classroom resembled Ms. Simmons's class, having a basic square frame with large windows overlooking a grassy area and two blackboards, one along the west side wall and another at the front of the room north. The classroom was located on the second floor. The desks here also weren't very often arranged in strict rows; they tended to be formed in a horseshoe with the empty ones scattered about in the center (see figure 7). The teacher's desk stood at the far east side of the room, not far from the windows. When Mr. Lou Taylor, the teacher for the class, wasn't sitting in a circle with the students or sitting on top of his desk as Ms. Mitchell sometimes would do, he would sit behind the desk doing paper work. Mr. Taylor, the only male English teacher in ASP, is Caucasian and is a graduate student in his mid to late twenties. It's worth noting, perhaps, that
compared to the other two teachers, both of whom were also graduate students, Mr. Taylor was considerably more reserved, which might have also contributed to the relatively low-key atmosphere. It was also his first time to teach the course, which might have made a difference in how he taught it.

In this horseshoe arrangement, the students sat typically in groups divided by gender and race (see figure 7). The two athletes sat together and Holly, the only other African American in the class, always sat near them. Cicily, the Caucasian female, typically sat near Holly. Such an arrangement would, of course, leave all the white male students on one side of the room and the four of them on the other. When the quarter began, though, two of the white male students sat on the far west side (figure 6), while the remainder sat on the far east side. As time passed, all five of them sat on the same side, making for, in the teacher's opinion, a very segregated arrangement. As it happened, the 052A peer-responding groups were divided in this way. I tutored the athletes and girls in one group, and, on a few occasions, the group of white males as a separate group. It was only when Mr. Taylor decided to divide them up that they ever sat in a more heterogeneous way. Finally, Gary's class was distinguished from the other three principally by the fact that it was composed of absolutely no Ohio State University student athletes. Although it's difficult to say how, if at all, this difference played upon the
Figure 6: The configuration of Lou Taylor's English 052A class on October 15, 1991.

Figure 7: The configuration of Lou Taylor's English 052A class on a typical day.
dynamics of the class, it was obvious at least that among these students few spent as much time together as the athletes did in and outside of class. Although Gary did share his dorm room and worked with Terry, another student in the class, no students were members of a distinguishable community equal to the athletes in the other classes. In spite of this general lack of community outside an academic context, the class was not a silent or unsociable one. A fair number of both male and female students participated in class discussions, and, as some of the students came to know one another, they attended campus social events such as on-campus parties or fraternity step shows together. Still, whether they had social space equivalent to the athletes' locker room seems unlikely.

There were a total of fifteen students enrolled in the class. Six of these were black males and five were white males. All of the female students in the class were black. One of them, however, first appeared to me (and to the teacher) to be white, but I discovered later that, in spite of her appearance, she identifies more with her mother's black racial identity than with her father's white racial identity. The teacher for the class was a Caucasian woman by the name of Kate Martin. Unlike the other teachers, she wasn't a graduate student and was probably the eldest of the four. Like the others, she had her liberal side (she didn't, for instance, censor their explicit language use), but, quite unlike them, she seemed more to prefer being in control of whatever took place in
the class. I infer this from the fact that she often had a very well thought-out interpretation of the reading material that she, at some point, impressed upon the students.

As I mentioned in chapter in three, a graduate student researcher also attended this class. She, in fact, observed the class nearly every day, collecting data on the students' writing and how the teacher and students talked about writing in class. She was also a middle-aged Caucasian woman who, I believe, had some previous experience teaching in the Columbus public school system. Although Debbie, as I refer to her, did at times interact with some of the students in the class, she functioned chiefly as an observer, in contrast to my role as a participant observer (see Spradley). I usually attended the class on Fridays when Ms. Martin needed me to respond to students' essay drafts. The class met at noon in the same room that Ms. Simmons's class did the hour before.

Figure 8 illustrates the way seating was arranged on October 11th, about the third week of the quarter. It's not necessarily a typical arrangement, but one that students might assume given the order of the desks in the class before them. As in the other classes, social groups developed once students became better acquainted. Two of the black females regularly sat together, while three, sometimes four, of the white males did the same. One of the black females, the more garrulous one of them all, grouped herself
Figure 8: Kate Martin's English 052A class configuration on October 11, 1991.

Figure 9: Seating arrangement of students before Kate Martin's English 052A class began on November 19, 1991.
with one or two of the more talkative black males. The more timid students, two black males and the remaining black female typically sat by themselves or wherever there was available space. Gary, on the other hand, usually sat together with his roommate Terry and/or his high school classmate, Darren. At first, it struck me as odd that Terry, a white male from a small town in the state, didn't gravitate toward the other white male students. Although I never inquired of him, it was obvious that he preferred to be wherever Gary was, even at times when it cost him a better partner to work with.

There was just such an occasion on October 31st. By this time, though, Terry knew well what it was like to work with Gary and Darren. He was hoping to work with a more productive group, but everyone had already gotten into his or her group. Thus, he was forced to work with Darren and Gary. Ms. Martin had asked the class to find some significant events in *Catcher in the Rye*. Most of the groups got started fairly quickly and appeared to be actively engaged. Although I didn’t tape-record any conversation in the groups, I did take note of a few words that were said, some of which, by the way, also illustrate the use of BEV. I first overheard Darren say to Gary "Teacher be sittin' right here. . . ." I believe that Darren was imitating some teacher from another course. Then, as the three of them got their discussion under way, Gary had the following response to Terry's suggestion that Holden's trip to New York was a significant event: "He wasn't going to no New
York. Where you get New York from?" Gary might have been quite serious in his indictment of Terry's proposal, but when I heard it I had more the impression that he made the statement (and in the way that he said it) just to tease Terry. Moments later, however, when Gary suggested the "train, the lady on the train" scene, Terry rebuts, "Now I know why you had me write. You don't know shit." Terry was obviously frustrated with what he deemed as Gary's unpreparedness, but not entirely upset with Gary since, as they left together, he rather affectionately touched him on the head with his notebook.

Figure 9 shows how students were seated several minutes before class began on November 19th. Since some of the students were accustomed to arriving early, on this day, I was able to overhear their conversation. Such occasions were at times very fruitful for observing students' use of vernacular language. Approximately six students were present and were seated in what had become by then a customary arrangement. All of the students, except Terry, are African American, four males and one female. The primary participants in the conversation were Gary, Rob, and Nina, with only occasional comments being made by Alvin and Jake. For the most part, the group talked about the Kappa Alpha Psi step show that was held over the weekend, an event that many of them had attended. To shed a bit of light on the social dynamics of this small group, I should mention Terry's involvement in it. After discussing the fraternity step show, Rob
shifted the topic to joining a traditionally black fraternity or sorority. Nina and Gary briefly indicated what their thoughts were on the matter, and someone, perhaps Rob or Jake, joked about Terry joining one of them. After Terry, in his own defense, mentioned the name of a white fraternity he was interested in, Rob somewhat mockingly pinned, "You know he ain't gon make it in a black fraternity." There didn't appear to be any particular reaction from anyone, including Terry, but it was fairly obvious that Rob was aware of Terry's close association with Gary as falling short of his being acclimated to black culture as a whole. Not phased by this ridicule, however, afterwards Terry goes on to talk to Gary about video games.

"We gotta see you?": Tutoring

As I walked to Morrill Tower to tutor at athletic study tables one October evening, Peter, in what I took to be a mildly disdainful tone, asked me "We gotta see you?" I found Peter's question indicative of, at least as I perceive it, my precarious role as an ASP tutor. Although this section is not about that role, I point it out because I believe that it may reveal something about students' language use, or rather, my access to students' language use. I rarely, for instance, tutored Demetrius or Patrick (nor Peter or Henry for that matter) outside of class. Unlike some of the other athletes whose classes I attended, Demetrius never called upon my assistance during the hours of study tables. As for Patrick, I
helped him with his work a few times in class but he never scheduled an appointment for tutoring. I suspect that for both of them, as well as nearly everyone else in their class, there was either too great a stigma attached to seeing an English tutor or not enough reason to schedule an outside appointment. Given this paucity of tutoring sessions with Patrick and Demetrius, I have little evidence of their language use in that setting.

Paul, Gary, and Jimmy, on the other hand, I tutored fairly often. I tutored Paul and Gary in peer-responding groups that consisted of members of their class. On occasion, however, I also tutored them individually. Jimmy typically arranged to see me by himself. I would meet with him at athletic study tables and, more often than not, just talk over a topic for his essay. Since even in one-on-one situations Paul's utterances were very succinct, I include in my data analysis only examples from tutoring sessions with Gary and Jimmy. What I attempt to demonstrate from my analysis of these examples is the kind of language these informants used in the more confined setting of a small group (i.e., two or three members). Specifically, I show what PEV discourse practices were used in conversations with me as a tutor and/or with others as peer-responders. What I'm unable to show, however, is whether such practices would change were a different tutor (e.g., a white male or female) or peer-responders present.

Since over the course of the two quarters I tutored several student athletes at athletic study tables, this study would be
incomplete without at least a brief description of the social dynamics of that setting. First, the athletes who attend study table in Morril Tower (the actual name) are primarily freshmen students who are members of the football and basketball teams. Requiring these students to attend study tables is the athletic department's way of assuring student retention through the first year of college. In effect, the department is, by way of tutors, furnishing necessary academic support to their athletes. Or as assistant director Robert Larson puts it, they "make sure that athletes are progressing toward their degree, that they're not just here to get a piece of paper or to major in eligibility, that they're indeed taking things that go toward a viable degree."

To this end, study tables provide the athletes tutors in a variety of subjects ranging from the humanities to the social, behavioral, and natural sciences. Math tutors are, however, the most numerous of all the tutors and are the most utilized by the athletes. These tutors are typically male and female graduate students who are hired by the athletic department to tutor within their major subject areas. During the time of this study, a majority of the math tutors were foreign graduate students, who, in large part, were from India. Not a few Caucasian graduate students also tutored math and other subjects such as psychology, sociology, and economics. The total number of tutors varied from evening to evening since they set their own hours. However, on an average night, I suspect that there are 12-15 tutors for the 25-30 male
athletes. Of the fifteen or so tutors, (not including myself since I was there only out of courtesy to the athletes enrolled in ASP) only three were of African descent. An African couple tutored Swahili and other subjects, and an African American female graduate student tutored a variety of subjects, especially history. Excluding myself and one of the ASP academic advisors, then, it was rare for the athletes to observe an African American man in some academic capacity. If what Ms. Simmons says about Jimmy is true, then he as well as others, perhaps, would greatly benefit from having African American male teachers and tutors.

Study tables take place on the basement floor of Morrill Towers, one of the twin towers that serves as a large student dormitory, and are scheduled from 7:30-9:30 every evening except Friday and Saturday. Tutoring hours for Sunday, however, begin an hour earlier, from 6:30-8:30 pm. The tutoring facility is actually a dining hall, complete with soda and ice cream fountains. The athletes studied at several rectangular shaped dining tables dispersed variously throughout the room. The area where the athletes studied was, however, segregated from the area where the tutors sat and worked with students. Figure 10 is a schematic representation of the arrangement of study hall. The number of tables and individuals included in the representation isn't exact but is a fair approximation of the overall setting. The abbreviation "FA" refers to football athletes, in contrast to "BA" which refers to basketball athletes. My informants' customary seats I've indicated
Figure 10: The configuration of Athletic Study Tables on a typical evening.
by their names, "Dem" (Demetrius), Paul, and "Jim" (Jimmy). The "M," also in this area, stands for the monitors, who, on the one hand, had a designated space where they sat but, on the other hand, frequently roamed about to keep a watchful eye on the athletes. On the tutor side of the room, I identify a representative number of tutors by race and gender. Consistent with previous usage, "WM" and "WF" refer to white males and females. "IM" refers to the Indian male tutors. "AC" signifies the African couple and "AAF" the African American female tutor. Finally, "KC" refers to me, the tutor for ASP students. My placement on the far west side of the room is somewhat arbitrary. Because I usually arrived after other tutors, I sat wherever there was available space.

The two monitors, both of whom are physical education majors of some sort, were assigned to maintain the segregated arrangement between athletes and tutors so that the athletes wouldn't get distracted from their work. There was to be absolutely no talking on the athletes side of the room, and only talking that related to school work on the tutor side. As one might imagine, this arrangement didn't always sit well with the athletes, which is why from time to time some of them invented reasons for having to see a tutor. They were, of course, reprimanded if they were caught socializing with other athletes instead of being tutored. However, some of them had interesting ways of diffusing these reprimands, ways that I believe resemble the vernacular discourse practice called shucking (perhaps also, jiving). Roger
Abrahams and Geneva Gay define shucking as "a manner of speech used to accommodate 'the man'--any person who is a symbol of white oppressive authority such as a policeman, teacher, judge, employer--to create a false impression of cooperativeness" (203).

One example of the athletes' use of this kind of discourse practice occurred when one of the monitors upbraided Ronnie and Gerald for using their conference time with me as a pretense for not doing their homework. (As I recall, they both had some legitimate reasons for seeing me, but I think that the monitor took issue with the two of them being there at the same time.) While the students initially responded with straightforward denials, they later began to play off the matter by speaking on familiar terms with the monitor. They displaced the blame for their actions by asking the monitor what was wrong with him, whether he was having trouble with his girlfriend. And, interestingly, the two of them did so in perfect harmony, as if together they had rehearsed this form of verbal cunning a thousand times over.

However, interactions between the monitors and student athletes weren't always mitigated by creative word play. Indeed, at times tempers flared between the athletes and monitors. I witnessed one athlete and a monitor engage in just such an altercation. One of the basketball players, Walter, became upset when Darryl, the same monitor who was the object of Ronnie and Gerald's shucking, didn't want to let him go to the library for some
classwork he was assigned to do. I can't recall what Darryl's reasons were for prohibiting Walter, but he seemed to want to limit the number of times the athletes could be excused from study tables. It may have been that Walter had been excused from study tables on other occasions or that there were too many other athletes who had asked to be excused. Whatever the case, the two exchanged a few harsh words and ended with Walter leaving without permission and Darryl threatening to report him.

Although such open confrontations are infrequent, the above exchange is an apt example of the constant tension between student athletes and certain authority figures, a subject that I give some attention to in the next chapter. From what I was able to observe at study table, several of the athletes had trouble being subject to the orders of the two monitors. Not that the orders or rules were unusually oppressive or overbearing, rather the way in which they were enforced seems to have irked the athletes. Seemingly, the monitors' hard-line attitude posed a direct threat to the athletes' sense of freedom and self-determination.

**Hangin' Out and Shootin' Hoops**

My intention for this section was to describe vernacular discourse in non-academic contexts. I hypothesized that of all possible contexts within the university, the contexts furthest removed from the activities of the classroom would prove to be the most fruitful for the study of BEV. While I still hold to this
hypothesis. I've observed that contexts are not static entities which can be cavalierly categorized. Academic language is not the only language students speak in the classroom; neither is vernacular language the only language they speak in the lounge or on the basketball court. But certain forms of discourse do dominate particular contexts.

With the exception of one tape recording of a group of athletes (all of whom were not informants in the study) lounging around discussing a variety of subjects, I unfortunately have no substantial data to validate my assertion about language in non-academic contexts. I observed several athletes--Paul, Jimmy, and others--playing basketball, standing or sitting at the athletic department bus stop, or conversing with a few friends at odd places on campus, but in most cases accessibility was problematic and in others not a great deal of talk took place. On two occasions at the basketball courts in the university gym, for instance, I noted only a few vernacular expressions that Paul used such as "good one T," "damn" (after missing a shot) "straight" (when a shot was made), and when referring to the aggressive style of play of some of the guys, "motherfuckers playin'." Needless to say, it's doubtful that any of this terminology would be used in an academic context (unless, of course, talk is centered on the basketball game that was played the day before). Yet, such terms alone don't convey fully the kind of discourse constitutive of that context.
In the one lounge session, participants engaged in very lively talk, covering news events, childhood experiences, and various other topics that were raised. And though (as I mentioned in the last chapter) the session was a bit contrived, participants demonstrated their ability to *rap* and *signify*. In fact, on one occasion, Henry challenged Shawn to a game of the *dozens*; however, Shawn said that he didn’t play that "yo mama stuff." Thus, apparently even among these young men, who are as eager verbal game players as anyone, there are limits on language use, depending on the situation and on the audience.

**Quarter II**

Before ending this chapter, I should note that the dynamics of the classes I’ve described changed somewhat during the winter quarter. Since some students chose or were forced because of scheduling conflicts to transfer to different sections and times, the student constituency of the 053A course differed slightly from 052A. Still, I don’t think that it made a significant difference in how language was used, except perhaps in the case of Ms. Simmon’s and Mr. Taylor’s classes. Dennis was transferred from the eleven to the one o’clock section, leaving one fewer black male athlete in Ms. Simmon’s class and adding one more in Mr. Taylor’s. Ms. Simmons lost another one of her student athletes when, for personal reasons, Jimmy transferred to a section of 110W. Although adding Dennis to Mr. Taylor’s class gave Paul and Shawn
another athlete to interact with, his presence didn't appear to have a significant effect on Paul's language use. In a few cases, classes changed rooms, but again these didn't appear to have any significant bearing on language use.

However, What did have a significant bearing on informants' language use was the informality, the inclusiveness of 052A and 053A English classes. Because the students weren't pressured to conform to academic ways of using language, the richness of their own language was permitted to surface. And not only was it permitted to surface, in most cases, it also became part of the overall discourse of the classroom. Commentary expressed in the vernacular wasn't considered entirely inappropriate for class discussions. Neither was academic discourse only considered acceptable for formal written assignments. Rather, as Bakhtin has stated concerning *heteroglossia* in the novel, (at least) "two voices, two world views, two languages" were incorporated into 052A and 053A classroom discourse (325). It is this double-edged discourse that I describe in the next chapter under the guise of two very influential women, that is, Mother Wit and Alma Mater.
CHAPTER V

VERNACULAR AND ACADEMIC DISCOURSE PRACTICES: MOTHER WIT MEETS ALMA MATER

You know what's so, this is the honest truth, and this is not to downgrade any particular person or race or anything, but that [feeling "locked up" by the system] is common sense, plain and simple. They don't think, they don't have common sense. No street smarts, no nothing. They don't have common sense. They don't know. You know. That's the bottom line. And she is a fine example. You know what I'm saying? Exhibit A, Missy. She has no type of common sense. This is a typical white girl. Blond hair, basically blue eyes or close to it. . . . It was like well you know, do you watch [Beverly Hills] 90210?

--Jimmy Graves, English 052A

The persistence of the African-based oral tradition is such that blacks tend to place only limited value on the written word, whereas verbal skills expressed orally rank in high esteem. This is not to say that Black Americans never read anything or that the total black community is functionally illiterate. The influence of White America and the demands of modern, so-called civilized living have been too strong for that. However, it is to say that from a black perspective, written documents are limited in what they can teach about life and survival in the world. Blacks are quick to ridicule "educated fools," people who done gone to school and read all dem books and still don't know nothin! They have "book learning" but no "mother wit," knowledge, but not wisdom. (Naturally, not all educated people are considered "educated fools," but if the shoe fits . . .)

--Geneva Smitherman, Talkin and Testifyin

In spite of the unlikelihood of a meeting between what Geneva Smitherman calls "Mother Wit"--wisdom or just plain common sense--and the academy, "Alma Mater," I use the two terms to
symbolize the linguistic values of the two communities that I discuss in this chapter. The traditional African American community values knowledge acquired through real-life experience (and by experience I don't just mean trial and error learning but knowledge based on one's reading of people, what they say and what they do, as texts); while the mainstream academic community values knowledge acquired through written texts, reading not people and events but authors, the ideas of persons embodied in texts.

Although posited in dichotomous terms, neither is the title (or subtitle) meant to suggest an unimaginable chasm between the vernacular and the academic. Rather, I intend for it to represent the often tenuous relationship between, on the one hand, speech and print within African American culture and, on the other hand, between vernacular and academic discourses both in speech and in writing. By tenuousness, I'm specifically referring to the clash between the linguistic and cultural knowledge African American students bring with them to the university and the kind of knowledge-making that takes place in mainstream universities.

17 It's interesting to note, by the way, that the two appellations for institutions of knowledge (granting, of course, that "Mother Wit" be considered an institution) refer to the mother figure, especially since in both cases mothers or women aren't always deemed progenitors of knowledge. Symbolically, the collective wisdom of a people is represented by the feminine gender--by Athena, Goddess of Wisdom, for the Greeks, and by Mother Wit for African Americans.
This tenuousness is embodied in the students in this study, none of whom came to the university as blank slates, lacking all familiarity with academic ways of thinking, reading, and writing. There's a lot of grey (as well as a lot of shifting between black and white) in the types of language students used in the settings I observed. To maintain, therefore, that there are marked differences between the students' discourse communities and the university community doesn't preclude possible similarities. Indeed, many of the vernacular discourse forms that are discussed here and in the next chapter (e.g., signification or signifying) parallel academic forms.

What the stark categories—vernacular and academic—show, I believe, is something on the order of Mary Louise Pratt's "arts of the contact zone." In general, Pratt uses the term "contact zones" to refer to "social spaces where cultures meet, clash, and grapple with each other, often in contexts of highly asymmetrical relations of power" (34). The most obvious examples of such contexts are colonialism and slavery. But another is the academy, where students, especially those labeled "at-risk," grapple with academic culture and literacy. In this sense, Pratt's inclusion of comparisons between elite and vernacular cultural forms in the arts of the contact zone is here most applicable. In this chapter, therefore, I describe a vernacular cultural form one informant called "slangin'" vis-à-vis the mainstream academy.
"Into Slang" or "Slangin'"

In my interviews with Demetrius and Patrick, both mentioned *slang* as the name for the kind of language they use with their friends or the guys with whom they hang out. Demetrius explained to me that perhaps the reason he didn't have an accent native to his home state is because he was "into slang" while he was growing up. Actually, he was probably more than just "into slang," for in one of his papers he writes about how difficult it was for him to cease cursing and telling dirty jokes. A glimpse of this point took place during one class session when Demetrius engaged in a heated exchange with Kerry, a black student who by then had unnerved nearly all of his classmates and the teacher with his self-righteous attitude. Somewhat out of the blue, Kerry asked Demetrius "Have you always been skinny?" Not apparently in the greatest of moods, Demetrius snaps back, "Motherfucker, I ain't skinny. Just because you got skinny legs and a fat ass..."

Moments later, to Peter and Henry, Demetrius called Kerry "slew-footed" (the spelling about which I'm unsure)--an expression that is not exclusively black but that I've heard often used by southern blacks to refer to someone whose feet turn outward as they walk. Obviously, Demetrius hasn't lost his skill with biting profanity.

In my interview with Patrick, he reported that people at Ohio State told him that he has what they call a "ghetto accent." He didn't know what they meant by that because he talked to them just as he would talk to anyone. The one characteristic I observed
about his speech is that it tends to proceed at a fast pace, so much so at times that one can easily mistake his use of one word for another--as when members of his class thought he was saying Holden was "fuckin' everything" instead of "flunkin' everything."

In any case, Patrick has his own way of describing the way he talks. He calls the talk that he does with his close friends as "slanging": "I go around slanging," he said.

