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CRITICAL PEDAGOGY

Location and Literacy: What Phillis Wheatley Helps us Remember

GREGORY SHAFER

There is an educational disconnect between students' individual backgrounds and the instruction they traditionally receive in school.

—Lauren Leigh Kelly

When we think of location and its relationship to language arts instruction, we often focus on the geographic place of our students, the towns from which they come and their physical place in the world. Less frequently, we consider the more significant linguistic and racial location they inhabit and the importance it has to their development as students. Twentieth century author bell hooks could have been born in either the South or the North, but when she contemplated the relevance of reading and writing to her life, it was from the perspective—from the location—of an African American who had experienced a lifetime of alienation and who sought to delineate the location from which disaffected people come when becoming “educated.” Her many essays and books on the perilous cultural journey one takes when transacting with language, emanates not from a city or state but from a person who is navigating her way through the political aspects of literacy and probing the areas of hostility that have traditionally been part of learning to read and write. When she writes that “it is not the English language that hurts but what the oppressors choose to do with it, how they shape it to become a territory” (1994, p. 33), we begin to see the poignancy of linguistic and racial location and the urgent need to make the English classroom a place of diversity, of many languages and literacies.

The issue of linguistic location has forever been a point of resistance, conflict, and negotiation. The typical terrain of the academic is often unkind or even hostile to those who are not well versed in the world of parenthetical documentation, topic sentences, and Standard English. There are rituals and expectations for answering a question, responding to an

essay, and often the form and style are more important than the content. As a colleague once lamented in discussing the question of location and the language arts classroom, “Too often, we not only aspire to make them literate but to bleach away all of their past, transforming them into something their parents would never recognize.” This conundrum, this racial conflict, has been given many names. In the early part of the twentieth century, it was known as “passing” and was most poignantly captured in Nella Larsen’s *Quicksand and Passing*, Philip Roth’s *The Human Stain*, and in the idea that some African Americans consciously subvert their own academic education so as to maintain their identity at home and among their family members. Clearly, the location of the school—where success and literacy are determined—must become more democratic and inclusive if we are to serve all of our students.

Location and Phillis Wheatley

Over two hundred years ago, African-American poet Phillis Wheatley stood before a group of august colonists—politicians, authors, and ministers—in hopes of proving that she was the author of the poems that had been earlier published by a London printer. In doing this, Wheatley was hoping to refute the popular belief of the time that Negroes were, as David Hume argued in 1752, “naturally inferior to whites” (as cited in Gates, 2010, p. 23). As historian Henry Louis Gates (2010) tells us, “the stakes, in other words, were as high as they could get for an oral exam” (p. 6). Not only was Wheatley on trial as an author but as an African, as a person of color. Could she prove that she was white enough to be considered human, to be on some level with the white race? Could she recall enough classical authors and compose a poem in a way that would win over people as formidable as John Hancock and Massachusetts Governor Thomas Hutchinson?

Wheatley's story is fascinating in what it reveals about the hostile spheres in which literacy is negotiated. Much of her life had been devoted to being an obedient and laudatory slave, to learning the language and literature of her new country so as to be accepted and perhaps even emancipated. When not attending to her duties for the Wheatley family—where she got her name—she wrote poetry in the style and spirit of the time. When Minister George Whitfield died, she wrote an elegy that was later published in various newspapers in Boston, Philadelphia, and New York. To garner more support for her efforts as a legitimate author, she penned a letter of support to George Washington, who had heard of the young African poet and who later answered her letter with much affection. In much of the time leading up to her interrogation by eighteen of the most respected men in New England, Wheatley had worked assiduously to prove herself as a literate and even scholarly writer. Put simply, she had worked diligently to prove that she could be white.

As her book of poetry grew, her mistress and tutor Susanna Wheatley “set out to have Phillis’s work collected and published as a book” (as cited in Gates, 2010, p. 22). Of course, the intention was to prove that an African-American slave could inhabit the world of the white male; that a common slave could actually produce poetry that reflected the erudition of the most venerated leaders in the colonies. Wheatley knew that she was in a hostile world and that her personal location as a person of color was irrelevant. Her goal, if she were to be successful, was to prove that she could produce a language that would reinforce white values about language use.

Gates tells us that Wheatley’s endeavor was successful, and after hours of interrogation, the teenage slave was lauded as the true author of the great works she submitted. However, the story does not end there. While Wheatley became an accepted part of the white world of letters, she also lost a large piece of her cultural and racial identity along the way. Not long after receiving the acceptance of the interrogators, she was set free and worked alone to get her work published and continue promoting her poetry.

Years later, with racism still very virulent, she had trouble getting other works published and eventually ran out of money. Even more tragically, Wheatley found herself languishing in a world that was neither black nor white—a world that provided her with no identity of who she was. After devoting much of her short life to refuting the notion that African people could not think with logic and reason—an argument made by Thomas Jefferson—she was no longer accepted by

her own race while still questioned by most colonists. Her poetry proved that a Black woman from Africa could replicate the style and content of the erudite white world. But, as Jefferson later claimed, they were simply imitative of the white world to which she lived. (Gates, 2010, p. 49).