It should become clear by the end of this chapter that by "slang" or "slanging" Patrick and Demetrius mean more than just fadish street terms and phrases. For BEV, as I pointed out in chapter two, encompasses a whole range of speech forms, including what linguists narrowly refer to as slang. But the driving force behind these forms is Mother Wit, the veritable episteme\(^{18}\) that suffuses black vernacular language and culture. Given the real-life circumstances of slavery and discrimination in America, the essential function of this episteme is material survival; it is, as Smitherman writes, a "fundamental vehicle for gittin' ovuh" (Talkin and Testifyin 73). In the traditional African worldview, Mother Wit is closely linked to Nommo, the power of the spoken word that invigorates the activities of human beings and nature (Talkin and Testifyin 78).

\(^{18}\) Or, epistemology. Here I mean to suggest that Mother Wit is a way of knowing central to black vernacular language and culture. For further discussion of episteme or epistemic rhetoric see Richard Cherwitz and James Hikins's Communication and Knowledge, and, from a historical perspective, James Berlin's Rhetoric and Reality.
Thus, in what follows, I describe various aspects of Mother Wit in the oral language uses of my informants. I do not intend, however, (nor is it likely even possible) to describe each and every one of such aspects. Rather my intention is to describe the more obvious ones, which include playful uses of euphemism and metaphor; signification; rapping (along with mimicry); and narration or, in Smitherman's terms, narrative sequencing.

**From the Laughing Barrel: Euphemism and Metaphor**

The first example I have comes from a class session attended by Patrick and Demetrius.\(^{19}\) Two students in the class, Henry (one of the two black males in the class who played on the football team) and Patrick, make some clever sexual puns—ones that play upon the vernacular art of indirection through euphemism and metaphor. The students had just begun reading J. D. Salinger's *Catcher in the Rye*. During this day's session the class was discussing the relationship between Jane Gallagher, the unrequited love of Holden Caufield, the narrator of the story, and Holden's boarding school roommate Carl Stradlater, who, to Holden's chagrin, took Jane out on a date. Concerning Jane's previous relationship with Holden, Henry pronounces, "Maybe she playing him like a

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\(^{19}\) Recall that two of my informants, Patrick Ellis and Demetrius, were in the same class. The other three informants, Jimmy Graves, Gary Carter, and Paul Collins, were each in separate classes. Other names of black male students that receive treatment in this section are incidental to the social context and dynamics of the classes.
baldhead buddha in a Japanese buddha factory." Moments later, he then asks concerning Jane, "Ain't that the same girl his roommate did the nasty with?" To this, Patrick softly, yet playfully, adds, "That's cause he got cock blocked." What a baldhead buddha in a Japanese buddha factory has to do with Holden's interest in Jane is beyond this researcher's understanding, but obviously there's some metaphoric connection built upon the vernacular expression "playing him." In the case of romance, to "play" someone means to toy with his or her affections whimsically or for some personal gain (be it emotional or material gain). The student whose writing I cited in the pilot study mentioned earlier used this expression frequently. On one occasion, he wrote that a certain girl whom he was dating at the time "was trying to play both of us" (he and another guy). The expression Patrick used, "cock blocked," is also common in black vernacular semantics. According to Foib, it means "to interfere with a male's attempt to 'win over' a female, even if the other male is not interested in the female himself" (42).

Such punning didn't come as a succession of utterances by any one student. Rather one student was the catalyst for another, shifting from playful to serious comments and from serious to playful and back again. Not long after Patrick made the pun just mentioned, he gave the following response to the teachers' question about what Holden thought happened on Stradlater's date with Jane: "He you know he thinks he knows him [Stradlater], you know, but he also think he know the girl too." Patrick then follows
this by a question that led to a series of exchanges culminating in a bit of levity. The more substantive exchanges are indicated by the speaker’s name.

Patrick: He got in a fight wit'em, didn't he? Somethin' like that.
-Yea
Teacher: What about that fight?
Henry: He got in a fight because ah he was jealous.
-Yea
-Naw, man.
-That's the reason why the fight broke out.
Peter: That ain't the reason why the fight broke out.
-Yeah it was.
-That's why he...
Teacher: Well, where's the fight? Can anybody find the fight?
Peter: He kept, he kept goin off on callin him moron.
-Naw.
?: Yea, he called him moron.
Peter: And he said, "I'm warnin' you, I'm warnin' you, you keep on, man, I'm droppin' you."
(laughter)
Teacher: Where is that fight?
Henry: But see, that’s the only reason he got all stirred up was because he thought he got ah got the boots.

(giggles)

Dante: (laughter) Oh Jesus!

Henry: He’s just tickled to death.

(laughter)

Peter is the other member of the football team. At times, he’s rather passive during class discussions, but here he’s engaged in the discussion and displaying a bit of humor as well. What began as a serious search for some explanation concerning the fight scene quickly developed into jocular display. Note, however, that it isn’t that the content of what is said differs from more formal statements but the manner in which it’s said. Peter and Henry’s points are valid ones, but suffusing these points with vernacular expressions (i.e., "droppin'" and "boots") adds, for many of the students in the class, a humorous appeal. At this point, it’s no surprise, then, that Patrick soon turns his remarks to sport.

Monica: He kept calling him a moron.

Teacher: Ok, Holden kept callin' Stradlater a moron. Why does he do that?

Henry: Cause he was upset that ah... 

Monica: ...went out with his girl, the girl he wanted to put the boot on.
?: He won't tell 'em what happened.
Patrick: Yea, cause he wanted to let a pipe through her too.
Henry: Yea, he wanted to go plumbing.
(laughter)

Of course, *getting the boots* (or *knockin' the boots*, as it is otherwise called) and *plumbing* are euphemisms for sexual acts, but they're also colorful ways of getting a point across, especially given the captive audience Henry and Patrick obviously had. Each of the play on words, it will be noticed, evoked snickers or restrained laughter from several classmates. In fact, after one such utterance, Dante laughed to the point of exclaiming "Oh Jesus!", an expression like the one Slim makes while witnessing a bout of the *dozens* in Richard Wright's *Lawl Today* (90, 92).

During these exchanges, Ms. Mitchell maintained the flow of the discussion by including the students' puns in the classroom discourse without, however, referring specifically to the students' terms. After Henry's question about the "nasty," for instance, she responded, "I don't know. What do you think about that?"

An instance of Gary's in-class conversations might provide further insight into students' metaphoric language use. The use of what may be either vernacular slang or Gary's own patented wording occurred when he had his eye on Nina as she walked past him to put some paper in the trash can. Looking at her buttocks, Gary remarked, "You got a boomin' system!" If I'm not mistaken,
here Gary metaphorically links the sway of Nina's butt to the "boom boom" of a car stereo system. As will become quite clear in the next chapter, sexual references are not at all taboo for Gary.

Of all the students in each of the four classes, Henry was the most comical; few students could compete with him for the role of class comic. While in Ms. Mitchell's class Patrick made equally witty remarks from time to time, he reserved much of his humor for the group of students with whom he later developed close friendships. Demetrius, on the other hand, with his quiet demeanor, seldom performed comically before the class. Indeed, during the aforementioned discussion of Catcher in the Rye, I recorded his having made only two comments. First, he questioned Monica's pronunciation of the word "fifteen," noted that she had omitted the second "f" (making it "fiteen"), and then called her a "trip" (e.g., somebody who obviously doesn't have it linguistically together or is from the "country," as he put it in the interview) for having pronounced it that way. Second, Demetrius questioned the teacher as to the direction of the discussion at a certain point, saying "What we doin' now comparing Maya and Holden?" Before the discussion, Demetrius had made two other statements, one a question for clarification which some students took as humorous and the other a reprimand to three of the students whose conversation in the back of the class was disruptive. His reprimand was especially interesting because it included a nonstandard phonological feature in the word "can" just
as Monica's statement did in the word "fifteen". "We cain't hear
man, y'all. . .," Demetrius intoned. No doubt the reprimand also
shows how serious, without being priggish about it, Demetrius took
classroom protocol.

Thus, Henry's (and to a lesser extent Patrick's and Gary's)
playful and metaphoric use of language, while integral to the social
dynamics of the class and a significant part of black vernacular
culture in general, does not necessarily characterize language use
for every African American student in ASP English classes. What
his language use does characterize, I think, is a context in which
such colorful and figurative utterances are deemed permissible--
and even appropriate. Not that Henry, Patrick, or any other
student, for that matter, thought of their English classroom as an
inner-city street corner where such kind of verbal witticisms are
most at home, but since the class was predominantly African
American, students like Patrick and Henry felt the liberty to be
"themselves"--to be how they are in certain contexts outside the
classroom. True to the African American tradition of speaker-
audience relationships, they had an audience who would readily
"respond" as they "call." A more heterogenous class likely would
not have evoked such "responding." In fact, it is partly for this
reason that the two African American males (one of whom outside
of class had proven to have the disposition to do so) in Paul's
English class failed to engage in such kind of repartee. On the
contrary, it is partly because of the six African American males
(and all football players to boot) and two African American females in Jimmy's English class that some form of vernacular speech was exhibited there.

"Dissin" and "Raggin' On": 1990s Style Signifying

Like Patrick, Demetrius has his playful moments. He displays his sense of humor most often in the company of a small group of intimates. On at least two occasions that I'm aware of, he did some light signifying on Peter. At a certain point in their conversation about professional basketball players, Peter stated that he thought Chicago Bulls' star Michael Jordan was "sweet"—a term referring to his remarkable style of play. Not thinking so highly of Jordan (at least not to the point of idolization), Demetrius said in response that Peter had a poster of Jordan in his room, the implication being that Peter, as some adolescent might, idolized Jordan. In actual fact, however, Peter admitted having only a poster of Malcolm X in his room. Demetrius's outright "lie," therefore, functions as a mild form of ridicule employed for the fun of it.

The other occasion in which Demetrius signified on Peter was when the discussion centered on Peter's haircutting skills. Again, on the surface of it, Demetrius told an outright lie about Peter. Having looked over Henry's new haircut, specifically the odd lines in his fade, Demetrius claimed that Peter had given Henry the cut, when in fact he hadn't. What may, however, appear to be merely a "lie" on the surface, in actuality, is the stuff of playful signifying.
But signifying has its more sardonic side, one that has been called by some informants "dissing" and "ragging on." That is, a person disses or rags on another playfully but as well, at least as the students I observed used it, cuttingly. I'm taking some liberties perhaps by dubbing dissing and ragging on 1990s style signifying since, as I noted in chapter two, names for this verbal art form change over time and vary by region. The term "dissing," however, is commonly used by rap musicians to refer to at times biting criticism to or from a rival musician or group. Because many of the students I observed were avid rap fans and, as I'll show later, borrowed from the language of rap, I believe that the term could represent a popularized version of signifying (or perhaps even the dozens) for the current decade.

A good example of such kind of signifying occurred in Ms. Simmons's class on November 15, 1991. The athletes in the class were always needling one another about something, and this day was no exception. Signifying (or the attempt to) emerged when Gerald was egged on to read his paper. He initially resisted reading it because he feared (and rightfully so) that his fellow athletes would "diss" or "rag on" him. The exchange proceeded roughly as follows:

(someone, perhaps Jimmy, in the background whispers repeatedly as if cheering, "Gerald")

Teacher: Gerald? Please, I beg you.
Gerald: They gonna diss(?) me... I don't trust them.
Dennis: Do it brother! (slightly mocking tone)
Teacher: Come on!
Jimmy(?): It's time to git dissed(?)...
Gerald: It's not long. It's just like, a page or somethin'.
Male: Come on Ger!
Teacher: Somebody just go right now.
Gerald: Alright. (begins reading paper) ... I then came to the conclusion ... when I was little, (pauses to comment)
I don't want to say that cause my friends will rag on me.
(reactions from classmates indicating that he should read it)
Gerald: A'ight. (resumes reading) ...the reason why...
(interrupted)
Ronnie: What happen to when you was little?
Gerald: I wanted to ... because you know I know how you guys are.
Ronnie: Why you read your paper then, man? Don't be givin' us the short end of the stick.
(laughter)
Gerald: (abandons reading) I'm finished, I'm serious.
Teacher: Well, just from what little you were able to hear, what do you want to know more about? ... I want
to know what kind of fad you and your friends
started.

Gerald: We didn't start a fad...

(heckling from athletes overshadows)

Male(?): (sarcastically) What's it like growing up in LA?

Male(?): Don't start man.

Gerald: That's why... I mean you know like people like...

(laughter)

Male(?): Come on Ger! (jokingly) You wear khakis and a

sweatshirt?

(laughter)

When, using BEV grammar, Ronnie asked Gerald what happened
when he was "little" or young, the exchange between them could
have turned into some heavy signifying or even a bout of the
dozens. This being a class session and a time to get what could be
important feedback on his essay, perhaps, led Gerald to decline to
engage in such an act. Or, quite possibly, Gerald wished to guard
his *ethos* from humiliation.\(^{20}\) It's obvious from his hesitation to

\(^{20}\) The rhetorical concept of *ethos*, though not referred to explicitly in this
study, is an integral part of informants' image-making or construction of
self. For Balester, *ethos*, "or the image of the speaker's or writer's character
as presented through discourse, is vital to the success" of nonmainstream
students ("Introduction" 2). I propose, however, that *ethos* is truly vital to
students' success when through the use of vernacular forms of discourse
BEV speakers can affirm their sense of black cultural identity vis-à-vis
academic language and culture.
share his story openly, though, that such verbal dueling is a constant part of how the athletes interact with one another. Whether Gerald actually engages in it on other occasions is unclear, but he has apparently learned not to leave himself open to such ridicule, for even when Ronnie in a mock-serious tone goes so far as to accuse him of giving them "the short end of the stick," Gerald abandons his reading and doesn't rebut. I might add here that while there were clear attempts to bring BEV discourse practices into the discourse of the classroom (and when I say "discourse of the classroom" I mean specifically the exercise of analyzing and critiquing an author's work), these practices would likely be more pronounced were the context more suitable. I'm thinking specifically here of, say, the athletes' locker room where, they've indicated, a lot of the talk that goes on wouldn't be used in class.

While Ronnie appears to be the principal instigator (or Signifier) in the above exchange, he by no means operates alone. Typically, at least in many of the published accounts (Smitherman, Labov, and Mitchell-Kernan), signifying is transacted between two individuals, but here four or five individuals all hurl insults at one. One of the four student athletes asks "what's it like growing up in L.A.?" and another asks "You wear khakis and a sweatshirt?" These questions, though harmless on the surface, center on the fact that Gerald grew up in Los Angeles, a city notorious for violence and gang-related activity. Here, in an indirect way, he's being associated with such things because he wrote about hanging out
with a group of friends who were responsible for changing some local fads. His football cronies jokingly label him a gang banger, thus, the allusion to the khakis and sweatshirt--the attire worn by gang members and ganster rappers from Compton, California.

By no means, though, was Gerald singled out for such ridicule. Any one of the six athletes (only occasionally anyone else in the class) could be, as it were, put on the hot seat. In the sessions that I observed, however, some of the athletes were more involved in ritual games than others. Since Randy and Russell often sat at a distance from the other athletes, they tended to stay out of the line of fire. Yet, at times in spite of the distance, Ronnie would make comments about or loud-talk on Randy. Randy, on the other hand, would ignore such attempts at angering him or would, on occasion, cap back (see Abrahams's "Rapping and Capping"). During the same class session, Ronnie reads his paper and is himself teased.

Ronnie: (reading paper) . . Many of the lessons in life my dad taught me. . . (pauses and comments) I gotta rephrase that too.

Randy: You need to rephrase the whole paper!
(mild laughter)

Ronnie: (reading paper) Today my personality is somewhat disturbed. I think I'm kind, nice, mean, smart, silly, careless, and worry-free.
(laughter)

Jimmy: Bulshit! . . . worry-free? Bullshit!

Ronnie: Come on, man! (resumes reading) . . .

Randy and Jimmy, in this case, both signify on Ronnie. The point Randy makes about Ronnie's need to rephrase or rewrite his entire paper reflects a bit of sarcasm, especially since Randy had already responded to his paper when the two of them and Leslie met out in the hallway the first ten or fifteen minutes of class. Jimmy's comment, on the other hand, has less to do with Ronnie's writing per se. Rather, he criticizes or questions, somewhat seriously it seems, Ronnie's description of himself as "worry-free."

To verify the legitimacy of Jimmy's claim and to push him more in the direction of academic modes of argumentation, the teacher might have asked him to elaborate on or give support for his critique. But since it isn't clear whether Jimmy actually disagrees with Ronnie's description or is simply being antagonistic for the sake of verbal posturing (see Smitherman 120), such an approach may not be very productive. But the entire exchange, Randy's included, stands as a vernacular anomaly vis-à-vis academic discourse.

Dennis didn't want to read his entire paper, but before the class ended Ms. Simmons, having thought highly of his opening line, asked him if she could read it to the class. Dennis's use of the
expression "locked up" put his fellow football players virtually in stitches. In fact, Ronnie laughed so hard that he was moved to stomp his feet up and down as he stood in the center of the circle of desks.

Teacher: (reading) I wake up in the morning, and sometimes I take a look in the mirror and I feel funny, I feel locked up. (a huge outburst of laughter)
Male: I feel locked up!
Jimmy: . . . feel locked up cause you k-i-l-l-e-d some-body! (stressed intonation such as some black preachers do when trying to move their congregations--see Smitherman's notion of tonal semantics)
Ronnie: He say that all the time.
Teacher: . . . Is that like some dirty connotation . . .
Several Athletes: Naw!

Here, with regard to Dennis's paper, there was no obvious use of signifying, except perhaps for Jimmy's associating Dennis's feeling "locked up" to his killing somebody. In this case, Jimmy plays upon Dennis's psychological condition of being "locked up" by suggesting that it refers instead to physical imprisonment, a condition that, ironically, not a few young black men find
themselves in. Yet what I find really significant about Dennis's expression and the athletes' response upon hearing it is that it intimates some kind of insider knowledge. No one, not even me (though I had fairly correct suspicions), knew what feeling "locked up" meant. Only the athletes knew what Dennis meant because, as football players, they were members of the same community. But in addition they understood it because they themselves, as young black men, had experienced it. During a class session the following week (November 20, 1991) when Jimmy and Ronnie tried to explain it to Missy, they indicated that the expression had to do with how they felt at times about being "locked up by the system," that is, "the rules and regulations we have to abide by." Needless to say, Missy still couldn't figure out what they meant, but I believe this was so because they hedged on saying explicitly that the phrase had something to do with the fact that they were black men in a society (including both outside and inside the university, but especially inside because of the authority they had to subject themselves to as football players) dominated by powerful white men.

What I've pointed out about the discourse practices that take place in each of the two classes can't justifiably be categorized as one and the same. While Patrick and Henry did make clever use of punning to comment on certain scenes in a literary text, they didn't, on the whole, attempt to "rag on" their classmates as many of the athletes in Ms. Simmons's class did. This may be in large
part due to the fact that students in Ms. Simmons's class were commenting on their own work and not that of a literary text, for when her class did, for instance, discuss *Catcher in the Rye* the athletes, except on one occasion, targeted their humor at the characters of the story. Below is an example of part of the discussion concerning Holden's sanity. Ronnie, as is usually the case, offers his rather facetious but honest opinion, while Jimmy chimes in in the background.

Teacher:  Okay, you're on to a good point. What do we mean by normal and it depends on what we mean by crazy.

Ronnie:  (half-seriously) I don't consider him [Holden] normal cause he didn't want no sex. We was over there talkin' bout that. We didn't understand that! He's like seventeen and what not. .

Jimmy:  He was chokin! He was chokin!

Ronnie:  He's like seventeen and what. .

Teacher:  What is his conflict about sex? Is it that he totally doesn't wanna have sex?

(everyone answering all at once)

The relative lack of raggin' or signifying in Ms. Mitchell's class can be attributed not only to differences in class activities but also to differences in the students themselves. That is to say, the
students in Ms. Mitchell's class, while at times quite critical of one another, were not predisposed to open engagement in such vernacular speech forms. Certainly, the athletes in the class were a different set from those in Ms. Simmon's class. Aside from Henry, none of them were the type that would instigate a verbal duel with another member of the class. If anything, they "ragged on" people who had little or nothing to do with their English class. As for non-athletes like Patrick, any signifying he might have done occurred while he was "rapping" about things in his small group. It was in these groups, as I'll show in the next section, that not a few vernacular discourse forms emerged.

By contrast to the two aforementioned classes--that is, because black students were in the minority--Paul's class didn't provide the type of atmosphere where a Patrick, Henry, or Ronnie would have seen fit to display their wit. To witness such practices in this class one would have to look at Paul and Shawn's language use in the less formal setting of the peer-group. There is some evidence of signifying, for example, in a class held on December 3rd. Students worked in small groups and were assigned to respond to each other's essay drafts. It was within this kind of set up, like so many of the tutoring sessions I held with this group, that Paul and Shawn digressed to talk about their everyday affairs. This is not to say that because they conversed on nonacademic subjects they spoke BEV. That would be too naive an assessment. For even when the subject is an academic one, or one that is within the
pursuit of the business at hand, it's possible for some nonmainstream forms of discourse to surface. During the responding session when I brought the conversation back from a fairly lengthy digression on football practice and travel to Paul's paper, specifically, that is, to the happy meals that he and his date shared during dinner, Shawn did some light signifying on Paul.

Shawn: You like happy meals?
Paul: Yeah.
Shawn: I bet you kill bout four or five of em.
Paul: I eat one, nigga! What you mean?

Shawn's response to Paul's fondness for McDonald's happy meals is presented as an exaggerated assumption about Paul's eating capacity. Although Paul is not a big or overweight person, by his musculature, one might rightly assume that he could and does eat more than one happy meal. Even if this were not the case, however, Shawn's playful suggestion amuses the rest of us in the group and evokes a sharp reaction from Paul. Paul retorts emphatically "I eat one nigga!" Something like the way Al does to Jake in Lawd Today! (89), Paul highlights his retort by calling Shawn a "nigga."21 This form of address is not to be taken too

21 I've chosen to transcribe "nigga" with the short "a" suffix instead of the typical "uh" (e.g., "nigguh"). I do so to remain consistent with current usage of the term in rap music (see chapter six for a fuller discussion).
seriously but is a key ingredient in Paul's effectiveness at setting Shawn straight.

As regards subject matter, the exchange between Paul and Shawn also resembles Smitherman's account of the light-hearted signifying of a group of black adolescents.

Sherry: I sho am hongy, Dog!
Reginald: That's all you think bout, eating all the time.
John (Sherry's brother): Man, that's why she so big.
Sherry: Aw, y'all shut up!
John: Come on, Sherry, we got to go. We'll catch you later, man.
Reginald (to John): Goodnight
Sleep tight
Don't let Sherry
Eat you up tonight
(Everybody laughs--including Sherry--and gives skin.)

Although I have no estimates of how frequently Paul or Shawn engage in signifying, I assume that if it, like other discourse forms, occurs at least occasionally in a classroom setting it must occur to the same or a greater degree in other contexts.
Just Talkin': Old folks, Mamas, and They Southern Ways

In Ms. Mitchell's class, often as students were supposed to be responding to one another's drafts, they would enter into fairly lengthy dialogue about everyday matters or things that they knew. They referred to such dialogue as "just talk" or "just talkin'," though even a casual examination of it may lead one to call it *rapping*—that is, "a fluent and lively way of talking which is always characterized by a high degree of personal style" (Kochman, "Toward an Ethnography"). But, as ordinary talk, the students' dialogue might also be called *talking shit*, a term that, according to Michael Bell, is used by the patrons of Brown's Lounge. Regardless of how its labeled, talk in this context is more than just casual conversation or idle chatter; rather, it is a purposeful way of communicating, a way of building an environment of self-creation and dramatization beneficial to all participants (Bell 27).

On occasions when such talk took place, the language students use exhibited more vernacular features than at any other time. For students like Henry and Patrick, such occasions were optimum for a display of their ability to tell stories and mimic the peculiarities of others before a captive audience. They weren't the only students who did so, for in that particular context women as well as men would relate some humorous anecdote about family or friends, but they seemed more the catalyst for such verbal behavior. One rather lengthy example of these occasions took
place on November 26th just before the Thanksgiving holiday, and it involved Patrick, Roger, Kerry, and Freda. (Freda was, however, initially less involved because throughout much of the exchange she and I worked on her essay.) The exchange had gotten underway because Roger mentioned that he had an early class the next quarter. That led to a discussion about how elderly people rise early, and eventually about how their grandparents would rise early and expect their grandchildren to do the same.

Patrick: You know how old people always get up early?
Roger: See, I'm used to gettin up cause in the summertime I used to get up at four cause I had to be at work at five-thirty. I got off at two. So like, it wut'nt nobody on the road, so I mean. . . I'm like fifty-five, sixty down main street.
P: Old, old, old people get up, ole people get up early.
R: Huh?
P: My grandfather get up bout five, six o'clock in de mornin'. I'm like, "What?" You know what I'm sayin', tryin' to wake me up. (mimicing) "Come on, get up baby." Gramps, try to wake me up.

As the conversation develops, it begins to shift into a discussion of early morning breakfast. Notice how Patrick accents his point with the ubiquitous vernacular word "motherfucker." Here it's
being used as a grammatical intensifier to modify "early" (see Smitherman 60).

P: Especially if they come from down south. Dey get up early as a muthafucka.

R: My Aunt Mary, she lives down south, she be gettin up at five, six . .

P: Yep

R: She say, "Let's get up." I'm like, "You give me another four hours . . . and den we'll consider gettin up."

K: My grandfather, he gets up like, they get up least, about five thirty in de morning, cookin' breakfast . .

P: Cookin' breakfast, everything . .

R: Cook dem big ole breakfast . .

K: Yeah

P: Big breakfast!

R: Whooah! Breakfast in bed (laughing)

R: Bugby, Bugby, den you be full and sleepy . .

P: Den you be goin to sleep and dey be like (mimicking in female voice) "Whatcha doin? Sleep like me. Get your ass up!"

R: Dey be like, "All you do is sleep and eat." I'm like, "You got that right."

P: All the good stuff. Grits, biscuits, sausage, eggs, . .

R: Eggs, everything.
P: Everything.
R: Everything. Cereal and shit.
P: Every-thing.
K: They go to bed like seven thirty in the evening.
R: Not my gramps! My gramps dey be goin bed at eleven thirty gettin' up at five.
P: Ho dup ... bout grandparents talkin'...
R: Uhm hum.
P: (mimicking a female voice) "Well, it's five o'clock. It's time to go."

After another comment from Roger on grandparents waking up early, Patrick shifts the conversation back to the subject of eating, that is, his grandmother's preoccupation with his eating. For some reason (because the same is also true in my family), grandmothers down south never think their children and grandchildren eat enough.

P: Then you know you just ate. You be full of dat big breakfast.
R: That's my grandmother. . .
P: (mimicking grandmother) "Boy you losing weight! Come on and eat. You better eat that!"
R: That's my grandparents.
P: . . . eat dinner around fo o'clock.
R: And then [you] have snacks... 
P: Yeah!...that's why you be gettin', be eatin' around three, four, five...
R: Be eatin' five, six times a day.
P: And they all be big, big as [what].
R: My grandmother, you could roll her big ole butt down the road.

P: (laughing) (mimicking grandmother breathing hard) "ha, haah."

Up to this point Patrick and Roger had made fun of (e.g., signified on) the ways of old folks and the manner in which they communicated these ways. The two interlocuters take their signifying a bit further when they talk about how big their grandmothers are. Thus, the talking or rapping, in this instance, includes signifying as well as bits of story-telling.

The delightfully dramatic mimicry Patrick exhibits above is augmented when Freda joins in. Having completed my tutoring with her, she enters the conversation and shifts it to mothers' attitudes toward cooking. These attitudes may not be unique to African American women, but the manner in which they're expressed certainly is.

R: Dey be like, "You hungry?"
Freda: I know, be like, "Come on, you better come and eat right now cause if I sit down you ain't gettin nuthin'."

R: "I know one thing, you gonna be hungry."

... 

P: Go home for Christmas. ... 

R: See, my mom, my mom she don't cook breakfast for us no more.

F: Hell no!

P: My mom don't either!

R: My mom she cook on weekends. ...

P: My mother be at work, and den she expectin it on the table, you know what I'm sayin'? I'm like, "What? What I look like?" (mimics mother) "I [ain't] cookin' for you no more." I be like. ...

R: During the week, we used to cook.

P: "What y'all been doin' all day? How come you ain't take nothin' out den?" She be like, "You ain't take nothin' out? I cook if you take somethin' out. At least take somethin' out."

R: That's what my mom, my mom she take somethin' out and den write a note and put it in the oven and den she gets home she expects it to be done during the week. Den on the weekends she. ...
P: On the weekends she cooks, but the weekdays she be like.
"Shitit. I'ma cook me somethin' to eat. Y'all can cook for y'all itselfs."

This last remark by Patrick is a delightfully funny one. Not only does he capture his mother's voice, complete with four letter words and southern dialect, but also her staunchly independent temperament. At this point in their lives, she apparently felt that her children were grown up enough to cook for themselves, that they no longer needed their mother to prepare their every meal. After all, practically speaking, she worked the entire day and was probably too exhausted to put in more hours cooking dinner for children who, comparatively, had little to do during the day.

But apart from the reasons behind Mrs. Ellis's actions, what's most important about Patrick's remark is his use of mimicry. In fact, all of the interlocutors effectively use this art, which may suggest its prominence in African American discourse. Smitherman is one of the few scholars, however, who has discussed the role of "mimicry" in black rhetoric. She writes,

A deliberate imitation of the speech and mannerisms of someone else may be used for authenticity, ridicule, or rhetorical effect. For instance, whenever rappers quote somebody, they attempt to quote in the tone of voice, gestures, and particular idiom and language characteristics of that person. A black female complains to a friend about her man, for instance: "Like he come tellin me this old mess bout [speaker shifts to restatin and imitatin] 'Well, baby, if you
just give me a chance, Ima have it together pretty soon.' That's his word, you know, always talkin' bout having something 'together.'" (94-95)

Any one or all of the purposes for which mimicry may be employed could apply in this case, but ridicule seems the most likely. Because my informants' attitudes and values differ greatly from their parents and grandparents, they find it expedient to ridicule them. And they do so by imitating the voice, the character of their forebears, for with such imitation comes the humorous appeal. In an amusing way, it highlights the differences between the generations, even the differences in language use. Obviously, there are key differences in grammatical and phonological features (albeit not drastic) between the students and their relatives, but there are, more importantly, differences in overall self-expression. The students don't provide a wealth of detail on this difference, but their reactions to the requests of their elders, for one, make it very clear how they differ from the generations before them. Patrick's response to his grandfather's attempt to wake him is stated sarcastically, "Gramps try to wake me up"; and his reaction to his mother when she expected dinner on the table after she arrived home from work reads, "I'm like, 'What? What I look like?'." Quite possibly, the students' parents and grandparents may have expressed themselves in the same way when they were young. Yet, on the other hand, one can't help but imagine that
there is some slight evidence here of the difference between home and street language and culture.

The dramatic and performative quality of the students' talk is another important element of vernacular discourse in the tradition of Mother Wit. It's not enough to tell one's auditors merely how early old people arise in the morning and what they do once they are up (as academic expository discourse might require). Rather, the facts must be presented in an animated way, in a way that manifests the performative abilities of the teller. Admittedly, the students are not creatively stitching together their version of a Signifying Monkey or Stagolee toast as Abrahams's informants did (see Deep Down), but they are adding drama and personal style to their messages. It's these kind of rhetorical qualities, along with the more general ones like signifying and rapping, that are rarely made use of in the formal work of the English composition classroom.

"A nigguh always got a story": Narrating from Experience

Ritual story-telling and narrative speech have long been a part of the tradition of Mother Wit. Smitherman claims that BEV speakers "will render their general, abstract observations about life, love, people, in the form of a concrete narrative" (147). I managed to collect a few examples of students' oral narratives that I think may well illustrate this point. The first example is taken from a session in which I tutored Gary and Darren. The session
took place in a tutoring facility of the basic writing program. In this session, I helped the students decide on an appropriate topic for their second essay. According to the type-written essay prompt, the students were required to write about a time when they "thought, hoped, or were led to believe that an event would be significant, but when, in fact, it wasn't." Students were to write first about the change they expected, and then how it happened that the change didn't occur. Gary thought of writing about when his father promised him a car, just the kind of car he wanted, in fact. He considered that it would change him with regard to his popularity with girls but not with regard to his relationship with his family, that is, that his staying out so late in the car would cause him to spend less time with his family. After a few comments from Darren and me, Gary responds as follows:

Tutor: Did you have any expectations for change?
Gary: Uh, I knew it was gon be some changes, with the girls. But not with my mother or family, you know. I really didn't pay attention till my mother sat down and tol me. And then, it was like three months later my car broke down and uhm, that's when my father came back to town and uhm, cause my head gasket fell off off the engine,

T: U huh
G: and it cost like a thousand dollars to repair cause I need a new engine.

T: Wow!

G: And uhm, I only had so much money in the bank, and my mother wouldn't help cause I wouldn't let her use my car sometimes when her car broke down, and uh she wouldn't help me so I go to [our] father and uhm, he he bought he you know he bought another engine and stuff, and told me, you know I better, I better start treatin' this car like I treat myself with a little respect and stop racin' it all the time and stop, you know stop stayin' up stayin' out, you know going places all the time and take care of it cause if not, next time it break down nobody, he's not gonna help.

Tutor: Uh huh.

G: I'ma have to fix it. So, it seem like when I got my car I became more wise what to do with the car, and how to treat a car instead of misusin' it. And now, after after that, uhm, it's like when I see the car it's like it's, it's like I treat it as me I want to take care of it cause if I don't, it's not gonna be there,

T: Yeah, ok.

G: Have to be more responsible. Because now I see a car as, as my baby,

T: (laughs)
G: cause I don't have any kids or nothin'. So that's my kid. I got to take care of it. That's what's happenin' to me now. You know that's the change I I had over this many years since that incident when my car went out.

T: Ok.

G: And that hurt real bad because my car was in the shop for three weeks,

T: Uhhuh

G: and I got it out like the same day as my homecomin', and I was like, you know like I like had it out like two hours befo my homecomin',

T: Uhhum

G: started. You know man, it was like, God! God! came into the picture, you know. Got the car out within two hours of homecomin' had to get ready had to go pick up my girl. And plus durin' that time that's when I, met her, I tol her I had a car but she didn't believe me,

T: Uhhum

G: cause I tol her it was in the shop.

T: (laughs)

G: And a lot of girls be like "yeah, right," you know?

T: Yeah.

G: . . . you know, I had to, impress her and stuff because she thought I was a liar. . . ., when I got it out it was like (in a whispered tone) "thank God!" It was like the
happiest times of my life. . . . it was like I just got it. [it was] a whole new car again.

Perhaps the most obvious feature of Gary’s response to my question is its narrative quality. Although at certain points Gary suggests that some event caused a change (e.g., the incident with his car), he appears to be more caught up in narrating the sequence of events that transpired rather than in discussing the matter of an expected change. It may well be that, like other students at this point, he hadn't yet grasped the nature of the writing assignment, and confuses it with the one before it where the focus was on an event that affected a change. Indeed, by the time that he makes a final statement regarding his experience, he hasn't (unbeknown to him) come up with an "expected change."

What's so fascinating about what Gary does, though, is that he seems to string together a continuous series of episodes concerning his car. I hesitate to go so far as to call it "meandering," a term that Smitherman uses to describe the structure of black narratives (148). After all, Gary does stick to a more or less linear form. The car breaks down, his father comes to town and pays to have it repaired, Gary changes his attitude toward the car, he gets it back just in time for homecoming, and finally Gary has a splendid time in his "new" car. But even if it does lack meandering routes, it's interesting to note the personal commentary interspersed between the narration. For instance, after Gary was instructed by his
father to take better care of the car, he comments "Because now I see a car as, as my baby, cause I don't have any kids or nothin'. So that's my kid. I got to take care of it." Gary's reflection on his current disposition toward the car along with his claim that since he doesn't have kids, the car is his kid add a personal touch to the narration.

This personal quality is shown even further in the comments he makes in what follows. First, he expresses his disappointment over the condition of the car, "And that hurt real bad because my car was in the shop for three weeks. . . ." Then, as if rapping to Darren and me, he says, "You know man, it was like, God! God! came into the picture, you know." Finally, in an aside to explain how girls react to guys who say that they have cars in the shop, Gary runs it down, "And a lot of girls be like 'yeah, right,' you know?" Although here Gary did not do the kind of mimicking that Patrick did or even the kind that he himself does in his writing, these statements similarly suggest a performative quality in his relating of events. This may in part explain why he, unlike many students, favored opportunities to read his papers in class or be interviewed. Unfortunately, however, opportunities for vernacular display or performance in the classroom are few and far between.

A second example of vernacular narrative discourse comes from a tutoring session I had with Jimmy. It exhibits more of a meandering pattern than Gary's does, but it also contains strong
elements of *rapping* and *running it down*. According to Kochman, this later form of discourse, refers to the communication of information by way of an explanation, narrative, and giving advice ("Toward an Ethnography" 254). Several of the statements Jimmy makes could be interpreted as his "running it down" to me. Still, I place the example here because Jimmy's principal objective, at this point in our session, is to relate what happened to Gene, a fellow football teammate and friend from high school. For the purpose of clarity, it might be worth pointing out where each of the various discourse forms are deployed in the conversation.

Unlike Gary's, Jimmy's assignment didn't actually require the narration of a specific event that might have led to a change. Rather, his required more of an exposition, a kind of description and analysis of his identity. This assignment was for the third essay in 052A, and it was the third time that I had met with Jimmy to discuss it. The session took place on November 18th at the athletic study tables, amidst the noise of other athletes and tutors working on various subjects. Here, Jimmy and I grappled with defining his identity, or the kind of selves that constitute his identity. The first three or four lines resemble *running it down*, whereas the narrative proceeds immediately after it.

*Jimmy:* But I mean, its like stuff right there because people just don't know. I mean, all you can do is observe and try to help the black people, that's all, you
know. . . . I try to talk, you know, try to tell, you know, I was kickin' some stuff to uhm Gene when I was in high school. . . . and when I got up here and everything, you know, he was kinda like you know, kinda nonchalant about the whole thing, you know, kinda of shy away from listening and everything. But when he got up here and everything. . . . Grant Stokes and Harold Ross and I was tellin' him, tryin' to tell the brother everything you know, . . . Gene . . . well, damn! Why, you know, he laid back, you know. Cause Grant, Grant Stokes sittin' down, you know talkin' to him and everything, you know, like he started kickin' knowledge and everything, you know. I know I got knowledge. . . . cause I was like, boom! We was kickin' knowledge . . . we was goin' nine to five you know. I was like, it was like ah . . . (makes filler sound) blaze, blaze, blaze, it was like boom! And blaze, blaze, blaze on that right there. . . . we were schoolin' im. We were tryin' to help him, you know.

This first part of the exchange is not directly related to defining Jimmy's identity, but, like many of our tutoring sessions, it exemplifies his multifaceted language use. Basically Jimmy is relating to me what happened when he and Gene came to football
camp in August. When they were in high school, Jimmy tried to impress upon Gene some of the insights he had gained about black people from his reading of Afrocentric literature. Gene wasn't, however, very impressed until he came to football camp and met Grant Stokes and Harold Ross, two teammates, who confirmed Jimmy's words.

What's interesting about this event is the way in which Jimmy refers to their attempts to enlighten Gene. He says that they were "kickin' knowledge" to him. Now, the term "knowledge," in this context, is a standard one in vernacular semantics. Labov mentions it in his 1968 study of adolescents in New York city. His informants engaged in a type of discourse called "rifting"--a formal display of "heavy knowledge." Such knowledge included, in the main, doctrines of the Nation of Islam, a religious/social organization that gained (and continues to gain) widespread influence among the grass roots black community because of its frank words about the evils of the white man and the superiority of the black man. "Kickin'" is, I believe, a term of more recent vintage. None of my other informants used it, but I've heard popular comedian and film star Eddie Murphy use it to suggest when something really powerful or exciting was going on. By "kickin' knowledge," then, Jimmy means that in a kind of high intensity, fever-pitched fashion they were giving Gene a solid education or "schoolin' him." Jimmy's blow-by-blow description of how the session went intimates the excitement and fervor of the
expression. Though it's impossible to transcribe accurately the sounds Jimmy made to express it, his exclamations were evident: "we was goin' nine to five, you know. I was like, it was like ah . . . blaze, blaze, blaze, it was like boom! And blaze, blaze, blaze on that right there!"

In what follows, Jimmy actually tells when and how the business of kickin' knowledge with Grant Stokes got started. Yet, he only remains there for a time before he lights on other subjects. This digression, of course, attests to the meandering nature of Jimmy's discourse, but the outstanding part of it is how the "I" comes through during the course of it. Notice also his imitation of his teammates to whom he "kicked knowledge."

Tutor: When did you do this?
J: When we first came to camp . . . when everybody first quarter like you know how . . . and Grant, Grant uhm, I guess takin' uhm Peter up under his wing . . . if your you when ever I hear some knowledge, you know, I'm out, hey I'm there . . . I'm tryin' to learn something new everyday (with stress on the first syllable). . . . you know, sittin' down talkin' to me everyday, you know, kickin' knowledge . . . I be sittin' there talkin' to him for hours . . . but, I mean but, uhm . . . I sat down for a minute like, you know and den Sabrina came over and listen everything you know, and we joke about it . . . later on how we all
knew each other and everything . . . how we . . . we joked about it, you know, a little different . . . I mean it helped out dough because people came to me askin' me . . . they was like, "Damn man, could you tell me some of that stuff? You know, that sounds cool . . ." you know . . . you know it was like . . . it was like, you know, my main objective is to get back to myself now, you know, because . . . I wanna know myself, you know, I mean, it's like . . . yo, like, you know, . . [she knows I've got everything. She knows I feel guilty . . . the world and everything,] you know . . . I'm a nice guy, you know, I try to be a nice guy but people give you an attitude like, you know . . . I get very, very, very vindictive, very vindictive. . . you know. People don't really think, you know. People don't know what I'ma, what I'ma do. I'm not predictable. That's my [asset?] right there. I'm not predictable. No one will never know what I'ma do next . . . you know, I mean. . . I could talk to people. I'm about to go back over there . . . you know, whatever. Oh, sure you know . . . I mean I do think about my own time . . . when I wanna do it.

Granted the topic of Jimmy's assignment involved defining his identity, therefore necessitating a projection of the self, of the "I." Yet the manner in which he expresses the way he is resonates with a kind of braggadocio or bad man posture, not unlike the
legendary Stagolee (for discussion see Smitherman and Abrahams). Although there are several sprinkled throughout the discourse, I mainly get this sense from a few statements. At the point at which Jimmy begins to mention his being a "nice guy," he switches from a strict narration to a sort of rapping style. First he casually admits that he's a nice guy, or tries to be a nice guy, but his reaction to people who express to him a (negative) attitude is to be "vindictive." As he assertively puts it, "I get very, very, very vindictive, very vindictive." Then, Jimmy says of himself, "People don't know what I'ma do. I'm not predictable. . . . No one will never know what I'ma do next." Such authoritative pronouncements create an image of individual toughness, control, and fearlessness. Although again this is not the kind of narrative boasting exemplified in the toast, Abrahams's notion of the "intrusive I" might be a suitable application. Abrahams writes that

In narratives the performer uses the most subtle words that he can within his range of experience. . . . He is master of the situation he is narrating, director of the heroes' lives in the narration. He achieves this kind of control not only through the force of his vocal powers but through the creation of a narrative persona which I call, for want of a better term, the "intrusive I." (Deep Down 58)
This creation or projection of a "narrative persona" seems to characterize Jimmy's narrative and expository modes. By the end of the following portion that persona emanates in full force.

J: And den that's, I mean, see I got that right there from observin' lookin' at people, watchin'... watch how people act. You know, in the army man... they have an inferiority problem... dey really do. ... dey, dey power trip, ego trip... they just wanna be in control... Several times, I had to tell her, I was like, "M'am, do not get in my face. Do not come in my face. I'm not playin'. Cause I would hurt you so bad... You will never in your life... [let anybody] hurt you." Don't I mean cause, you know, if I'm not crowdin' your face, don't crowd mine. I try to keep peace, you know... bottom line, you know is you gotta talk, you know, we have that problem you know... I mean, I feelin' like [he doin] too much. I like him, but he just too, he think he can keep the world goin, you know, get like a [federal] I gotta... you rather help him out... I don't know, he tryin' to be too tough... yea I know, like said... Yes m'am, you know... my mom used to always tell me, she was like, you know, "Say, yes m'am, no m'am." And I respect that my mother always said that. I was like, "That's bull." You know, I was like, "Yea, okay." I mean I do it from time to time now. But you know, I be
like, "Yes sir, no sir." I get people thinkin', you know well, polite, yes ma'am, no ma'am this and that you know. . . on the inside like, you know, like I ain't got no. . . up to them. . . you don't even deserve my respect . . . [cause first of all] I don't respect people that don't respect themselves. . . I for damn sure don't respect you if you don't respect me. You gets No Respect! They tell me . . . she tell me . . . like, you know, I be havin this other side of me, you know so . .

Unfortunately, neither the audio-tape recording or my fieldnotes reveal what individuals Jimmy was referring to. But since he mentioned earlier in our conversation that he has problems subjecting himself to authority, I suspect that he's referring to individuals such as teachers and coaches who are in a position of authority over him. While some of what Jimmy asserts may be his own unique way of expressing himself or dealing with authority, it's important to point out that (because of black instincts for survival in the white world) it isn't uncommon to hear any inner-city black man or woman express the same feelings in a similar manner. The first retort, in particular, reflects so precisely vernacular language use and the "bad nigguh" attitude:

Several times I had to tell her, I was like, 'M'am, do not get in my face. Do not come in my face. I'm not playin'. Cause I would hurt you so bad. . . You will never in your life . . . [let
anybody] hurt you. . . . if I'm not crowdin' your face, don't crowd mine."

Jimmy's threat to hurt this perhaps hitherto unsuspecting female is indication enough of how "bad" he makes himself out to be. But in black vernacular culture, to "get in someone's face" or "crowd their face" is tantamount to physical violence. Interestingly, during one of my tutoring sessions, I overheard Paul say similar words to Shawn regarding the study table monitors "they bet'not [better not] get in my face like they get in Jimmy's."

Typically, unless one is well able to call the person's bluff, one simply doesn't get into a black man or woman's face. I don't doubt, in fact, that Jimmy would carry out his threat. But the point of the expression is not to induce violence; instead it is to project an image of oneself as beholden of verbal and physical prowess. This image comes through again in Jimmy's statements about the showing of respect:

... you don't even deserve my respect ... cause I don't respect people that don't respect themselves ... I for damn sure don't respect you if you don't respect me. You gets No Respect!

The purpose of projecting this "bad man" image is not, however, to intimidate for intimidation's sake; rather it is, once again, to survive. One might think of it as a black rhetorical strategy for survival in the white world. Abrahams stresses this point in his
introduction to *Afro-American Folktales*. Writing about the ability to signify, he states that

The strategy of being able to signify is especially useful in dealings with those who have greater power than the good talkers. In the Afro-American world, populated largely by blacks and yet commonly under the political and economic control of whites, the usefulness of learning wariness and counteractive devices of wit is obvious. (6)

While in his discussion with me Jimmy tends to employ a direct, confrontational strategy, there are more indirect "counteractive devices of wit," as Abrahams calls them. It is in this sense that having Mother Wit--not merely book knowledge--becomes so critical. It’s the generations of folkloric wisdom that have assured the survival and progress of the race. As demonstrated by the students in this study, metaphorical language, signifying, rapping, and narrative discourse all play a part in the exercise of this wisdom. But the students have come to the university to acquire book knowledge, to learn academic ways of knowing, communicating, and valuing. And though because of twelve years of primary and secondary school these ways are not entirely unfamiliar to them, the unique form these ways assume in the academy surely puts the students at a disadvantage—a disadvantage not just in terms of their lack of preparedness for college work but, more significantly, in terms of the different linguistic and cultural identity they must to some degree be
socialized into. For the research on cultural difference (see chapter two) has clearly shown us that socialization into school language and culture is by no means a given. Indeed, because the academy often denies nonmainstream students a sense of the value and relevance of their own language and culture, it is frequently met with forms of resistance.

One such form of resistance is students' exercise of Mother Wit—that is, the many and varied BEV discourse practices encompassed by Mother Wit. Because BEV has little, if any, place or privilege in the academy, students' deliberate use of it in speech or in writing signals their resistance to conform to the sociolinguistic expectations of the academy. The student writing that I describe in the next chapter is a most telling site of this resistance. It is a virtual contact zone, a clashing point, for vernacular and elite discursive forms.
CHAPTER VI

VERNACULAR DISCOURSE AND THE ACADEMIC WRITING OF AFRICAN AMERICAN STUDENTS

... If I put it in my own words it comes out better. It makes more sense. ... Like when people say you know tell like on an essay or something, they say put this in your own words. I can do that, but if you say put it in your own words and you know use certain words you know ... and things like that you know that gets hard for me. I'll spend all day on that stuff.

--Patrick Ellis, English 052A

She [Mrs. Flowers] teaches young Margaret [Maya Angelou] that she must use the spaces left, that she must add her own voice to that of the dominant narratives, for only the sound of her own voice can convert these texts into enabling vehicles; can resist their silencing potential.

--William Cook, "Writing in the Spaces Left"

Perhaps one of the most intriguing, yet bewildering, bits of lore that I collected in this study was how much in their element many African American male students seemed to be when relating their experiences orally and how, on the other hand, very much out of their element they seemed when relating the exact same experience in writing. Of course, most students (not to mention most people throughout the world) find it far easier to talk than to write. But with these students it wasn't merely a matter of what was to them a more comfortable medium of communication. Rather, these students, their teachers and I recognized, were avid
storytellers, were skilled at composing or crafting a tale that vividly recaptures an event or an experience.

I first became aware of this kind of predilection for the oral over the written, when I sat in on an in-class responding session with Peter, Demetrius, Henry, and Mark, the white male student who was on the track team but coveted playing football. The students were asked to respond to their first drafts of the autobiographical essay, one of the major writing assignments for English 053A. Henry didn't have more than a few lines written, Peter nearly a page, and Demetrius and Mark at least two pages. Somewhat disdainful of what they had written, no one wanted to read his aloud first. Finally, Mark read his, then Demetrius, Peter, and Henry. When it came time for Demetrius to read his paper, it struck me as rather odd that he only read a paragraph or so of what was at least two pages of text. He told us that he preferred to talk through the rest of his paper, thus relating to us, conversation-like, his story about the effect that his father's death had on him. I don't have a complete transcription of the portion of the essay that Demetrius read, but the passage below illustrates his progressive movement from a formal to a conversational style of expression.

Actually the hardest time in my adolescent days was the summer after my eighth grade freshman year. The reason I say that cause that was like the time period when my father had died, you know. And basically, when I had both parents, you know, I really... I wasn't as independent as Peter was.
I was mostly, you know, dependent on my ol man. You know, he, when he was there he was pretty much finacially, we were financially safe. He owned like a cafe and we had a lot of stuff, you know, we sold and stuff like that in the house. Pretty much, I just hang with him, you know, and get the money. I be gettin money from him, you know. I be with Pops, man. I, you know, always be with him and, you know, he'd always give me money. I never, you know, have to worry bout gettin' money from my mom, you know. The money that she would make, you know, she could keep for herself. You know what I'm saying? So uhm... you know, after he died, it was real hard for me to adjust, you know.

Aside from the obvious conversational expressions like "you know" and "you know what I'm saying?" expressions such as "I just hang with him;" "I be with Pops, man;" and "I was mostly dependent... on my ol man" call to mind the rapping style of discourse mentioned in the previous chapter. That is, these expressions call to mind, in Kochman's words, rapping as "descriptive of narration, a colorful rundown of some past event" to one's peer group ("Toward an Ethnography" 242).

To my surprise, Peter opted to do the same as Demetrius. He began reading some of what he had written down but not long afterwards began to narrate how he became independent through his many job experiences. Interestingly, at one moment during his narration, he manifested the facial expressions of one enigrated by his own telling, by the very performative act of storytelling. Given the African American oral tradition that these students are undoubtedly privy to, it should come as no surprise that they
exhibit such tendencies. What is, however, surprising, or even bewildering, is that these students' vivid and entertaining stories are not expressed as such in their writing. According to Ms. Mitchell, who has discussed the matter with the students quite a few times, something about the act of writing for these students alters the process of narration. Important details, dialogue, in fact, even stories are omitted from the students' essays. By the time of my interview with her in late February, she, however, did report that Demetrius was making progress on incorporating such material. Still, with Peter, Henry, and also Patrick, she confessed that their oral narratives were richer and more complicated than what they produced for their final written drafts.

Although it's difficult to pinpoint exactly what the students' troubles are (after all, Henry himself couldn't explain it to me), Patrick's notion of the difficulty that is required for him to write in words that are not his own may hint at it. Using his own words, so he reasons, "comes out better," that is, "makes more sense." It is this "sense" that I seek to explore in this chapter. By examining the various types of writing my informants engaged in during autumn of 1991 and winter of 1992, I attempt to describe the language and logic of African American male students academic writing--to see whether, in effect, this "sense" that Patrick speaks of is traceable to the vernacular discourse practices I described in the previous chapter. Of course, this is not to say that the students in this study were totally unfamiliar with written academic
discourse (and hadn't, to certain extent, already appropriated it); rather, it is to say that, for whatever reasons, they consciously or subconsciously used vernacular forms in their academic prose.

One should not, however, expect a one-to-one correspondence between students' oral and written languages. That is to say, each of the BEV discourse practices I have identified in speech do not necessarily appear (at least not in the same form) in writing. But the question is whether they appear at all and, if so, how they are used in the context of writing. If, as Ms. Mitchell suggests, there is a highly metaphorical quality to the students' oral language, then how much of this quality is utilized in school writing—how much of it is lost in their attempts to write in academically sanctioned ways?

**Talkin' Black on White: Vernacular Voice in Writing**

When I speak of students engaging in "academic writing," I'm actually speaking of a hodgepodge of written material that, in the main, took place in an academic setting. Some of this material is journalistic or impressionistic, some essayist. The writing that will be analyzed here falls into four broad categories: 1) journal entries, which themselves are so varied as to include responses to readings and other class activities, and mini expository essays; 2) research writing in courses outside of English; 3) essay exams (midterm and final); and 4) personal narrative essays. Critics may question whether some of these categories (e.g., certain journal
entries and the personal narratives) are authentic examples of academic discourse, examples, that is, of the rigorous critical thinking, reading, and writing that is the hallmark of academic work. I include them all, however, because they are artifacts of literacy—artifacts that, while not essentially expository or research-based, nonetheless exhibit characteristics of academic prose (e.g., description, comparison, and cause and effect). But, in fact, because much of the students' writing is devoid of an objective, clinical stance toward discourse I find in them the strong presence of a black vernacular voice.

Naturally, not all of these various writings resonate with such a voice. The students were called upon to write for the academy in ways that the academy deems acceptable, and so they often did. For instance, in spite of Paul's use of vernacular speech, his writing doesn't manifest a vernacular voice. Demetrius and Jimmy's writing, on the other hand, does manifest a vernacular voice, yet in very limited ways. In Demetrius's placement essay exam, for instance, he gives a very realistic account of his mother's admonition to him for his misbehavior. Although the account doesn't possess any features of BEV grammar, intuition tells me that it bears a vernacular tone. (The following excerpt, as well as all of those included in this chapter, is typed as it appears in the original piece of writing.) Demetrius quotes his mother as saying,
Demetrius your behavior today wasn't good and you know I will always tell you when it is but today it wasn't and I feel its time for you to learn what we mean by behavior. People tend to look at you and judge how I'm raising you and if your acting like a fool they think your not being raised proper. Of course, your young but when I say no I mean that and people will notice if you continue to do things that I have already told you not to.

Not only does the tone, in a general sense, derive from vernacular culture. The concept of people "looking at" a child as judgment on how a mother is raising him (or her) is also derivative of the culture. While in practice such judgments on parenting may hold true for any culture, I doubt that the onlookers in other cultures would express the child's misbehaving in quite the same way that Demetrius's mother did, that is, as his "actin like a fool." Interestingly enough, Patrick used this same expression when he referred to his clownish behavior in high school. It bears a slightly different meaning there (more in the way of doing silly things to make others laugh rather than as with Demetrius showing disrespect for elders), but the cultural concept is the same. From Patrick's papers we learn also of other terms that are used synonymously with "actin' a fool" such as acting "retarded," which, of course, is a purposeful overstatement of the case.
The vernacular language in Jimmy's writing is similarly expressed at the semantic level (see Smitherman for a discussion of Black semantics). Actually, that Jimmy uses the vernacular in writing at all comes as a bit of surprise since, of the five informants, he seems to exercise the greatest control over his use of both academic and vernacular discourses. A couple of vernacular expressions pertaining to relationships with others appeared in a draft of Jimmy's first 052A essay. The assignment required that students write about a significant event in their lives, one that changed them in some way. Jimmy wrote about his having moved to another city and meeting a girl by the name of Allison.

When I first met Allison, she and Audrey were on their way to Cosmetology school. She was wearing some Levi's 501 shrink to fit jeans, with a white knitted sweater, carrying a suitcase full of cosmetics supplies. I called myself trying to be a gentlemen, by offering to carry her suitcase to the car!!! And without any hesitation she told me No!!! Naturally I had my feelings hurt because I had waited about a week or so to meet her. At that moment I felt like a fool on a search for a needle in a haystack. I tried to remained my composure and replied, "Now next time when I don't ask to carry your suitcase don't say, "I'm not being a gentleman" because you had your chance." Not like I was someone special but I had to speak up for myself.

Three expressions in this passage strike me as semantically linked to BEV. First, Jimmy says that "I called myself trying to be. . .," and then that "I had my feelings hurt." Neither term has, to
my knowledge, any special connotation, but they represent vernacular ways of expressing personal action and personal loss. Actually, Smitherman defines the former term as "to assume to be doing something, to intend to do a thing, as in 'I call myself having this dinner ready on time"(258). The notion of "calling oneself trying to be something" (instead of simply "I tried to be something") and of "having one's feelings hurt" (instead of "my feelings were hurt") suggest also a peculiar stress on the self in such expressions. The final expression appears in the last sentence: "Not like I was someone special. . . ." I've heard the phrase rendered alternatively in a mildly agitated tone as, "Not like I'm something special or anything." Again, the sense of the expression has to do with the manner in which the speaker (or writer, in this case) makes reference to himself.

One might think of these self-referential expressive forms as pervasively egocentric, but such an interpretation overlooks the fact that these forms are deeply embedded in BEV as a rhetoric. That is to say, self-referential discourse is virtually synonymous with BEV discourse practices because of the social value African Americans place on verbal performance, on artful talk. In "Rapping and Capping," Abrahams explains that

There are a number of other devices at the disposal of such artful talkers, which they use to focus attention on themselves. The most obvious of these concern the use of the first person singular pronoun, the intrusive use of "I" and "me." These pronouns are, in turn, commonly associated
with active verbs (and conversely, the "you" character is identified and characterized with verbs of privation and constraint). (135)

Through these self-referential devices, the artful talker, or "man-of-words," not only calls attention to himself before an audience of his peers but also, in symbiotic relation with this group, he constructs an identity or ethos for himself. Much like the Greek rhetor who establishes his good character (i.e., ethos) before his audience,22 Jimmy, for instance, constructs an ethos of himself as a gentleman in contrast to the ethos of a person who considers himself "someone special" to Allison. For this reason, it seems, Jimmy felt compelled to tell his readers (not Allison) that his offering to assist Allison with her suitcase was "Not like I thought I was someone special." It was instead a gentlemanly act, one that he felt required him "to speak up for myself."

While this kind of ethos or self construction is most obvious in the Black tradition of storytelling (see Deep Down in the Jungle), as the above example shows, it is also quite evident in everyday speech and to some extent in written prose. In this way, BEV rhetoric reflects aspects of social constructionist thought, especially the notion that knowledge and selves are "constructs generated by communities of like-minded peers" (Bruffee 774). Mother wit is certainly a construct of community-generated knowledge, and the

22 See Aristotle's Art of Rhetoric.
various discursive forms Mother wit encompasses reflect community constructions of self, identity, and reality. As Cecil Brown states in the preface of his novel *The Life and Loves of Mr. Jiveass Nigger*, "Black speech is reality construction at its best. . ." (xxxiii). It is the construction of reality vis-à-vis white American language and culture.

A final example of vernacular language use in Jimmy's writing appears later in the same paper. Jimmy's rendering of the dialogue between his cousin and him demonstrates his use of the vernacular in speech as well as, in a literary sense, in writing.

> It only took me a matter of minutes to rethink what I did and called him back with a humble voice. "My fault dog, for real man, my bad." "Please tell me again?"

Jimmy's reference to his cousin as "dog" suggests here an instance of black vernacular naming. With the rise of hip-hop, nowadays almost any word could be used to refer to an individual or group. I don't know that "dog" has any particular meaning here, except that, given the circumstances under which it is used, it must serve as a term of endearment. "My bad" is a slang term of recent vintage. By a simple process of substitution, the standard English possessive pronoun/noun combination "my fault," or "my mistake" is transformed into a uniquely black vernacular (possessive pronoun/adjective) expression, "my bad."
Since I've raised the issue of a substitution between standard American English and black English vernacular at this point, I might add another example of it in student writing. I was intrigued by the title of a paper written by Ronnie, one of Jimmy's classmates and football teammates. The paper was written for 053A and focused on students' participation in a group that had its own unique identity. Ronnie entitled his essay "Real Niggaz's Don't Die." Since the time Ronnie wrote this paper, I've discovered that the title derives verbatim (excepting the "'s," which Ronnie mistakenly uses as a plural form of the noun) from the title of a song by rap group N.W.A. (i.e., Niggaz With Attitude). In spite of this discovery, I'm still struck by Ronnie's use of this title for his paper. Why Real Niggaz's? And why don't they die? In its own way, the content of the paper bears out the meaning conveyed rather obliquely by the title. It reveals the bold-faced attitude or stance that Ronnie and his friends have adopted as retaliation for society's rejection of them as black men. Identifying themselves in repugnant terms signifies this stance and displaces their identification with an unjust society. Instead, they have their own society, one in which they feel loved and respected. In describing what it was like when he entered the house of one of The Real Niggaz--the "honey comb hideout" as they called it--Ronnie writes

... I will never forget the feeling just walking through the hideout and seeing the rest of the niggaz. I knew that I could say Fuck you! to society and its shitty rules because I
was in a society of my own a very special one and everyone in this room loved me.

Thus, the title (and much of the paper for that matter) may be considered a form of *signification*, or what Henry Louis Gates has conveniently labeled *Signifyin(g)* to suggest the distinctively black usage of the term. The title signifies essentially in two ways. First, "Real Niggaz" is a repetition of the pejorative label "niggers" (or "real niggers"), those who, particularly in the minds of racists, are the worst sort of black people. Yet it is a repetition with a black difference (see *The Signifying Monkey* 45-46): the standard English *er* is supplanted by the black vernacular *az* to affirm absolutely and positively hard core blackness, with the corresponding denial of anyone or anything that poses an existential threat to blackness. In traditional rhetoric, this kind of sound/letter change is termed *agnominatio*—"two words of different meaning but similar sound brought together" (Lanham 3).

The introduction to H. Rap Brown's autobiography, *Die Nigger Die!* expresses most eloquently what Ronnie (and N.W.A.) mean by *Real Niggaz*. While Brown's sentiments do not represent the views of all African Americans on the usage of "nigger," they do accurately represent street vernacular usage of the term. Brown writes,

To be Black in this country is to be a nigger. To be a nigger is to resist both white and negro death. It is to
be free in spirit, if not body. It is the spirit of resistance which has prepared Blacks for the ultimate struggle. This word, "nigger," which is taboo in negro and white America, becomes meaningful in the Black community. Among Blacks it is not uncommon to hear the words, "my nigger," (addressed to a brother as an expression of kinship and brotherhood and respect for having resisted), or "He's a bad nigger!," meaning, He'll stand up for himself. He won't let you down. He'll go down with you. When Blacks call negroes "niggers," however, it takes on the negativeness of white and negro usage.

Negroes and whites have wished death to all Blacks, to all niggers. Their sentiment is "Die Nigger Die!"--either by becoming a negro or by institutionalized or active genocide.

Blacks know, however, that no matter how much or how hard negroes and whites may try, ultimately it will be the negro and his allies who will "Die, die, die!" (ii-iii)

A second way in which Ronnie's title signifies is that it reverses or rebuts the assumption that oppression categorically yields death or defeat, for the Real Niggaz are those who don't die. Rather, according to N.W.A., they multiply.

I will examine signifying in greater depth below. I devote substantial treatment to students' uses of signifying, what may be the most pervasive vernacular element in their prose. To highlight this element, toward the end of the chapter, I compare students' uses of signifying to those of African American published writers. But this extensive discussion may perhaps best be framed by a consideration of the other major discourse practices identified in students' writing. Since Patrick chose as topics for some of his
journal entries activities that invoke certain vernacular terminology, I'd like to continue with my discussion of semantics, only focusing more on how the terms and metaphors serve as modes of invention. Closely related to semantics is Patrick's use of the verbal tropes of repetition and rhyming. A brief description of these tropes follows the discussion on semantics. As in the students' oral discourse, there is also evidence of rapping and narrating in their writing. Although, in so far as writing goes, it's difficult to distinguish sharply between these two forms, I've separated them from one another to direct attention to their unique qualities.

The examples of vernacular discourse in student writing derive almost solely from Patrick and Gary. For whatever reasons, they displayed the strongest vernacular voices in their academic prose. I include also a few references to the vernacular in Ronnie and Gerald's writing because they wrote very telling accounts of language and culture in the inner-city.

**Pullin' Jacks and Rockin' Coke: The Semantics of Invention**

With regard to inner-city language and culture, Patrick has written some rather daring pieces. Two of his journal entries cover subjects rarely discussed in the academy, at least not so in any positive or neutral way. One of the entries is entitled "How to Pull a Jack Move!" and the other "The Rocking and Cutting of
Cocaine." Both entries are short how-to expositions, providing, as one would expect in an expository writing assignment, detailed instructions on committing a robbery and preparing cocaine. But it's the uniqueness of the language here (a "jack move" and "rocking and cutting") that makes the entries so fascinating, for they suggest a mode of invention antithetical to mainstream values such as security and the work ethic. Quite appropriately, Patrick first enlightens his readers on the key terms:

First of all a Jack Move or a Jack is a robbery by gunpoint. There are many slang words for a robbery or something being taken off one person by another they are: gafflen; ganging (or a gange), and PD rolled. The only differences is that a Jack is by gunpoint.

From here Patrick goes on to explain in a very serious and objective manner how one goes about pulling one of the most famous jack moves, jacking someone "for their car and money."

First you wait till they pull up at a red light or any kind of stop. Run up on the car with your gun in hand and ready to shoot. Any kind of gun can do the job a Ak 47, 9mm, 12 gauge anything. Just simply tell the persons who are in the car to empty there valuables on the car seats quickly, (because there is no time to wait). Tell the persons to get out or even pull them out. Then get in there vehicle and drive off. Do what you want with car, sell it, sell the pieces, rims, stereo equipment or just profile in the car until the gas runs out.
Clearly, Patrick offers quite explicit and detailed instructions on pulling a jack. He tells his readers (or would-be robbers) both what to do and what to say, and he even provides alternatives for how they might make use of their rewards. They can either sell pieces of the car for money or "profile in the car until the gas runs out." The idea of "profiling" in a car, though the term is of fairly recent vintage, is central to black vernacular culture, particularly hip-hop. The value hip-hop culture places on an individual's status associated with a fancy car or "ride," is summed up in this notion of profiling. One's image or profile appearing behind the wheel of a car as it cruises through the "hood" (with a booming stereo system, of course) can mean everything, especially to young black males. In this sense, not only does the speech but also the gestures (e.g., profiling) of the black vernacular community function to construct self or ethos.

My next example comes from Patrick's journal entry on the "rocking" and "cutting" of cocaine, where he instructs his readers on how to make cocaine. Here I reproduce just enough of the piece to convey a sense of how key terms are used.

When you are rocking or cooking up cocaine, you first need Baking Soda, a Tube of some sort and a pot and of course you need the cocaine.

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23 Hip-hop refers to the music, clothing, talk, and general lifestyle of a generation of teenagers strongly influenced by the rap expressive genre. In Buppies, B-boys, Baps & Bohos: Notes on Post-soul Black Culture, Nelson George draws an important distinction between the terms "hip-hop" and "rap" (75-76), but for my purposes here hip-hop is synonymous with rap.
Then you wait for a egg shape to form in the testube this is called a "cookie" or a "chop." . . . .
Take the cookie and cut them into desired pieces. The most famous are 20's, 10's and 5 pieces but there are some addicts that ask for 7 pieces.

I offer the above examples not to expose some criminal element in my informant's background but to demonstrate ways in which this student came up with topics for writing. I believe that strategies for invention should begin with students' own lives, with the social and cultural circumstances that give meaning to their sense of being. At times, however, student writing about social and cultural circumstances, may be antagonistic to much of what the university stands for. Yet, if one expects mutual inquiry and critical thinking to take place in university classrooms, this very clash in mainstream and nonmainstream values and discourses must figure into our pedagogy. For knowledge, according to social constructionist thought, is the product of a complex dialectic between the writer and the material world and the writer and the discourse community in which he or she is taking part (Berlin 172). The successful mediation of the dialectical process between speakers of BEV and the academic discourse community will, I believe, determine in large part what teachers and students come to know.

A few other vernacular expressions are used in Patrick's formal essays. These include to "dawg" or "dog" somebody and one that
Patrick and a friend invented, "T-boning." Both appear in the final draft of the student's autobiographical essay.

I changed and got serious, and it brought many problems of getting into fights and people thinking wrong of me by saying that I thought that I was too good and [was] trying to dawg.

We talk about people from their walk to the way that they dress and to who or what they look like, but we would refer it to things that we only knew about since we were from the same neighborhood and knew a lot of the same and seen the same things. One time there was this gut named Hubert Rutledge who always walked fast with his booty all tight and things. Ray and I know this guy name T-Bone who walks something like that. We called the way he walked T-Boning. So no one knew except for us and it was funny.

In African American vernacular culture there are all kinds of names for people's behavior before their peers. To try to "dawg" or to "dawg" (the spelling is intentional, that is, another case of agnominatio) somebody means to treat them wrong often for no legitimate reason. In this particular case, when Patrick stopped being a class clown and tried to be serious about school, his classmates all took it personally. They thought that he had started to look down on them because he didn't laugh and talk with them as he had done before. In a sense, the term is also closely linked to signifying because it can refer to the conscious act of putting someone else down. Demetrius used this term when he referred to one rap group throwing out lyrics to put down or "diss" other rap
groups in major cities throughout the country. The way Demetrius expressed it was, "They be doggin' everybody." To "dawg," however, appears to be a particularly heavy or serious form of signifying.

The second example reflects what Smitherman writes about the metaphorical and imagistic quality of black semantics. Specifically, the labeling of an individual's walk reflects her statement that "Many Black English vocabulary items manifest a poetically appropriate representation of rather mundane reality" (70). In fact, it almost appears to be a case of the kind of methorphorical substitution rhetoricians call *antonomasia*--a descriptive phrase for a proper name or proper name for a quality associated with it (Lanham 123). One can only half imagine what "T-boning" must look like, but, in any case, it certainly demonstrates the inventive skills of BEV speakers.

The metaphorical and imagistic quality of black semantics, according to Smitherman, not only serves as a tool, but also its figurative power and rhetorical beauty complement its survival function (70). Gerald's use of vernacular expressions effectively illustrates this point. Although most of the really innovative terms appear in the dialogue Gerald reports on, it nonetheless shows how integral such language use is to the participants' way of being and getting along socially.
Nutrition was the best time of the day; it was when all the heavy lingo broke out. Everyone in the Mob [close-knit group of football team members] always meets at the same table so that we can chill together. Besides, our table was where all the highnas (girls) went. We had a distinct language that not many people could decipher. We used it sorta like the mescans [i.e., Mexicans] used Spanish. My boy, Gee-o, stepped to me and said, "Damn, Bone, that chili over there is really on your nuts. What up? Are you going to step to it and get a fever or what?" I just told him that if my chocolate was not sweet to me, my mouth just might end up on fire. He just laughed and said, "Don't get burnt."

For this assignment students were asked to write about a group that they were a part of. Along with his discussion of the group that he belonged to, Gerald focused also on the language that is central to the identity of the group. Granted, much of the language amounts to little more than ephemeral slang (e.g., "chill," "highnas," etc.); however, its metaphoric qualities would doubtless make useful resources for writing instruction, especially since the metaphors played upon by the two interlocutors are not arbitrary but are based on concrete objects natural to the occasion. (And we often question basic writers' ability to move easily from the concrete to the abstract--see Thomas Farrell's "Literacy, the Basics, and All That Jazz."

Admittedly, the clever repartee Gerald depicts also possesses a phallocentric bias, one that is not unlike much of today's rap lyrics. While it is not my intention to endorse such language, it is also not my intention to censor what may, in part, constitute the very
identity I seek to explore. Besides, such language use is deeply embedded in black vernacular culture and must, therefore, be judged with regard to the values and worldview of this culture.

For the moment, however, let me describe some of the qualities of the language in this passage. Gerald's friend, Gee-o, uses the word "chili" to inform him that some girl has the "hots" for him, or, more accurately, would be "hot" to him since from this "chili" he could catch a "fever." Picking up on the food/heat metaphor, Gerald hints that he might taste the chili (i.e., at the very least, pursue the girl; at the most, well . . .) and, as a result, his "mouth might just end up on fire." Gee-o, adding another layer to an already dense metaphor, cautions him, "Don't get burnt."

Juxtaposed with the hot dish metaphor is another metaphor which appears in Gerald's conditional response to Gee-o's question. He says that his mouth might catch on fire "if my chocolate is not sweet to me." Gerald's "chocolate" is, obviously, his girlfriend who, as such, should be "sweet" to him. The play upon the intrinsic qualities of chocolate and chili--sweetness for the one, and sauciness for the other--clearly indicates the richness of our students' language. In addition, the sense of belonging, or affirmation and denial felt through this language is equally evident. Gerald comments,

It was nice to just sit at the table and see all the fellas just chill. I knew by seeing them all together that we could not ever be stopped or broken up. We were in full stride and could not be taken out by anybody.
Troping through Repetition and Rhyme

In Patrick's writing, there were also instances of what Bizzell and Herzberg call the verbal tropes of rhyming and repetition. Though not as pronounced as the student writing in Cooper's study, Patrick's use of rhyming and repetition patterns infer some influence of the vernacular on his writing. The first example is taken from an early draft of Patrick's first essay in 052A, and the second from the final draft of the same paper. Notice the sort of couplet pattern in the first; the second exhibits a repetition of words with some alliteration.

My neighborhood was alwaays filled with little street gangs that hung out and also have their claim to fame as being rough and hard in school aswell in the streets.

I was brought up [in] a nieghborhood were everyone knows everyone and everything about everyone because they had nothing else to do, no work, no nothing except to look forward to gossip.

What these passages imply is that Patrick's prose exhibits a quality that may be traced to the tradition of rapping. Certainly, if nothing else, it bears some of the characteristics of rap's poetry. In what follows, I attempt to tease out these characteristics.
Rappin' in Writin'

According to Bizzell and Herzberg's definition, the term *rapping* refers to a general ability to use rhetorical devices. Smitherman explains that this concept of rapping came about because of appropriation by the mainstream. Originally, it referred to "romantic talk from a black man to a black woman for purposes of winning her emotional and sexual affection" (*Talkin and Testifyin* 69). But even in the black vernacular community this only refers to one such meaning of the term, for, according to Abrahams it can refer to "simple stylized conversation" and can also refer to a way of hustling someone ("Rapping and Capping" 137). In this section, as in the previous chapter, I use rapping in the sense of stylized conversation. I want to suggest that at certain instances in the students' writing they projected a voice much like what Kochman calls "a high degree of personal style" ("Rapping' in the Black Ghetto" 27). Though not always so easily detectable in their writing, it's the performative quality about it that appears to derive from the rapping tradition.

The first three examples were excerpted from different drafts of Patrick's paper on his experience of a significant event that changed him. In the first, he writes about the process it took to join one of the local gangs, "the folks":

To get in the to the folks you had to learn your lit as if it were your family History, and take a Ass whipping by six niggas while you kneel on one knee.
The phrase "take a Ass whipping by six niggas while you kneel on one knee," may be in some respects an ordinary one. However, I think that it indicates something of the way in which Patrick and his friends expressed themselves in the company of one another, which in and of itself is a stylized form of language use. Again, as indicated in the H. Rap Brown excerpt, there is reference to gang members or close friends as "niggas."

A better example appears later in the same draft. Here Patrick refers to his separation from the folks and the comparatively better circumstances this separation afforded him.

When the Governors and other Foot Soldiers saw who I was down with they kicked me out of the sect. Now I'm just Chilling with the Hood and a lot of the Folks that I knew are dead.

The expression "Now I'm just Chilling with the Hood" brings Patrick's audience up to date on his current state of affairs. Yet, it's stated in such a way that only a member of the BEV speech community could fully understand what is meant. On the one hand, it projects Patrick's personal style of verbal expression; on the other hand, it projects the group ethos of black inner-city street culture.

The passages below also convey the expressive function of rapping, only more as a rather "colorful rundown of some past
event" ("Rapping' in the Black Ghetto" 27). The passages are taken from the final draft of essay one.

One of the gangs broke off from the rest and set up their own religion and literature, they were the folks they rode the six just as the crips would in L.A. Soon they got a rep for being hard and real, and some others respected them because they were something to fear, but lots of others tried them and treated them like they were jokes.

I told an entrusted friend of mine Mo' Murder that I didn't want to join and that my participation in was through. He said I would have to take it up with Crazy, Corn bread, Diablo, which were my superiors. I was discouraged and never went because I didn't want to be called a hoe and treated like a little bitch or something.

Although it's difficult to say just what makes these passages "colorful rundown," Patrick's use of expressions like "rode the six like the crips would," "they got a rep," "being hard and real," "called a hoe," and, quite obviously, his friends' nicknames (e.g., Mo' Murder) do add a delightful hue to what could be rather drab narrative prose. If nothing else, these expressions, especially the last sentence of the second passage, reveal something of the values of this all-male group. Though the terms "hoe" and "bitch" are disparaging toward women, for a young man to be called one or treated like one is perhaps one of the greatest indignities.

The final example of rapping I have from Patrick's writing could very well show the kind of repetition and rhyming patterns
I mentioned earlier. I place it here, however, because the chain of phrases beginning with "I didn't want to be like" expresses in a vivid way the writer's sense of self-worth. Through the long series of negations, Patrick conveys both the reason why he felt the need for a change and essence of the realities he had to deal with everyday.

Even though I hated school I felt I had to change not only because it's stupid not to go because everyone else is off [out of school] or not going and I wanted to be with them, but because I was wasting my parents money, but it was that I didn't want to be like the older guy in the streets killing each other to get paid, lying in the gutter with no food or like a drug fiend that I see everyday of my life begging and spending the last of his money for a hit of the pipe.

Excerpts from Gary's essays offer rather different evidence of vernacular influence on writing in that he tends to write as though he's addressing his audience directly. In this sense, his is a stronger "rapping" voice than Patrick's. Still, the key in both cases is the use of vernacular discourse to express a distinctively black cultural identity. The first excerpt is taken from Gary's final exam in 052A. Gary explains how he squandered the money he had earned from his job at the country club.

When vacation was over I had to buckle my ass down and save my money, so that meant that I would have to stop blowing my money on friends, clothes, parties, and other bull shit you know Kate because it hurts me today, . . .
The most obvious vernacular features in this passage are the way in which Gary refers to himself (i.e., "buckle my ass down") and addresses his teacher, Kate Martin. The latter is particularly interesting because it resembles the way that informants in Cooper's study were personally involved in their writing. The second excerpt likewise reflects personal involvement. Although he misspells the word "whip" and omits the objective pronoun "me," Gary's statements "believe [me] she was a hard whimperer" and "thank god 'amen'" especially highlight the factor of personal involvement.

While in the early parts of my elementary years the teacher would call my house to tell my mother that I wasn't doing so good, and my mother whim me for this and believe [me] she was a hard whimperer, she would bring out everything from the shoe, the belt, and sometimes the house broom we also had one for the garage which she never used thank god "amen".

The excerpt is, however, a very small sample of an autobiographical essay that is saturated with such expressions. Gary failed to take the essay through the usual number of revisions that were part of the class paradigm. Quite possibly, had he done so, some of the vernacular expressions would have been deleted or replaced. No real indictment against revision is intended by this statement. Indeed, taking into account Gary's essay as a whole, I'm persuaded that it needs much revision both
in content and in structure. However, the more important point is that had Gary taken the necessary steps to revise (whether by way of responses from his teacher and peers or his own sense of what's considered academically acceptable) standard English expressions might have beat out certain black vernacular expressions. Such, unfortunately, is the nature of the academy; in the name of educating the country's citizenry, it displaces (or attempts to) students' own linguistic and cultural knowledge.

Narration: Imitating Community Voices

Much of what I've indicated for rapping can also be applied to the vernacular narrative quality of students' prose, for it too exhibits a high degree of personal style. The difference is that in addition to the vernacular voice of the speaker other voices come through in the narration. These voices tend to be centered in informants' homes or communities and signal an at times antagonistic relationship with the writer. However, the real enterprise is in the performance or imitation of the characters who take part in the teller's story. Gary was very adept at such imitation. Whether truly represented or falsely conceived, he provided, at least for me, a most realistic characterization of individuals within the African American community. His characterization of the black maternal figure is perhaps most impressive, because just as the students in Ms. Mitchell's class could find similarities in the vocal expressions between their
parents and grandparents, so do I find similarities between the sayings of Gary's mother and many other black mothers, including my own. For instance, Gary's reference to his mother's speech in his 052A final exam sounds almost exactly like my mother's words. He writes,

When I told my mother that I would be working just about everyday she says.
"Gary your going to college and you are going to have to do what you can, because your growing up into a man, because I am not going to be there for you money wise sometimes and I what you to know this mommy is going through some rough times right know, but I know you can make it out there at Ohio State, because you have the will to make it, I'll be sending you money from time to time, but I understand that you will be working more hours just don't let your grades slip.
"Ok Mom"

The fact that mothers in different regions of the country sound alike may not come as a great surprise to anyone, but the common ways of thinking and feeling that many of these women express in language imply some powerful cultural connections. Here I'm referring specifically to such expressions as "I'm not going to be there for you money wise sometimes" and "I [want] you to know this mommy is going through some rough times right know." In superb narrative style, these expressions capture the maternal voice and persona within the BEV speech community.
Gary gives at least three separate accounts of his mother's expression of ire at his actions. In the first account, she basically tells Gary to stop spending so much time with his friends. But added effect is achieved in the way she says it, that is, with the expletives "ass" and "damn," and the alliteration--"no nothing niggas." It's impossible to tell without the sound of Gary's voice, but it almost appears as though in tone and inflection he's mimicking his mother, as Patrick, Randy, and Freda did in describing their relatives orally.

Mother: Gary you better get your black ass in those books and stop hanging out with those no nothing niggas, and get a dame [damn] job. My mother would say about five times within two minutes, . . .

In essay three, Gary demonstrates how his mother reacted once when he arrived home late.

"Gary it is five o'clock where have you been for the past two hours".

"Playing with my friends".

"Get your black ass in your room and don't come out untill your home work is done."

"Ok Mommy".

Finally, in his autobiographical essay, Gary relates another instance of his mother's chastisement, this time, however,
concerning his school report card. (The all capital letters of the dialogue appear in the original.)

... while in the forth grade I was getting out of hand I brought my first card home, and when I called my mother at her job to tell her what I got she just hung up the phone and said,

"GARY DON'T TAKE YOUR ASS ANYWHERE BUT TO YOUR ROOM AND DON'T TURN ON THE TV".

This only meant one thing whimpping time on my ass, and when she got home all she said was take off your belt all I heard was,

"I TOLD YOU BETTER GET YOUR SHIT TOGETHER OR IF NOT YOU WILL BE LIVING SOMEWHERE ELSE.

Commands and threats abound in the discourse of many cultures, but here it is expressed colorfully with the four letter word "shit" and with Gary's potential departure from his mother's house. Assuming her position of authority, this mother has made her will known (not to mention felt) to her wayward son.

One last example of the vernacular narrative voice comes from an essay in which Gary describes his encounter with a high school bully. In addition to the dialogue, note the way in which Gary narrates the encounter. Somewhat like the street corner storyteller or rapper (see Kochman), Gary interjects a virtual aside on the one-time popularity of swatch watches. The complete encounter is rendered as follows:
Well a few weeks later this girl gave me this watch, and it was a nice watch, it was a swatch, back then swatch watches had it going on, but one day in gym class this known bully came up to me and said?

"You want to sell that watch for 20 dollars".

"Nooo".

"Would you like your ass whipped Kenya in front of these people".

"Gone on Mr. Bully Boy".

When school was over I told my boys what had happened, they told me not to worry about it they'll take care of it, I told them not to worry about it. The following day in school in gym the bully came up on me and tryed to take my watch.

"Gimme this dame [damn] watch Gary, I don't like you telling your boys about me and this watch I want, I hate you, I really do, it's like when we play football on the street, have you ever notice how I always push you around, you always do everything right you never do anything wrong, the girls go crazy for you because they think you are cute, before you moved on this street I was getting all the pussy know you have taken it away, I don't like that Gary."

"Stop choking me man, you can have all the girls back man just live me alone."

I'm not sure how much I believe that Cary did "everything right" and that the girls went "crazy" for him. It could be a bit of an overstatement, to say the least. But one thing is for sure, these
ideas, especially the one about the girls, reveal the all-pervasive inner-city black male value of manhood, virility being substantial proof of that manhood. After all, as Kochman points out, "Rapping to a woman is a colorful way of 'asking for some pussy'" (27). Taken together, then, the imitative dialogue, aside, and masculine values all strongly suggest the influence of vernacular narrative strategies on school writing.

**The Signifyin(g) Voice in Prose**

*On the Lighter Side*

Gary's autobiographical essay also manifests what I believe to be elements of vernacular signifying. Although I have no evidence that Gary intended to signify in his paper, the voice that he expresses at times is a voice that pokes fun at himself and at others, seemingly for the purpose of amusement and display. In recounting the many arguments he and a sixth grade friend used to have, for instance, Gary pokes a little fun at the bus driver who often overheard their disputes.

... all sorts of things we would argue about even the bus driver would laugh we allways thought the bus driver was high, because everyday he would be late, and sometimes he would talk to himself to make this wild as[s] turns; one time we turned this corner on two wheels it was fun, but also scary as fuck; imagin yourself falling from the top bunk coming down on your face hard.
The bus driver's suspected condition of being "high" means that his imperfect actions (being consistently late, talking to himself, and making wild turns) would lead one to believe that he's on drugs. But the term can also be used to signify on someone because he or she is behaving out of the ordinary. To illustrate just how wild the driver's turns were, Gary also uses an effective metaphor. For a visual and sensual comparsion, he asks the reader to imagine himself or herself falling face down from a top bunk bed—a scary thought indeed. The next example is not so much an attempt to poke fun at or insult someone but a rather jocund way of describing a person. Having hit a boy in the jaw to join in with a gang of high school friends, Gary has to pay a visit to the principal.

I was to come down to see the principle, and "DAME" there he was again Mr. White in full color and this time he sent my little ass to the detention room for a week without reporting it to my mother, but he also have me a warning if I fuck up again that I would be barred from returning to this school it was kool with me because I was not go through all of the emotions with my mother, so I got my act together.

The amusing description comes through in Gary's use of the expression "in full color." In spite of the fact that Gary never says that the principal is a white man (or even if he's black he represents the white power structure), his reference to him here and in other places (e.g., "I was caught by the man himself Mr. White the principle") suggests racial overtones not unlike
vernacular references to *The Man*. This might, in fact, be an apt interpretation since Gary, throughout much of his account of grade school, seems to be concerned with outwitting his principal. As Smitherman explains,

While *The Man* suggests the fearful notion of "boss" and control in this male-dominated society, black men have always thought they could outsmart and out-man *The Man* if given only half a chance. (68)

The final example of light signifying in Gary's writing also appears in his autobiographical essay. Here he recounts how he engaged in one of many fights while in grade school. This time, however, the boy he fights is many times his size.

. . . a few days later this fight [fat] boy disagreed with what I said which was,

"What's up BIG MAC can I have some Fries with that Shake".

Next thing you know I'm fighting this fight [fat] ass fucker who has to out weigh me about seventy pounds, and when he punched me in my eye I felt that [w]hole extra weight upon my eye five times in the same eye,. . .

Almost like the Signifying Monkey (about whom I'll have more to say later), Gary's signifying voice surfaces most dramatically in his quip to the "fat" boy. Gary uses images of food as analogues for the boy's excessive weight. Although the reader is never told for
sure that the boy's name is Mac, to bestow upon him the appellation "Big Mac" as a lead to pointing out his "Shake" is indeed a witty figurative association. Gary's narrative following this quip also resounds with a strong signifying voice. The statements--especially ones like "fat ass fucker"--are perhaps insensitive, but the overall expression nonetheless has its element of humor.

On the Heavier Side

More important perhaps than just the function of amusement, signifying serves to affirm black cultural identity (for a further discussion of this concept see my essay, "The Signifying Monkey Revisited"). In general, this aspect of signifying refers to the use of language to affirm cultural identity and community in the face of imposition of cultural dominance and oppression. It's one of the more potent survival strategies in African American vernacular culture because it does--sometimes covertly, at times overtly--precisely what Jimmy's "kickin' knowledge" does: it enlightens and uplifts the race.

To illustrate this "heavier" side of the art, here, I'll refer to selected examples in the essays of Gary and Patrick and, for the sake of comparison, in the autobiographical writing of H. Rap Brown. I make use of Brown here for several reasons, most importantly, because he, like many writers of the 1960s, unapologetically (not to mention shrewdly) used black vernacular discursive forms--something that most students are rarely
permitted to do in academic writing. Brown's calculated use of the vernacular affirms specifically black manhood and black street culture. While at times this affirmation is at the expense of others (most notably and regretably, black women), it is affirmation nonetheless and requires understanding as well as critique. My first example derives from Patrick's "change" essay. Patrick begins his narrative as follows:

I grew in the city of East Manville. the percentage of blacks are 98%. there is only one high school called Wash High, which enrolls 3,000-4,000 students. It was a so-called ghetto. There was ways that you could show that you were mature and a man in the eyes of this society One was to join a gang. Even though it was wrong it was a way of having clout and money b[y] ways of threat and robbery.

Although this passage exhibits no particular vernacular discourse forms, I make use of it here because it suggests, like the real niggaz example from Ronnie's essay, a society (and, thus, a corresponding social identity) at odds with the mainstream. Manhood in this society is acquired by gang membership because through such membership one gains "clout and money," the ostensible measurements of manhood.24 The means by which

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24 I'm tempted to extend this textual analysis even further by applying Baker's economic approach, for the affirmation of self (manhood), in this case, partially depends on one's ability to acquire through subversive action mainstream entitlements such as money and power. Such an approach would, however, be beyond the scope of this study.
Roger Abrahams reasons, allows the gang member to demonstrate his manliness by "striking out against an almost impersonal foe" with little damage to himself, even if he loses (Deep Down 34). But, more importantly, gang membership and gang activity give inner-city boys "a sense of place and a constant set of friends upon whom they can rely" (34).

Having been steered by his parents to choose college over gang membership, Patrick thus sums up the socially accepted view of maturation and manhood:

Growing up in the inner city you have to make many decisions. Ones I had were to be a true man in the eyes of my culture by not joining a gang and to go to college.

True manhood, Patrick was persuaded, comes not through delinquent activity but through mainstream education. Still, Patrick did not immediately and totally denounce street life, for it furnished the very things (e.g., "freedom" and "brotherhood," he coins a phrase) that school deprives him of:

Growing up in the hood and going to private school was interesting, because I had the best of both worlds. I could chill out with the fellas on the street and still have a good enough chance of being something with the name and the education that my parents would make me receive. I never liked school I liked the streets, I liked the freedom of the streets, I liked the brotherhood of the fellas in the neighborhood and I liked the excitement and danger of the streets that was caused by us and others. Seeing the older gangsta niggas mess up, I learned what and what not
to do. I felt that these lessons were more important than any school books.

In spite of Patrick's apparently favorable attitude toward school, one shouldn't dismiss cavalierly the function of his discourse to construct and affirm identity vis-à-vis mainstream culture. To demonstrate this, I'll draw on three of the statements quoted above. First, Patrick rhythmically repeats the phrase "I like" in a series of sentences that begin with "I never liked school I liked the streets, . . . ." Then, the last two sentences read "Seeing the older gangsta niggas mess up, I learned what and what not to do. I felt that these lessons were more important than any school books." The signifying voice in these statements, though mild by street standards, essentially hinges on the notion that the streets are where real education takes place. Thus, Patrick signifies on teachers and the type of learning privileged in school. At the very least, he's re-affirming anew the value of, as we've seen before, Mother Wit over book learning.

In his autobiography, Brown offers a similar critique of schooling:

THE STREET is where young bloods get their education. I learned how to talk in the street, not from reading about Dick and Jane going to the zoo and all that simple shit. The teacher would test our vocabulary each week, but we knew the vocabulary we needed. They'd give us arithmetic
to exercise our minds. Hell, we exercised our minds by playing the Dozens.

I fucked your mama
Till she went blind.
Her breath smells bad,
But she sure can grind.

I fucked your mama
For a solid hour.
Baby came out
Screaming, Black Power.

Elephant and the Baboon
Learning to screw.
Baby came out looking
Like Spiro Agnew.

And the teacher expected me to sit up in class and study poetry after I could run down shit like that. If anybody needed to study poetry, she needed to study mine. We played the Dozens for recreation, like white folks play Scrabble. (25-26)

Brown's use of signifying is certainly much more directive and pointed than Patrick's. For this reason, signifying might best be defined here as a verbal put down or, in Abrahams's terms, "making fun of a person or situation" (Deep Down 52). But the point of comparison between the two passages emerges when we read how, like the student, Brown denounces the real life relevance of school learning: "I learned how to talk in the street, not from reading about Dick and Jane going to the zoo and all that simple shit," and "And the teacher expected me to sit up in class
and study poetry after I could run down shit like that." The implication of these statements I see as twofold. For one, they imply that teachers should be about the business of making what they teach relevant to students' lives. Reading about Dick and Jane is obviously too elementary for kids who grow up on the robust inner-city streets. Second, and perhaps more important, the statements imply once again a re-affirmation of the value of Mother Wit over book learning. That is, through signifying, Brown denigrates the mainstream community value of knowledge acquired through schooling to affirm the black vernacular community value of knowledge gained through common sense experience. Thus, by denying the mainstream its claim to linguistic, cognitive, and social superiority, Brown constructs an ethos of the black vernacular community defined on its own terms.

My other student example comes from Gary's autobiographical essay which, again, focused on significant events that occurred during his adolescent years. Notice how his use of the vernacular "shit" resembles Brown's in his mockery of "Dick and Jane." (In general, as I indicated previously, the essay lacks much needed revision, but the writer's voice is, I think, sufficiently lucid.)

. . .for that school year the girls started to bloom, I started to get hair up under my arms "dam" this time when I started to do the girls I got this funny feeling I thought I had to use the bathroom but it was white I didn't know what the hell it was but it felt good coming, when I was about ten that is when I had my first
sexual intercourse I did not feel anything at the point in long ago time, but when I reached twelve I could not be stop until I asked my mother what is the white stuff, and she told me without hesitation; see my mother is the type of mother who would tell me things straight up she did not play that birds and he bees shit, and when she told me what the white stuff was she also told me to wear rubbers; at first I thought she was talking about rubber boots when she took me [to] revco she told me that I should always wear these rubbers, because they would keep me from having babies, and from the hospital, and I asked her way from the hospital she told me when someone goes out into the rain with out a coat it can really pour down on the person really bad, and that person can end up going to the hospital for something he they could of stop happening,. . .

"Shit," I believe, accentuates Gary's signifiying voice. Signaled also by vernacular expressions like "straight up" and "did not play that," this voice pits a mother who discusses sexual matters straightforwardly with her children against mothers (presumably, white middle class) who relate such matters euphemistically. Still, at times, Gary's mother conveys her messages indirectly, also a pervasive aspect of signifying. She says, "when someone goes out in the rain with out a coat it can really pour down on the person really bad." Though she intends no insult in her analogy (as is often true for signifying), it is an excellent example of the use of metaphorical reference to convey an indirect message (e.g., see Mitchell-Kernan).
metaphorical reference to convey an indirect message (e.g., see Mitchell-Kernan).

In any case, for Gary, sex is clearly not a taboo subject. Quite the contrary, one has the sense that it is a subject to be celebrated, even boasted about—virility again being a demonstration of a boy's manhood. Thus, here also we see the writer's construction of self (of ethos) resisting construction or definition by a dominant mainstream.

Brown echoes this sentiment in the following lines:

Sometimes I wonder why I even bothered to go to school. Practically everything I know I learned on the corner. Today they're talking about teaching sex in school. But that's white folks for you. They got to intellectualize everything. Now how you gon' intellectualize screwing? At the age when little white kids were finding out that there was something down there to play with, we knew where it went and what to do with it after it got there. You weren't a man if you hadn't gotten yourself a little piece by the time you were seven. (30)

Brown's verbal onslaughts, in contrast to Gary's, verge more on the comic, especially the two final statements. Before in verbal dexterity, now in sexual prowess Brown ranks black street culture as superior to white mainstream culture. But Brown's put-down of white culture cuts even more deeply. Specifically, his point about white folks intellectualizing everything suggests his criticism of what he sees as a kind of hyper-rationalism in white mainstream
theorize about it when you can actually do it, that is, learn by doing it? For, in the inner-city black male view, the sooner you begin to practice, the greater your knowledge and experience. In spite of its masculine bias, one can see from this view that African American culture espouses everyday practical wisdom and experience over abstract rationalism. Clearly, though ironically, this principle is summed up in the vernacular concept of Mother Wit.

All this is not, however, to claim the unquestionable veracity of Brown's pronouncements, for the art of signifying depends least of all upon the truth (that, say, white kids are, or were in the 60s, naive about sex). Rather, the art of signifying depends foremost upon the imaginative potency of the Signifier. While my informants and Brown do show signs of it, this imaginative potency is nowhere better exemplified than in the supreme Signifier, the mythic folk hero the Signifying Monkey--he who as Signifier, according to Henry Louis Gates, "wreaks havoc upon the Signified" (The Signifying Monkey 52).25

"Trope-a-Dope": Figuring the Signifying Monkey in Prose

Of course, literally, the Signifying Monkey is a character in a fictional narrative, but he figuratively represents very real

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25 Subsequent references to Gates's The Signifying Monkey: A Theory of African-American Literary Criticism will be simply listed by the author's name, unless otherwise indicated.
sociolinguistic phenomena in the black vernacular discourse community. Given the social and political circumstances many African Americans find themselves in, the Monkey tends to embody the ethos that African Americans often aspire to. If in Ciceronian rhetoric the ideal orator is the good man speaking well (De Oratore), in BEV rhetoric the ideal orator (or rapper) is the Signifying Monkey—that is, the bad nigger talking shit. Or, as Kimberly Bentson puts in her wonderful spin on Muhammad Ali's "rope-a-dope" rhetoric of the 70s, to signify is to "trope-a-dope" (Gates 52).

To frame the signifying operating in my informants' essays, it is useful to revisit the Signifying Monkey tale and its function in African American vernacular discourse. Signifying Monkey tales or toasts are, as I alluded to in chapter two, narrative poems performed often, though not exclusively, by men in barrooms, pool halls, and on street corners (Gates 54). Gates aptly points out that given the nature of these poems as "rituals of insult and naming, recorded versions have a phallocentric bias" (54). As to the structure of the poems, Abrahams notes that toasts possess a general framing pattern, including a "picturesque or exciting

26 Though often used interchangeably with "talkin' trash" (e.g., Brian Lassiter's "Talkin' Trash: Tracing Rap's Roots to the 'Signifying Monkey'"), "talkin' shit" particularly means "to interact in order to build an environment of self-creation and dramatization beneficial to all participants" (Michael Bell 27).
introduction, action alternating with dialogue (because the action is usually a struggle between two people or animals), and a twist ending of some sort, either a quip, an ironic comment, or a brag" (Deep Down 97). Signifying Monkey poems achieve unity through the "consecutiveness of action"; that is, they're organized by the conventions of the traditional epic (98).

As to the content of Signifying Monkey tales, it centers on three stock characters: the Monkey, the Lion, and the Elephant. In most versions of the tale, the Monkey reports to his friend the Lion some insult purportedly generated by their mutual friend the Elephant (Gates 55). The Lion, outraged by the insult, demands an apology from the Elephant, who refuses and then trounces him (55). Realizing that he has been duped, the Lion then returns to the Monkey to settle the score. The Lion's mistake, of course, was in taking the Monkey literally, that is, in failing to realize that the Monkey was signifying.

Although Gates denounces the simple black/white binary opposition many scholars have interpreted between the Monkey and the Lion, I find an intriguing implication in the Lion's misreading of the Monkey's use of language. To take an example from pop culture, the Monkey's duping the Lion is much like Homey the Clown "gittin ovuh" on the Man (Smitherman 73). It is this element of "gittin ovuh"--of surviving--that suffuses the Monkey's heroism; it imbues him and, more importantly, the teller
of the tale with identity, authority, and persuasive appeal. Thus signifying as derived from the Signifying Monkey tales means the use of certain discourse forms not only to put down or poke fun at someone but categorically to debunk an individual's or community's self-imposed status of power. This strategy is commensurate with the speaker or writer's affirmation of self.

Below is the introductory portion of a tale illustrating the Monkey's signifying. It's taken from a version told by an adolescent male in Abrahams's study (*Deep Down*). In this version, the Monkey is figured as something of an adolescent prankster.

Deep down in the jungle so they say
There's a signifying motherfucker down the way.
There hadn't been no disturbin' in the jungle for quite a bit,
For up jumped the monkey in the tree one day and laughed,
"I guess I'll start some shit."
Now the lion come through the jungle one peaceful day,
When the signifying monkey stopped him and this what he started to say.
He said, "Mr. Lion," he said, "a bad-assed motherfucker down your way."
He said, "Yeah! The way he talks about your folks is a certain shame.
I even heard him curse when he mentioned your grandmother's name. (113)

A more extensive introduction appears in a version offered by another of Abrahams's Philadelphia informants. The Monkey in
this version assumes more of an adult personage, only one that is perhaps more respected by adolescents than adults—the bad-talking, smooth-dealing pimp. However, the signifying in this version closely resembles that of the first, namely the third-party variety in which the Monkey falsely reports insults the Elephant has made about the Lion's relatives (see Mitchell-Kernan). The effect of such signifying, though different in structure from the signifying I stress below, is to make the King of the jungle instead the King's foo!. The tale reads as follows:

Deep down in the jungle where the coconut grows
Lives a pimp little monkey, you could tell by the clothes he wore.
He had a camel-hair benny with belt in the back,
Had a pair of nice shoes and a pair of blue slacks.
Now his clothes were cute little things,
Was wearing a Longine watch and a diamond ring.
He says he thinks he’d take a stroll
Down by the water hole.
And guess who he met? Down there was Mr. Lion.
The monkey started into that signifying.
He said, "Mr. Lion, I got something to tell you today."
He said, "The way this motherfucker been talking 'bout you I know you'll sashay."
(He told the lion)
He said, "Mr. Lion, the way he talking 'bout your mother, down your cousins,
I know damn well you don't play the dozens.
Talking about your uncle and your aunt's an awful shame.
Called your father and your mother a whole lot of names.
I would 'a fought the motherfucker but looked at him with a tear in my eye."
He's a big motherfucker, he's twice your size."
The lion looked down with a tear in his eye,
Said, "Where's this big motherfucker that's twice my size?"

(115)

Finally, another section of this toast also illustrates the
Monkey's signifying; this time, however, not as a reported insult of
the Elephant towards the Lion's relatives (i.e., the dozens or
sounding) but the Monkey's direct insult of the Lion.

Here goes the monkey in the tree with that same signifying.
He said, "Look at you, you goddamn chump,
Went down in the jungle fucking with that man
And got your ass [mangled] and drug in the sand.
You call yourself a real down king,
But I found you ain't a goddamned thing.
Get from underneath this goddamned tree
'Cause I feel as though I've got to pee."  (116)

The Monkey first calls the Lion a "chump," then ridicules him
for having foolishly challenged the Elephant. But notice how in the
narration the Elephant takes on a different identity. The Monkey
calls him "that man" who the Lion "Went down in the jungle
fucking with." This reference to the Elephant as a "man" suggests
the tale's applicability to the everyday real-life affairs of men. In
this context, the allusion may mean that in spite of how powerful
one may think he is, there's always some "man," some person, who
one would do well not to tangle with. Such is the balance of power
in the urban jungle.
By contrast to the Elephant, the Lion's identity as a self-proclaimed "real down king" the Monkey denies, instead positing him as not a "goddamed thing." Although the Elephant literally dethrones the Lion by physically beating him, it is the Monkey's discourse, his signifying, that truly usurps the Lion's status of power. The Monkey's order to the Lion to "Get from underneath this goddamned tree/'Cause I feel as though I've got to pee" signals this usurpation of the Lion's power and authority. Granted, as the story goes, the order is deployed from the safe haven of a tree, but the fact that the Lion doesn't retaliate verbally (as one might expect in ritual signifying) implies that real power is with one who possesses _Nommo_--the magic power of the spoken word. In any case, I highlight the Monkey's pronouncements because they demonstrate the rhetorical strategy African Americans use for self-affirmation.

**Signifying as Self-Affirmation**

From the Signifying Monkey tales derives the pervasive art of signifying or what Gates calls the "language of Signifyin(g)." For Gates, the language of Signifyin(g) refers to black figurative language use and corresponds to Claudia Mitchell-Kernan's term "metaphorical signifying" (in contrast to the "third-party signifying" mentioned above) (Gates 85). In metaphorical signifying, "the speaker attempts to transmit his message indirectly and it is only by virtue of the hearers defining the
utterance as signifying that the speaker's intent (to convey a particular message) is realized" (85). The Signified, in other words, must recognize that he or she has been signified on by the Signifier. Mitchell-Kernan provides several excellent examples of metaphorical signifying. Though lengthy, two of these examples bear repeating. The first occurs in a conversation between three women: Barbara, an informant, Mary, one of her friends, and the researcher, Mitchell-Kernan.

Barbara: What are you going to do Saturday? Will you be over here?

R: I don't know.

Barbara: Well, if you're not going to be doing anything, come by. I'm going to cook some chit'lin's. (rather jokingly) Or are you one of those Negroes who don't eat chit'lin's?

Mary: (interjecting indignantly) That's all I hear lately-soul food, soul food. If you say you don't eat it you get accused of being saditty (affected, considering oneself superior). (matter of factly) Well, I ate enough black-eyed peas and neckbones during the depression that I can't get too excited over it. I eat prime rib and T-bone because I like to, not because I'm trying to be White. (Sincerely) Negroes are constantly trying to find some way to discriminate against each other. If they could once get it in their heads

\[27\text{ Readers familiar with structuralist and post-structuralist criticism may be somewhat befuddled by my use of the terms "Signifier" and "Signified." A most lucid account of structuralist use of the terms and its relation to black vernacular usage can be found in Gates (44-51).}\]
that we are all in this together maybe we could get somewhere in this battle against the man.

[Mary leaves]

Barbara: Well, I wasn't signifying at her, but like I always say, if the shoe fits, wear it. (71)

In spite of Barbara's statement to the contrary, she uses metaphors of black culture (e.g., eating chit'lin's) to imply that Mary and, possibly also, Mitchell-Kernan are assimilationists (71). Mary obviously perceived Barbara's indictment on "Negroes who don't eat chit'lin's" as an attempt to signify at her. In this particular case, as Mitchell-Kernan points out, the signifying bears negative import for the addressee (73). Indeed, one informant Mitchell-Kernan asked to interpret the interchange, "suggested that Barbara's goal was to raise her own self esteem by asserting superiority of a sort over Mary" (74). That is, the informant sees the function of signifying in this case as the "establishment of dominance" (74). Right or wrong, what seems fairly clear is that like my informants and Brown signifying here implicates a struggle for dominance not necessarily between two women of differing social attitudes but between the black vernacular community (metaphorically represented by soul food, i.e., chit'lin's)
and the white mainstream (metaphorically represented by prime rib and T-bone).28

The second example of metaphorical signifying, on the other hand, bears little negative import for the addressee. In this case, the Signifier drops information to the auditor in a humorous way (82).

I: Man, when you gon pay me my five dollars?
II: Soon as I get it.
I: (to audience) Anybody want to buy a five dollar nigger? I got one to sell.
II: Man, if I gave you your five dollars, you wouldn't have nothing to signify about.
I: Nigger, long as you don't change, I'll always have me a subject. (82)

Speaker II's recognition that speaker I has signified exemplifies the metaphorical brand of signifying. In addition, speaker I's use of the term "nigger" and his suggestion of selling "a five dollar nigger" to a member of the audience amusingly plays upon insult and naming in black vernacular language use. But Gates wishes to argue that signifying is more than a mere ritual of insult or a

28 One aspect of this struggle is expressed in what Smitherman calls the "push-pull syndrome" in Black America, which refers to pushing toward White American culture while simultaneously pulling away from it (Talkin and Testifyin 10-11).
specific verbal game. He rather sees it is a mode of language use, synonymous with figuration. Elsewhere he defines signifying as "a strategy of black figurative language use" (85).

Motivated by purely literary interests, Gates's definition well suits his purposes. But it doesn't go very far to explain the kind of signifying displayed in the tales, that is, signifying as a site of resistance or social revolution. This aspect of signifying is best illustrated perhaps by the Monkey's role as trickster. Of course, trickster figures abound in the folklore of Africans and African Americans (see, for example, chapter one of The Signifying Monkey), but, as Ivan Van Sertima points out, "the role of Trickster as underdog, as representative of an oppressed group or class or race, became almost the only role or function transplanted [in the New World]" (104-105). It is in the Signifier's role as revolutionary trickster, I believe, that signifying is most profound-for it suggests that BEV discourse is more than merely tropes and figures. It is a full-blown rhetoric with, especially, its own brand of deliberative oratory (see Aristotle). Van Sertima expresses this deliberative function in the following:

But I speak also of the revolutionary role of Trickster in a more radical and complex sense, a role Trickster played among aboriginal Africans and Americans, a role related to the profound and often obscure longing of the human psyche for freedom from fixed ways of seeing, feeling, thinking, acting; a revolt against a whole complex of "givens" coded into a society, a revolt which may affect not only an oppressed group, class, or race but a whole order--the
settled institutions and repetitive rituals of a whole civilization. (103)

Although Van Sertima's depiction of the trickster's role is so broad that it might apply to the political rhetoric of any society and people throughout the world, I find it especially applicable to the black experience of racism (and classism) in America. The denial not only of a people's civil rights but even their very humanity surely beckons for the kind of revolt that Van Sertima describes and that is often depicted in the Signifying Monkey tales. Indeed, the Monkey's jeers to the Lion cited in the previous excerpt reflect this revolutionary role of the trickster. In this role, the Monkey dethrones the Lion not just because, as Gates maintains, the Lion can't read his discourse (and thus is goaded into a fight with the Elephant) but because the Monkey's ability to signify--to git ovuh--affirms his otherwise questionable status in the hierarchy of the jungle. As consummate trickster, as bad-talker, as braggadocio, the Monkey displays his ability to use language to affirm his identity (i.e., metaphorically, his humanity) and reverse the power differentials of the jungle.

In the Signifying Monkey tales, therefore, the binary opposition between black and white is obvious. The Elephant, the pivotal third party in the tales, could be either black or white--black because the Monkey accuses him of playing the dozens with the Lion; white because of his overpowering size and the fact that the
Signifier (i.e., the Monkey) is just clever enough to pit one white man against another. In any case, the Elephant doesn't seem to play a role in Brown's or the students' signifying. Yet, their construction of a self that invokes signifying language, that invokes a language of resistance may be the bigger and badder third person that African Americans outside the mainstream can call upon to trounce the daunting image of a dominant culture.

In other words, African American writers' construction of texts which engage in signifying allow them to inscribe their identities and communities in ways that liberate them from the inscriptions and definitions imposed on them by others. The black male writer, in this case, like the teller of Signifying Monkey tales, fashions an image of himself that contrasts sharply with the images of, for instance, illiteracy and linguistic deficiency erroneously ascribed to many African Americans (see Fox's "Writing is Like an Enemy" in The Social Uses of Writing for a discussion of these issues in their revived form). In addition, the black male writers in this study create textual space in which they exercise control over how they, as black men from the inner-city, are to be perceived, valued, and judged by outsiders. As Michael Eric Dyson states concerning the rap music genre,

rap projects a style of self into the world that generates forms of cultural resistance and transforms the ugly terrain of ghetto existence into a searing portrait of life as it must be lived by millions of voiceless people. (15)
Thus, Gates may be right to consider "Signifyin(g)" the architectonic term for black rhetoric. After all, Signifyin(g) is implicit in the Monkey's various speech acts and is often also implicit in the general speech patterns of many lower class blacks. But, lest we impose on black rhetoric the erroneous notion of a separation between language style and language content, as a rhetoric, Signifyin(g) shouldn't be limited to black tropes and figures. Exception could be made, however, if within the various black stylistic devices one were to find the arguments, appeals, and general philosophic principles that constitute what Molefi Asante (a.k.a. Arthur Smith) calls an African (American) concept of rhetoric. As an African American concept of rhetoric, Signifyin(g) would thus be linked to the various historical, social, political, and economic forces that constitute black vernacular language and culture.

Because Signifyin(g) is so deeply embedded in the everyday lives of African American people, I see it as an attitude or stance toward humanity--one which, in fact, may figure into many African American students' resistance to academic literacy (see Labov, and Farr and Daniels for a discussion of this resistance). Whereas vernacular discourse forms like Signifyin(g) affirm for these students black cultural identity and community, academic discourse, because of its privileging of, for instance, the conventions of standard written English, often, at least implicitly, displaces these students' cultural links. The natural reaction of
many students is to resist the attempts at cultural displacement, even in spite of obvious consequences to their education.

What this dilemma suggests is that teachers allow students the opportunity to create space within academic writing for their own social and cultural experience, values, and words. Within this space, the African American male students in this study can be highly inventive, rhythmic, imitative, and metaphoric (not to mention, amusing). Above the cacophony of voices within the university community, their own voices can be heard. For I believe, as teachers, we wish to empower our students to demystify, as the Monkey does the Lion, the academy's self-imposed status as king or arbiter of discourse. The use of Signifyin(g) (as well as other BEV discourse practices) as a rhetorical strategy in the academic writing of African American male speakers of BEV would allow them to define themselves in apposition and/or opposition to the academic mainstream, whose discourse(s), if David Bartholomae is right, demands appropriation. Expressed in its entirety, Bartholomae's theory reads as follows:

The student has to appropriate (or be appropriated by) a specialized discourse, and he has to do this as though he were easily and comfortably one with his audience, as though he were a member of the academy or an historian or an anthropologist or an economist; he has to invent the university by assembling and mimicking its language while finding some compromise between idiosyncracy, a personal history, on the one hand, and the requirements of convention, the history of a discipline, on the other. He must
learn to speak our language. Or he must dare to speak it or to carry off the bluff, since speaking and writing will most certainly be required long before the skill is "learned." And this, understandably, causes problems. ("Inventing the University" 135)

Surely, there's no escaping the fact that to be successful in the university students must learn to "speak our language," must learn to talk and write like us. But students' membership in the academic community is not only dependent on how well they learn to speak our language, or how well they "carry off the bluff"; it is also dependent on how well we give them control over their language and how well we teach them to juxtapose their language to ours. In this way, we allow students truly to invent the university, to discover the various ways of valuing, knowing, thinking, reading, writing, and speaking inside and outside the university. As teachers, on the other hand, we must invent or discover our students' discourses and communities; we must discover the rhetoric implicit in their social and cultural uses of language. In drawing a conclusion to this study, therefore, the next chapter offers, among other things, a sketch of a model of this rhetoric as it applies to the students in this study.
CHAPTER VII

ORALITY AND LITERACY REVISITED:
A CONCLUSION

Like in English class, I just write the way I say it.
--Patrick Ellis, English 053A

Rap expresses the ongoing preoccupation with literacy and orality that has characterized African-American communities since the inception of legally coerced illiteracy during slavery. Rap artists explore grammatical creativity, verbal wizardry, and linguistic innovation in refining the art of oral communication.
--Michael Eric Dyson, Reflecting Black

One of the key issues this study has endeavored to explore is the relationship between orality and literacy—that is, between oral and written language. Specifically, it has attempted to explore the relationship between the BEV (oral) discourse practices and the academic writing of African American male college students. Other attempts (namely, that of Walter Ong and, his former student, Thomas Farrell whose writings have been published in a fairly recent sourcebook for basic writing teachers) at describing this relationship have been significant yet wrought with disturbing racial (and class) biases (for a succinct yet substantive review of this issue see Walters's essay "Language, Logic, and Literacy"). Ong and Farrell argue, for instance, that black inner-city or ghetto youth derive from a primarily oral culture that flourishes in
rhapsodic, formulaic expression but not in analytic thought. In fact, so they claim, these young people (and indeed inner-city adults as well) are quite incapable of analytic thought apart from contact with chirographic print or what Ong calls secondary orality.29 Having analyzed two interesting (though specious) examples of "nonthought" from inner-city black male students at St. Louis University, Ong thus concludes

In a primary oral culture, education consists in identification, participation, getting into the act, feeling affinity with a culture's heroes, getting "with it"—not in analysis at all. This is what this freshman student thought the class was all about. (51)

Certainly, as is evident from this study, "participation" and "getting into the act" (that is, I presume, performance) are integral to black vernacular culture, yet nothing about the students I observed supports Ong's assertions. The simple fact that Jimmy and his football teammates "kicked knowledge" to one another about white racist conspiracies to keep African Americans ignorant of the truth about themselves and their history is indeed testimony to the analytical abilities of young inner-city blacks. But in spite of the obvious flaws in Ong's line of reasoning, Farrell takes the argument a step further by linking it to distinctions

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29 By "secondary orality," Ong refers to the orality induced by electronic media such as radio and television. This form of orality, he claims, is "totally dependent" on writing and print ("Literacy and Orality in Our Times" 50). For a more detailed treatment, see also Ong's book Orality and Literacy: The Technologizing of the Word.
between BEV and standard English. In fact, he alludes to many of the very same discourse practices I've described in this study.

Black ghetto children today play various verbal games known as jiving, rapping, shucking, testifying, toasting, joning, and playing the dozens, and they employ in these games sound effects that are generically the same as the schemata verborum employed over the centuries in oral rhetoric to make it catchy and intriguing to listen to, and they systematically use paratactic grammatical structures to string together the lines in these games--structures which facilitate the rapidity of flow and rhythm that contribute to making the verbal exchanges sound clever and catchy. . . . Given the prevalence of these catchy sound effects in the various verbal games played by black ghetto children, I say that black ghetto culture is a residual form of what Walter J. Ong calls a primary oral culture, and Ong says that he agrees with this observation. (473)

Though Farrell is quite right to draw connections between the verbal games played by black children and the schemata verborum, or figures of speech in traditional rhetoric (see Gates 75-76), "catchy sound effects" is, to say the least, a malapropos way of describing what black children do with language. Farrell's proposal for the education of black ghetto children is, thus, equally suspect. He advocates that they be taught the grammar of standard English because

the development of abstract thinking depends on learning (1) the full standard deployment of the verb "to be" and (2) embedded modification and (3) subordination. Historically these are the three features of language that developed as
the ancient Greeks moved from oral to literate composing, which resulted in the development of abstract thinking. IQ test scores reveal that black ghetto children have not developed the power of abstract thinking, and they do not speak standard English. The hypothesis, then, is that the mean IQ scores of black ghetto students will go up when they learn to speak and write standard English. (481)

Farrell's hypothesis can be criticized on several grounds (see, e.g., Greenberg, Hartwell, Himley, and Stratton's responses to Farrell); however, my purpose here is simply to point out where the orality and literacy distinction, such as it is, falls short when applied to BEV speakers like the informants in this study. While I've suggested (chapters 5 and 6), on the one hand, that the students in this study are predisposed to oral rather than written forms of verbal expression, it would, on the other hand, be unwise to infer that this predisposition signifies that the students are deficient in analytical and abstract reasoning. As Labov demonstrated more than two decades ago, the deficit model "has no basis in social reality" (201).30

What I think the students predisposition for oral discourse (i.e., for BEV discourse practices) does infer, however, is that they possess a keen self-consciousness about rhetoric, about the persuasive, transformative powers of language. If, as Ong claims,

primary orality is "unplanned and unselfconscious" then my informants (and black vernacular culture as a whole) represent the poorest examples of a primary oral culture (Interfaces of the Word 298). Indeed, the elaborate metadiscourse indigenous to the black vernacular community is itself substantial evidence of the planned and self-conscious nature of black language and culture. But, more than that, the actual uses BEV discursive forms are put to by the informants in this study--their various attempts at play, display, and self-affirmation (among other things)--strongly intimate inner-city students' cognitive sophistication, not to mention their understanding of rhetorical principles like ethos, pathos, and logos.31

That some of these vernacular discursive forms are inscribed in print--inscribed, that is, in the students' academic essays--further indicates the students' mental adroitness and self-consciousness about rhetoric. Their bold-faced use of these forms in the face of the privileged discursive forms of the university signifies their awareness of, at some level, competing discourses (as in Michel Foucault's notion of the "social appropriation of discourses") and the necessity for resistance (as in Asante's notion of a "rhetoric of resistance").32 At the very least, informants' conscious use of BEV

31 In BEV rhetoric, these artifical proofs, especially logos, assume a quite different meaning from the classical definition. Bizzell and Herzberg define logos in black discourse as "an appeal not to logic in the traditional sense but to language itself" (1190).
32 The first of these points I alluded to in my reference to Bartholomae's "Inventing the University." The reference here derives from Foucault's
in academic prose functions, in Gates's words, "as a kind of writing, wherein rhetoric is the writing of speech, of oral discourse" (53). Admittedly, this point is an obscure one, but by the end of this chapter, I hope to show that, much like the tradition of African American autobiographical writing (see Gates's introduction to Bearing Witness), informants' uses of BEV in writing represents a unique brand of rhetoric, one that in its resemblance to Bakhtin's rhetorical double-voicedness, sees oral and written discourses in symbiotic, yet also dialectical, relation.

**Reviewing Key Questions**

Three major questions guided this research on the rhetoric of BEV. Although these questions were answered in one form or another throughout the previous chapters, it may be helpful here to review them before sketching a model of BEV rhetoric. The first question concerned with identifying the BEV discourse practices used by African American male college students is, perhaps, the most central. Although, as I've tried to indicate, clear cut distinctions between types of language use are problematic, the informants' discourse practices fall into the following categories:

*The Order of Discourse* excerpted in the Bizzell and Herzberg anthology, pp. 1154-1164. The "social appropriation of discourses" is central to Foucault's notion of systems of education (1163). The second point, Asante's "rhetoric of resistance," can be found in *The Afrocentric Idea*, where Asante discusses the African American spokespersons' preoccupation with "making a discourse that confronts the human condition of oppression" (81).
Tropes

semantics (including naming and nickname-using, and self-referential expressions)\textsuperscript{33}

repetition
rhyming

Forms of Discourse

rapping
running it down (as a sub-feature of rapping)
narrative (including the trope of "marking," i.e., imitation)
signifying (as ritual insult and as master trope)

While not as prominent, other tropes/forms like \textit{shucking}, \textit{loud talking}, and \textit{capping} were also present. These various forms of what I call collectively BEV discourse practices function similarly (though not exclusively) as constructs of black cultural identity and reality vis-à-vis the dominant culture. That is, the construction of black cultural identity and reality, when successfully achieved, reverses the forces of oppression and denial that the dominant culture imposes on nonmainstream black people.

\textsuperscript{33} Technically, "semantics" is not a trope, but here the term represents a variety of minor tropes, some of which I associate with \textit{invention} in traditional rhetoric. The terms "naming and nicknaming-using" derive from the Rizzell and Herzberg classification of verbal tropes.
As regards the second major research question concerning the occasions, purposes, and audience deemed appropriate for the use of BEV, it tended to depend on several factors, the most important of which was the racial make-up of the given setting. For instance, generally, if there were a majority of African American students in a class, my informants felt the liberty to speak BEV. This is not to say, however, that they used BEV discourse practices 100% of the time. Rather, it simply means that in a class where black students predominated, BEV was deemed an appropriate way of communicating. My interview with Patrick was very telling in this regard. When asked whether his English class was the only class in which he didn't have to talk "different" from the way he does with friends, Patrick responds

No. Because in math class it's almost all black so... ask a question you talk real... you know? Like "What's goin' on? What's happenin' man?" and stuff like that.

Like the students in Ball's study, for Patrick to speak in BEV is to "talk real." The make-up of the class was, therefore, integral to this kind of natural, unpretentious reality-talk.

On the other hand, BEV discourse practices were not always used indiscriminately. In Gary Carter's class, for instance, unlike Patrick Ellis's and Jimmy Graves's, rarely did I observe BEV discourse forms being used in the presence of the entire class or the teacher. The discourse forms that I witnessed there occurred
while students were working in small groups or while a group of African American students were conversing before class began. By no means were Caucasian students absolutely barred from participation; however, unless group work was called for, most of these students were segregated from many of the African American students such that their exclusion from the discourse was by default. Patrick also had an interesting statement to make about the way he talks in racially mixed groups. If he's in a group of white students and there is no particular assignment involved, he says that he talks in whatever way he wants to. But if this same group is working on an assignment together, he says that

First I would see how they talk. I would see, you know, if they like the people I talk to, we all understand each other, you know. . . . if I was in an all white group or something like that and I was talking, first I would let them know where I was coming from, and if they couldn't understand it enough to get through I'd probably change. Because I would say something slang or something like that and if they don't understand it, if they look at me strange or something, you know, I just talk to get through. But I would let them know that I'm not fake, that I still talk [slang], but just to get through, to get an assignment done or something like that, I talk [different].

Patrick may subconsciously alter his speech more often than he realizes, but what's important about his statement is his awareness of factors (e.g., audience as well as task, or purpose for being in a group) that are involved in his use of vernacular speech. Nevertheless, with regard to degree, BEV discourse practices were
more frequent among small groups of African American students. Elaborate stories, exchanges about common family practices, weekend events, and musical tastes could all be heard in such groups.

Other occasions likewise depended on who was (or who was not) present at the time. One-on-one tutoring sessions were unlikely to produce BEV discourse forms, on the one hand, because much of the time was spent discussing a written text (e.g., a book or student essay) and, on the other hand, because as a tutor I rarely invited or entertained its use. Sessions with Jimmy and Gary, however, would occasionally yield BEV discourse forms like rapping and narrative sequencing largely because the task centered on brainstorming or discussing possible topics for writing. Apart from these exceptions, the optimum times for an exhibition of BEV discourse practices were those tutoring sessions in which two or more African American students were present. This was especially true for the student athletes whom I tutored during study tables. Though my informants were not often included in such groups, the student athletes who were, obviously considered that time as appropriate for vernacular language use.

Although the total number of social occasions in which I observed student language use were limited in this study, the use of BEV discourse practices doesn't appear to depend largely on physical setting. Rather it depends on the audience or participants of the discourse and, to a lesser extent, on the topic under
discussion. The factor of audience is significant because it implies the existence of a community of insiders whose code bars access from outsiders. I believe this community (or a sense of it) along with its code is a strong source of support and affirmation to many African American students as they struggle to gain access to the academic community and its code.

The final question this study raised about the influence of BEV (oral) discourse practices on students' writing in SAE is a bit more difficult to answer than the others. The use of the term "influence" suggests that students' use of BEV in writing was an subconscious and unintentional act. And it suggests further that, as a subconscious act, the influence was overwhelmingly negative, that is, that the students' language falls far short of the standard. Defined in this a way, the term "influence" would not accurately apply to the students in this study. While portions of what the students wrote could be classified as subconscious influences of speech on writing, it's impossible to say just how much, for some portions (the obvious example being Gerald's essay) could also be classified as conscious influences or uses of BEV in writing.

Regrettably, a major limitation of this study was the lack of input from students about the language forms they used in their papers. Ideally, they would have been able to confirm whether the BEV forms in their papers were influences (in the subconscious sense). Short of this data, however, what I am confident of is that the students' frequent use of black semantics was a calculated
attempt to write, as Patrick said, in their "own words." It felt more natural that way, and it was far easier than trying to write in someone else's (especially the academy's) words.

This predilection for writing in one's own words suggests that if we were to classify features of students' writing as caused by an "influence" of BEV on SAE, it would be an influence that enhanced not impaired students verbal expression. Though the students' essays are by no means perfect, such as they are, their uses of BEV do make what they write their own words. And because their words are not merely their own but linked to a rich oral tradition-to Mother Wit-writing in their own words allows them to reclaim the voice of a community, a people seeking liberation and empowerment. William Cook brilliantly expresses this idea in his study of various accounts of literacy by African Americans like Olaudah Equiano, Frederick Douglass, Ann Petry, and Maya Angelou. His analysis of Angelou's experience of having been taught by Mrs. Flowers to resist silence is especially brilliant, for it implies the very intersection of literacy/orality that I seek to demonstrate here. The portion is lengthy but worth citing in its entirety. Cook writes as follows:

. . . She [Maya] must add her own voice to that of the dominant narratives, for only the sound of her own voice can convert these texts into enabling vehicles; can resist their silencing potential:
Now no one is going to make you talk—possibly no one can. But bear in mind, language is man's way of communicating with his fellow man and it is language alone which separates him from the lower animals. Words mean more than what is set down on paper. It takes the human voice to infuse them with the shapes of deeper meaning. (Angelou 82)

... Mrs. Flowers gives her books and she understands that "I not only must read them, I must read them aloud. She suggested that I try to make sentence sound in as many different ways as possible" (82). Here, too, wisdom and power are to be found in oral literacy which once again is assigned a privileged position:

She encouraged me to listen carefully to what country people called mother wit. That in those homely sayings, was couched the collective wisdom of generations. (83)

She must be "intolerant of ignorance but understanding of illiteracy."

These tales of literacy and liberation, for all their differences, agree on one very important theme: to preach the word demands possession of that word, and such possession is predicated on seizing for the creating and speaking self spaces not yet claimed by the texts of the dominant discourse. The primary or privileged texts of that discourse must not be permitted to foreclose the generation of voice by the formerly subjected, the coming to voice of the once silenced. (24)

It is the human voice, Mrs. Flowers instructs us, that infuses the words on the printed page with the "shapes of deeper meaning." Speaking, in other words, adds subtlety of signification to writing, to the text. Not just any speaking will, however, afford Mrs.
Flowers' "shapes of deeper meaning." Rather, through "mother wit"--the homely sayings which embody the collective wisdom of an oppressed yet tenacious people--will the young Maya understand life and how to live it. Thus, this "oral literacy," this fusion of oral and literate traditions at a juncture of discursive dominance and power, suggests a complex model of rhetorical praxis.

**Sketching a Model of BEV Rhetoric**

I propose here a brief sketch of a model of what I'm calling Black English Vernacular rhetoric. Although no true theoretical model can be based solely on the practices of a few individuals or a small group, I'd like to offer the implications of this study as an outline, a blueprint, if you will, for such a model. To express what I have in mind, I'll make reference to a few intriguing statements made by Henry Louis Gates and especially the graph he uses to depict the relationship between black and standard English.

But first I should reiterate a few key principles of BEV rhetoric revealed by this study. As we've seen, *Mother Wit* is the virtual guiding light of the ways of knowing, thinking, feeling, believing within black vernacular language and culture. She is, in effect, the "great mama" of black culture--the one who gives life, wisdom, and strength (generally) to African American people. Without Mother Wit, without her wellspring of generational "folk-lore," BEV would perhaps cease to exist as a rhetoric. For her function as a
purveyor of wisdom, of common sense to a people struggling to
survive in white America and her resistance to succumb to
mainstream America's arrogant bookishness are essential to the
various BEV discourse practices described in this study. Thus, like
Nommo in traditional African society, Mother Wit (though the two
terms are not entirely interchangeable) provides BEV its
philosophical or operational base as a rhetoric.

The highly performative character of black verbal expression
and the dialectical nature of the speaker-audience dynamic in
black discourse (see Abrahams and Smith in chapter 2), are other
important principles of BEV rhetoric. The former, we've seen,
tends to reflect the value the black vernacular community places
on the ethos of the speaker or "man-of-words" (Abrahams
"Joking"). Patrick, Jimmy, Gary, Ronnie, Gerald, and Henry's uses of
euphemism, metaphor, verbal put-downs (signifying), and
mimicry all create and project images of themselves as linguistic
virtuosos. The latter, closely linked to the former, reflects the
value African Americans place on dialogue or social interaction
between a speaker and his (or her) audience. In this sense,
informants' verbal display is no mere individual act; rather, it is a
communal transaction. Like Trackton's "stories," the students'
"slangin'" is

intended to intensify social interactions and to give all
parties an opportunity to share in not only the unity of the
common experience on which the story ["slang"] may be
based, but also in the humor of the wide-ranging language play and imagination which embellish the narrative.
(Heath 166)

All of the above principles constitute BEV a rhetoric, but (such as they are) they speak to its oral rather than written character. In what follows, therefore, I want to adjoin what I believe are missing elements in this rhetoric. Something like Cook's "oral literacy," Gates introduces a interesting notion of an "oral writing" in the black vernacular discursive system. Comparing Echu-Elegua, a god of Cuban mythology, to the Signifying Monkey, Gates writes that "Like Esu, however, the Signifying Monkey stands as the figure of an oral writing within black vernacular language rituals" (52). Elsewhere, he adds that "Its [Signifyin(g)] self-consciously open rhetorical status, then, functions as a kind of writing, wherein rhetoric is the writing of speech, or oral discourse" (53).

Without a detailed review of chapter one of his book, it's difficult to comprehend precisely what Gates means here, but, as I alluded to early on in this chapter, it appears to describe the function of the vernacular vis-à-vis standard written prose. Since Gates is primarily interested in the "black appropriation of the English-language term that denotes relations of meaning"--signification--he sees the black linguistic term--Signifyin(g)--as the writing of oral discourse (53). In other words, Signifyin(g), as
the meta-linguistic term for all the rhetorical figures in the vernacular, symbolizes the obscuring of apparent meaning, the play of differences between black vernacular and standard English discourses (53). Gates's illustrative chart might help to elucidate this very perplexing idea (49). However, I want to modify it slightly to account for a model of BEV rhetoric (see figure 11).

The relationship between vernacular and standard discursive fields is here represented by a perpendicular graph. Instead of being represented as opposite ends of a single pole, continuum, or even as parallel structures, this visual description represents standard and vernacular discourses at the crossroads, at a juncture of speech and writing (49). Gates makes a salient point about what he calls a collision of the two axes. However, in contrast to what I've depicted as a cross between spoken and written discourses, Gates sees the two identical terms Signification (y axis) and signification (x axis) as demonstrating that "a simultaneous, but negated, parallel discursive (ontological, political) universe exists within the larger white discursive universe, like the matter-and-antimatter fabulations so common to science fiction" (49). Though Gates's Signification/signification classification does apply to informants' use of BEV discourse practices, I use the oral/written designation instead to highlight the function of students' uses of vernacular discourse in writing. The model, thus, indicates that at the crossing point of black vernacular and
standard English discursive fields stands BEV rhetoric, the art of semantic trickery, resistance, and transformation. It represents the dialectal relationship between BEV speech and standard English writing, a relationship in which the vernacular voice is situated in and against the dominant discourse.

Rap (or Hip-hop) is a perfect illustration of this mix of oral and literate practices. Indeed, given rap's sway in the inner-city, I find it extremely difficult to believe Ong and Farrell's claims about black ghetto children. Perhaps, they see rap is a case of secondary orality, its oral narratives and rhymes being heavily dependent on writing. Yet, I see rap as a complex mix of oral and literate discourses. With its play on standard English meaning and values,
it is, as Gates describes, "a simultaneous, but negated, parallel
discursive (ontological, political) universe" existing "within the
larger white discursive universe" (49). My informants use of rap
lyrics and creative word-play demonstrates this coming together,
this collision of discursive universes.

Restructuring the Comp Class and More

For such a rhetorical model to be useful to students and
teachers in the composition classroom at the university, some
major restructuring must occur. Throughout much of this
dissertation, I've argued that teachers should regard BEV as a
resource for teaching writing. Unfortunately, however, vernacular
discourse forms like rapping and signifying, while not rare in the
classroom context (see Abrahams "Talking Black in the
Classroom"), are scarcely viewed as resources in the classroom,
especially not for writing. But the students whose essays I've
analyzed in this study show potential for effectively using
vernacular discursive forms in their writing, which suggests, as
Miriam Camitta maintains, "the logic for looking at vernacular
writing as a range of significant and meaningful literate skills and
resources that are mistakenly disconnected from the process of
literacy education as it is officially conducted" (267).

In addition to this change in perception and pedagogy, finding a
place for BEV rhetoric in the classroom will require administrative
change. For the most part, the students in this study had the
luxury of being in an academic program (the Academic Support Program) that employed many supportive, patience, and understanding people. The program director's confidence in the students and the teachers' willingness not only to work with students but also to bring students' cultural and linguistic knowledge into class activities were important factors in students' access to the university and its language.

But at large predominantly white universities such programs are few in number. In fact, as of spring quarter this year, even the Academic Support Program at Ohio State was phased out. In spite of the program's superb record in retaining "at-risk" students, administrators have considered it out of sync with the university's mission of educating students. In the name of some narrowly defined or ill-conceived goal of "academic excellence," the university administration has, in effect, declared that it will no longer accommodate nonmainstream students—that it will cease to educate students whose language and culture greatly differ from the mainstream.

But if BEV rhetoric is going to have a place in white mainstream institutions, if black inner-city males are going to find a place in the academy--then the university administration must broaden its definition of academic excellence, or rather broaden its notion of what constitutes "excellence" among students of diverse linguistic and cultural backgrounds. In a way, what I'm advocating here is that the university administration do a better job with upholding
its policies for affirmative action, for, like Stephen Carter, I believe that

A college or university is not fulfilling its educational missions if it fails to take a hard look at the applicant pool to be sure that it is not missing highly motivated students--some of them people of color, some of them not--who might not be "sure things" but who show good evidence of being positioned to take advantage of what the school can offer. This means taking risks, but that is what higher educational institutions ought to be doing . . . . (85)

As it has turned out, none of the students in this study were negligible or harmful risks. In fact, I believe that as well as having greatly benefited from the university these students have been of immense profit to the university community because they have brought to it creativity, originality, and intellect we haven't even begun to unearth.
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APPENDIX A

INTERVIEW TRANSCRIPTION: PATRICK

Interview 1

Researcher: Basically what I want to ask now is just some background questions. Where you're from, what kind of high school you, what kind of experiences...Your full name is?

Patrick: Patrick Ellis

R: You usually go by Patrick?

P: Yeah.

R: And your how old?

P: 19

R: Your birthday is?

P: May 20

R: And you were born where?

P: In Manville.

R: I know a little bit about Manville. . .

P: It's close to downtown. It's like east Manville.

R: Is there a lot of blacks live there?
P: Yeah. It's 90% black.

R: So your neighborhood then is probably... Is it middle class?

P: Middle class and lower class.

R: And your neighborhood is like that?

P: Yeah. It was. It's changing now because you know a lot of people selling drugs and what not so a lot of people there they have money but it don't show because the neighborhood going down from everybody all that activity going on. But you know it's a pretty good neighborhood though.

R: Yeah, that's pretty strange though. I was reading an article in Time magazine about Camden, New Jersey and that place is really run down. There's a lot of drug going on there. You see a lot of young people driving around in Mercedes and stuff like this. It's kind of strange how do you classify the, our they lower class or they middlle class or what? Because they are making some money...Ok, tell me a little bit about your high school...

P: Well, the first high school I went to was St John High School. That was the first semester of my freshman year. And it was kind of strange because I only knew two or three people that went there. They were like coming there with me so we didn't really know anybody. There was one guy there that was like he was like a?. Every school he went to ?. And uh, he was a senior so I didn't really see him that much. I just seen him like at parties. Walk past in the hall, I never really saw him. So the way I was making friends was acting silly, showing off in class and that was affecting my grades a lot. So my mother ?, well then my father they thought they was wasting money. So then I went to the neighborhood high school which was real real run down. It was called Wash High School. And it's like so many people there that the teachers there, it's like they don't get enough attention. It's big. They didn't get enough attention. If you didn't come to class the teachers rarely took attendance.
R: How many students went to your school?

P: It would be around a thousand in each class. A thousand in each class. This past year, incoming freshmen was 1500 and they said it was the lowest they had in the last couple of years.

R: Now this school is from ninth to twelfth grade?

P: It was like a jail. That's how big it is. It's really big.

R: Now is the school very big.

P: Yeah, the school is really big too. It has enough space it's just they don't have enough help. I guess the government doesn't fund for them or something? money. I went there for a semester and brought my grades up. Cause I was just upset that I wasted my mother's money that you know I wanted to try real hard. I had like a 4.0.

R: Really? Now how come at the other school you weren't doing so well and at this school...

P: See I knew everybody there cause they came from all the neighborhood. Like everybody from east Manville goes to Wash. It was like that. I guess I was comfortable cause I knew em I went to junior high school with them and what not like that. But when I came back to John's you know, my grades were they were my mother they saw a change and they said I can go back. You know my grades were like 2.9, 3, they was alright.

R: So the first semester you were at St. John's, then you went to

P: Wash. Then I went back to St. John's.

R: What kind of students were at St. John's.

P: They were mostly the same students. Alright, St. John's was like half, 60% white, 40% black. But the white people that went there were like from the neighborhood of St. John. It was like a
private school but it was like really like a little village, you know. And the black people that went there were from all over the city. There were people from the west side goin' there.

R: So you had to catch a bus to get there?

P: Yeah, I had to catch a bus to get there. So there were people from everywhere. It was like everybody was trying to impress each other. So a lot of people started off bad and later on they came out to be turning grades up, go up, because they started to get to know each other.

R: Any racial problems.

P: Yeah, yeah, it seems like every year around spring time the Italians and the blacks get in a big fight. Every year. Soon as the weather break, I don't know why, I don't know what it mean. But it's everytime. But throughout the whole year everything seemed right till the weather break.

R: So when you were there, at least the first time you were there, the classes you were in, ...

P: It was more black. It was more blacks the freshman year. But it seemed like every grade you go up, they seemed to leave or got kicked out or something. Because in my class freshmen year I think there was about 40 blacks in my whole class. In my graduating class it was about 25. And since it was a private school, my freshmen year tuition was like 1700 but my senior year it was 2500. So a lot of people left because of that too. Because of tuition. And the people from the community from that village, they were all old and they didn't have many children going to that school so they had to keep raising tuition. Because I think the enrollment was my freshmen year was 7 and my senior was like 700.

R: So when you came back to St. John what was it like?
P: It was they changed, my attitude changed toward my school work. Because really it was because of my mother, it really was.

R: What's that?

P: I really didn't want to dissapoint my mother about gettting my grades down low. Because it was like it was like I was doing it for her, I learned how to do it for myself later on in life, but ? wasting no money. So I didn't really want to go to Wash because I was getting the grades there, but usually the mentality of Wash was I ain't goin to say it was like you ain't going to benothin, but you know it was like you all goin to be on the streets and stuff.

R: (comments)

P: Cause like it's a lot of people in this school that came from Wash. But they're like in the honors program and what not like that. But if I was, this is a state school that's supposed to accept anybody but you know a lot of people, but it was better for me coming out of St. John's than Shaw getting in here.

R: So your mom was the main one that wanted you to go to...

P: Yeah.

R: Seems like she is very strong ...Did she get very far in her education?

P: She would have. She was supposed to go to OU and she got pregnant with my sister. So she went to some kind of business school or a technical school or something like that. She was a mender of the security system place called Sonitrol. She was always had high quality jobs or whatever. She seemed educated. She looked she knew a lot of stuff even though she had a high school education. It was like that. She's real strong. She really wants to go back. Really.

R: What about your dad?
P: My father he got out of school young. He graduated from high school, he was down south, and I guess it seems like everybody that comes from down south graduated when they're 16 or something. So when he was 16 he went to Manville. He went to a school called Manville Community College. He went there for 2 years and he started doing odd jobs. Now he works at the Chrysler Corporation.

R: Was he very strong...

P: Yeah. He was real strict on a lot of things. My mother she it seemed like he was real strict about things you know. Sometimes around him I would be the most timid one you know because he was so strict about things. My mother I'm real open with. But I have more respect for my mother than I do him. I seem to think that I care more for her because sometimes he's so strict and so like you know it's bothersomes sometimes you know.

R: Well, getting back to school, can you tell me a little bit about english classes?

P: My first english class,

R: You don't have to go back ...

P: There were two teachers that ? english, that was Mr. Arnie Stafford. He was more involved. He wasn't involved with writing, he was most involved with reading and writing. Not writing I mean learning terms and things. Definitions, vocabulary. We'd have, how to understand things. How to put them in your own words. We'd have movie day every Wednesday. He would want us to say what we thought about the movie. You know some things that we do so we know how we feel about them and stuff like that. And another one was Mr. Lester. His class was about poetry. He'd have us read poems. He wants us to show emotions and stuff like that. It was real fun. He would always have me stay after class and read poems to him.

R: Why did he do that?
P: I always trying to be silly about reading them you know making the class laugh. But he was like that though, and that was real good.

R: What kind of writing did you do?

P: I didn't really do that much writing.

R: Really? It seems like you did quite a bit of reading.

P: Yeah, a lot of reading.

R: You never had to write about what you read?

P: If it would be it would be a question. It would be like what happened. And you had to tell about a certain thing. But like for men's class you had to write a whole sheet. It was like a little space and you couldn't express yourself. You had to do the facts like this happened and that happened, you couldn't tell how you felt about it in like men's class.

R: That's a good point because in Ms Mitchell's class you're doing papers that are maybe 3 or 4 pages long. You never did that in high school? You never did drafts of papers? That's surprising. So what did you do just read?

P: Really nothing, we just watched movies. And read. See I was in general classes until my junior year. But it was like every junior class it was the same thing just faster. So it was not like everybody from my school we was all doing the same things, it was just at different paces. So when I went from general to college prep, I was doing the same thing. I was wondering cause I thought I would be doing stuff like that, reading a lot more you know, reading Shakespeare. Geez, we watched a movie on Shakespeare. You know it was the same stuff. The exact same stuff. We just watched it at different times. We watched Shakespeare at the beginning of the year and we watched it again at the end.
R: So you never read a play by Shakespeare?

P: No. But the funny thing is the students at Wash they read the book, McBeth.

R: This was in college prep class at St. John's?

P: St. John's High School. And a lot of people that come out of St. John's High School they come here they end up in 05.

R: Did you have a grammer course?

P: I think my grammer course was in the tenth grade. It was like half and half.

R: But you never had a set course on just on writing, composition. Is there anything else you can think of...

P: The most writing I did in high school was me and my friends would sit around and write raps.

R: How old were you then? What grade were you in?

P: All through high school. That's all we'd do. Be in the back of the class while the movie's playing and write raps.

R: You'd actually write them down?

P: Write them down.

R: Do you still do that now?

P: Sometimes when I get bored. Real bored, I sit around and write some stuff. Just by myself.

R: None of your friends from high school came here?

P: No. None of them. I tried to get away from them cause
K: Where'd they go?

P: Some of them went to Ohio University and some went to Akron. Most of them went to Akron. And like where they live and that is called ? apartments. They're really on campus but like they're private you know. And they got a kitchen, like that. I know I wouldn't get anything done being around all that you know. Most of them messing up there and talking about coming here.

R: So you don't have any friends from your high school here?

P: No, most of them are older. Like this guy that plays football named Ralph Small. He came

R: He's a

P: Junior.

R: Ok.

P: He came when I was a sophomore. No, was he? He probably a junior but he's supposed to be a senior. You know how credits messes you up or whatever. So me and him are real close. He comes by sometimes. But that's really it.

R: One thing I wanted to ask, one of the reasons I'm doing this is to try to find out your past history...I'm interested in if there's any out of class activities that you participate in that you wouldn't feel uncomfortable in that I observed.

P: There's nothing that I'm really in right now. All we doing now is we play football. It's like a video game. Me and my friends we play that. Not late hours of the night but ?.

R: What time does it start?

P: It's supposed to start around 8 today. My friend he has a class now, but we used to start about 6:30 or 7. I will be into
something. I'm supposed to be president of my fraternity next year. Omega Si Phi.

R: You don't go to any parties or anything?

P: Yeah, I go to parties. There's not that's much talk at parties, some people just dancing all the time. Maybe a couple of fights.

R: Well, maybe, I don't know, how often do you have these

P: Almost every day. Almost. Plus we have like a little, it's not really a study group, but a lot friends we get together and go some place to study and talk. But that's just like random. There wouldn't be any set time for it.

R: Well you can let me know...I don't know anything about the games. I think it'd be real interesting to observe that. Do you do that on the weekends?

P: Yeah. Sometimes. Most every day like we're addicted to it or something.

R: Same time?

P: Same time.

R: Well, I'll just have to keep in touch with you.

End of interview
Interview 2

Researcher: Why are you interested in those?

Patrick: I just like to see what they say.

R: Really? Are you into that kind of stuff?

P: I'm into it but I ain't into it like a lot of people, like other people into it like you know, they talk a lot about...you know. If they going to talk about it they do something, just talk about it they don't do nothing.

R: Yeah, ok. I understand that. A lot of people really take it seriously and they uh to the point that they are kind of racist themselves.

P: Yeah.

R: ...I have a copy here. I think there was another one that came out later in the fall that...Are you on the ? program too?

P: Yeah.

R: Do you see your mentor?

P: Yeah, we ...went to the shooting rinks.

R: Oh really?

P: Yeah.

R: Ok, I was wondering about that, where those came from.

P: Yeah.

R: Are these your shots?

P: Yeah. Me and Peter. That's Peter and that's mine.
R: Oh Peter too?

P: Yeah, Peter too.

R: Which one is yours?

P: That one.

R: That one? Ok. Pretty good shot.

P: What I wanted to do today is to sort of continue what we talked about a few weeks ago. And that was about writing. We talked a little bit about reading that you did in high school. But more about writing this time and especially about talking. You mentioned back in high school ... would make raps in class and write those down. Let me just ask you in general, why did you guys do that?

P: Because

R: You made up your own right?

P: Yeah, we made up our own. The class ... it looked like you know, the first three years, I was in general classes. And I we didn’t really do anything, we just watched movies all the time. Sometimes we got writing assignments but everybody be talking and playing around and really nothing to do.

R: Yeah.

P: So we started writing. Writing raps. Rap music, that’s all we’d listen too.

R: Well let me ask you about that then. Why do you listen to raps?

P: Sometimes we talk about you know ... or something like that you know. The song might be funny but it could still be happening you know.
R: I've heard some but I don't collect it because I think if I did it would cost a lot of money to collect all those things but I've heard some that does sound pretty good and they have messages too throughout about gangs, about drugs, about poverty, about a lot of things. Is there any particular kind that you

P: I don't like all of them. I don't like that house music stuff, I don't like that.

R: What is that?

P: Stuff that's real fast. Sometimes ...but if it's real fast. Have this in Chicago a lot. You can't hear all of it it's so fast. Real fast. And I don't like pop rap. Like MC Hammer and stuff.

R: Oh you call that pop rap?

P: Yeah that's pop rap.

R: How is that different from the rap you listen to?

P: Well I listen to educational rap like ? productions. They talk about racism and the history of black people. In ? they talk about the history of black people, how things change, but they didn't really change from slavery to Martin Luther King you know? They talk about the same problems but it's like in different forms. And like ganster rap talk about poverty and gang problems and drugs and stuff like that. Pop rap, they just talk about ...

R: What about the ones that talk about, I believe some of them talk about picking up ? and stuff like that?

P: Yeah. That's part of ? rap. They talk about that too.

R: I couldn't figure out which one was which. Ok. Well I don't know. I probably listen to some of that stuff sometimes and I'll borrow a tape from you sometime. But I was wondering, since you probably have a lot of different friends and get around a lot, do a lot of things, I was wondering if you consider yourself able to talk
in different ways depending on where you are and who you're talking to?

P: Yeah. I talk to people, I don't know. When I'm around my mother I don't cuss a lot but I still got a people say I got a ghetto accent.

R: Is that right?

P: Yeah. I just talk. A lot of people I know talk like that, so you know. My mother you know, I talk the same, but I don't cuss a lot. I try not too. She hear me. She know I cusses and she really don't pay that much attention to it but I don't really do it that much.

R: So when do you cuss?

P: When I'm around my friends and people I don't know I cuss a lot.

R: People you don't know you cuss a lot?

P: My father I don't cuss at all around him. I try not to.

R: What about with teachers and people, you've had jobs right? People you work for?

P: I don't do that at first. I see how they are. How they feel about it you know. I don't mean to, I don't realize it you know. Like maybe around her, saw her out of class you know. everybody talkin you know.

R: Besides the cussing, is there anything else different about the way you talk say at home and the way you talk with your friends?

P: At home, no. See at home, my parents they aren't there a lot, you know. So, at home I talk the same. Except my father around, you know, I don't want to cuss a lot you know.
R: What about in some of your other classes like? do you have classes, are you taking 3 courses now?

P: I'm taking econ 200, math, and english.

R: Now, in english class from what I've observed, it seems like people say pretty much what they want, any way they want to. She'a pretty cool about that. In other classes, if you want to ask a question or answer a question or discuss something, do you talk differently?

P: No. Because in math class it's almost all black so...ask a question you talk real...you know? Like what's goin on? What's happenin man and stuff like that. The only class I might say I talk different in is econ because? teacher a lot of people in there. It'd be one on one...

R: So what do you say to him?

P: I'd just tell him you know like I had a problem with the graphs in econ. ...on the first midterm I got a C. Really should have been an F. Like 27 problems, I got 13 out of 27. But with the curve it was a C. I told him...graphs. Might need some help with them you know. He said to stop by his office and go over graphs during his office hours. But you know his office hours I'd be in class or I work. So I had to have a special session and I asked him about it. When I asked him about it. But when I asked him about it I...just come out like that...just asked him politely.

R: Well let me get to the writing part of this I guess now and that is you have to do a lot of writing assignments in classes... When you're writing something that has to be very good standard english, do you feel like you have to change the way you speak and normally communicate? Do you feel you have to change that to write?

P: Not in english class especially. Like I had sociology...quarter. I dropped it. We had to do a paper and she said...regular sentences...no cussing in there. It had to be perfect. She wanted a
title page, references. I really don't know how to write like that. I could, there's a book out my psychology teacher told me to get last year, last quarter, called ...book. Showed you what to do and stuff like that. Get that for next quarter I think. I think I'm going to need that then. Ms. Mitchell's class, all she doing is tell how we see things in detail. So when I write stuff I say it how I see it. Like in autobiography I was saying stuff like this one line...hyphons. I would just write it how I would say it. But what I do have a problem with is with run on sentences...

R: So would you say then that you write like you talk or that you change the way you, make your writing different from the way you talk?

P: It's different. In english class you know. If the person asks for you how we feel how we express things and all I would say how I would feel. Because I would say if I feel this way, I wanted to put it different on a piece of paper, I would ...find the right words to put it in. You know I would put it in my own words. If I put it in my own words it comes out better. It makes more sense.

R: So you're saying then if you could write something in your own words or just write the way you feel then it would be more natural for you?

P: Yeah, more natural.

R: But if you had to write it differently it would be harder.

P: Yeah. Like when people say you know tell like on an essay or something, they say put this in your own words. I can do that, but if you say put it in your own words and you know use certain words you know...and things like that you know that gets hard for me. I'll spend all day on that stuff.

R: I see. Is that more of a vocabulary problem?

P: Yeah.
R: That raises some interesting questions because usually, I think for most people, if they want to write like we think students or people in college are supposed to write, then we got to think a lot about how best to say what we want to say. It can’t be the first thing that comes to our mind. The first thing that comes to our mind and the way it comes out is not quite the way we think it should be and not quite formal enough for us to hand in. But of course in English class you have drafts. You write a first draft, the first thing that pops into your head, on the second draft you make the changes. So in that way we begin to look at how we first wrote something down and then we begin to make the changes in it to make it more formal and to see if it can be changed in a way to be more acceptable. Now when you’re writing what are you thinking about? Do you thinking just about getting all your ideas down or are you thinking about something else?

P: For the first ...you know getting a start, trying to get a point across. Trying to make sure that my point goes with what she asks for. In the second draft you know figure out how to make more detail. I try to get all the detail in I can. Sometimes to me it seems too much detail but she says it’s not enough you know. That’s what...second draft. If we have a third draft, if the third draft was a final draft...computer type out it seems like I have a page of a, three pages wrote down, it’d come out to four pages typed. I seem to add more from what I typed earlier.

R: I see. So it helps you ...type.

P: Yeah...

R: Yeah, that’d be good ...class. I kind of skipped over something. In talking about different ways of talking, I wondered if you the way you mentioned cussing as one way of talking to friends, I was wondering if you had a name for how you all talked to one another.

P: Slang. I go around slanging

R: Who calls it that?
P: ... language. . .dictionary (reference to rap song).

R: Oh really?

P: Yeah.

R: Who said that?

P: What's his name? ...

R: ... What

P: He's from L.A.

R: What album is that?

P: Above the Law.

R: Above the Law. ?

P: Yeah.

R: That's interesting. I never read that.

P: He also made a point about blacks and whites. He said that it seemed like blacks had their own dictionary. ...he said ...our language. We just use it to get through. ...underground it's for us only. And this other guy... he also made a point about the same thing. He said you know how you see another black on the street ...the white ...they don't know what that means. He's on the radio station sometimes like 6 in the morning.

R: Oh is that KC Jones?

P: No. It might be him. His first name is a C or a K. He was saying you know white people get mad because we talk to each other. No matter where we at like what's up man, give him a hand shake and stuff like that. What's going on?
R: Yeah, so what do you think about that then that blacks in general have a kind of different language than white people?

P: It's true. We are two different races you know. They say we're not supposed to be here. We was brought over here and all that stuff like that you know. Everybody keeps saying, everybody says different things but I feel ...

R: Yeah. You mentioned something that what's his name?

P: ?

R: ? Something that he says that we're just learning their language to get through.

P: Yeah.

R: What do you think about that? Because in a sense to be in a university like this in a sense we're learning white language. So how do you feel about that?

P: I believe that's true. It's kind of hard to say because really blacks built their own language, blacks from Africa. They build their own language so when we go some place, if that's the way they speak then we have to get through by using their language. That's true. And you know to go somewhere in life you have to go through the school system and you have to study English language. So that's the way I feel about it. So it is true.

R: Some people, even adolescents that I know of that have been written about, they think that if you learn the so called white language and talk like that then you are becoming white in a sense.

P: I don't know about that.

R: You don't know about that?
P: I don't know about that. Lots of people that say too black and too strong and stuff like that. ...people on the street, I ain't working for the white man. I don't have any money.

R: No money and no job. But yet they're complaining about something.

P: Yeah. Complaining about something.

R: Well I think basically we have covered, unless you have anything else you want to say about, especially about how you feel about how your having to learn how to talk about a little bit differently in college and also to write differently. Have you felt that it's been somewhat of a struggle for you to learn how to write but also given that there are a lot of different people all around in different places all over the world and you may meet a few of them here and there ...have to learn to communicate and talk to them.

P: I just tell them what I feel about things. I might do it. I don't see myself changing the way I talk... I might do it but I don't think I do though. I try not to. I don't want to be like oh he's fake...I don't want to be like that.

R: Well it's just like when the guy was here last time you came ...into a classroom or maybe working in a group with say ...well say with Phil and someone like Janet, if you were in a group with them would you ...talk to...?

P: First I would see how they talk. I would see you know if they, like the people I talk to we all understand each other you know. We talk about the same stuff. We all understand each other. And

...talking the same but if I was around them, if I was in an all white group or something like that and I was talking first I would let them know where I was coming from and if they couldn't understand it enough to get through I'd probably change. Because I would say something slang or something like that and if they don't understand it, if they look at me strange or something, you
know, I just talk to get through. But I would let them know that I'm not fake. That I still talk ...but just to get through to get an assignment done or something like that, I talk ...

R: What about if there wasn't an assignment involved?

P: I just talk whatever way I want to talk.

R: Ok, you wouldn't change.

P: Huh uh.

R: Ok, that's interesting. Anything you can think of else about writing?

P: Like in english class I just write the way I say it.

End of interview