Phillis Wheatley’s relevance as an African-American poet hardly ends there. Centuries after her death, she has continued to be ostracized, this time by both white and African-American readers who often see her poetry as too “white,” as too removed from the authentic black experience—and ultimately as a sellout. Gates chronicles Wheatley’s curious linguistic odyssey and reminds us that Wheatley was only doing what she had to do to find any sense of empowerment in her world—in her very white, very classical location. The freedom to articulate a true racial language—to celebrate the diversity of various ways with words—had little place in the life an eighteenth-century slave girl.

Today, Wheatley is seen as a minor writer in American letters, mainly because her critics see her as nothing more than a mimic of white classical work. The critiques of African-American writers have shown Wheatley to be a pretender, a proponent of the white hegemony that gave her the freedom she later won. From the Harlem Renaissance to the present, Wheatley is seen as someone who sold out to the powers around her, earning her freedom while disowning her race. “One looks in vain,” writes James Weldon Johnson, “for some outburst or even complaint against the bondage of her people, for some agonizing cry about native land (as cited in Gates, 2010, p. 75).

Wheatley’s dilemma is fascinating in what it reveals about location and the conundrum confronted by people of color in 2014, people who enter language arts classes with what W.E.B. Dubois called the “double consciousness” or what Tillie Olsen referred to as the “Trespass Vision.” How does a person of color find any sense of empowerment in a location that has its foundation in replicating the literate notions of white people? For Dubois, the answer came in forever living in two different worlds—one world described by Paul Lawrence Dunbar as filled with “the mask that grins and lies,” “the debt we pay to human guile,” and the “bleeding hearts from which we smile” (as cited in White, 1999, p. 24).

This is the world of Tillie Olsen’s trespass vision, where writers are trespassing into the world of power, never feeling complete and always experiencing the pangs of alienation. In responding to these converging worlds, Jackie Jones Royster (1996) argues that “I have been compelled on too many occasions to count to sit as a well mannered other, silently in a

state of tolerance that requires me to be as expressionless as I can manage, while colleagues who occupy a place different from my own talk about the history and achievements from my ethnic group” (p. 30).

“I am an invisible man,” wrote Ralph Ellison (1980) in his classic novel. “I am invisible, understand, simply because people refuse to see me” (p. 3). The invisibility that Wheatley understood, has resulted in many African Americans in our present time—and other marginalized groups—to develop a strategy that helps maintain their identities. As an oppositional culture, African Americans have often refused to wear the mask of the white intellectual, often resorting to elaborate strategies to undermine their own success and salvaging their place as people of color. Fordham and Ogbu (1986) suggest that the resistance to “acting white” is an effort by many African-American students to embrace a culture that does not serve them and that compels them to sacrifice much of their history, family, and linguistic traditions. Thus, they develop an oppositional social approach that perceives “certain activities, events, symbols, and meanings as not appropriate for them because those behaviors, events, symbols, and meaning are characteristic of white Americans” (p. 181).

This is the world of what Michael Apple called “official language” in which students of color are asked to learn Standard White English and celebrate it as the language of upward mobility, as the language that is purer, more professional—a language devoid of slang. If Phillis Wheatley had spoken or written the dialect of other slaves, she would have been dismissed as a savage and much of the theories concerning African slaves—and people of color in general—would have been reinforced.

The Oakland School Board and Ebonics

Today, two hundred years later, the location for using other dialects is equally hostile. In 1996, the Oakland School Board proposed that Ebonics be introduced in schools as a legitimate language, so as to ease the transition for many Black students into Standard White English. The clear goal of the school board was not to teach African American English—since students already know and use it on a daily basis—but to show students that their language is rule-governed and valid—that it is not simply sloppy English. If Black students were able to see that they speak a different dialect—as opposed to speaking an inferior version of English—they could become more aware of the social significance of communication and the importance of context or location in

using certain dialects. Much of the impetus for the move was based on the idea that children who speak African American English will not be good students if their language—and all of the cultural baggage that accompanies it—is considered defective. As Perry and Delpit (1998) argue, “the children whose language is considered defective are themselves viewed as defective” (p. 41). How, the school board asked, could students of color be expected to excel when their language was being negated?

However, as has been enumerated in various publications, the response to giving African American English any validity was virulent, expressing an antipathy that would have made any racist happy—an antipathy that was not dissimilar to that given to of Phillis Wheatley centuries earlier. Theresa Perry chronicles the insults and barbs flung at the notion of validating the speech of African Americans. From President Clinton to liberal columnists like Ellen Goodman, the condemnation was vitriolic and often vicious. According to Perry, “White America had a field day. On T.V. programs, in the halls of Congress, and on the infamous talk shows circuit, white Americans made pronouncements: African Americans were too stupid to learn the language” (p. 11). Why many others asked, would a school teach an inferior language when the African American student was already falling behind? Lamentably, few wondered about the alienation felt by many speakers of the African-American dialect and their invisible status in the typical language arts class. Few asked if perhaps an acknowledgment of their language’s legitimacy might make the transition to Standard White English more effective.

Of course, language is not only about communication, but also power and identity. Our founding fathers knew that when they examined the whiteness of Phillis Wheatley, and educators today know it as well. To give equal status to African American English is to give de facto equal status to African Americans, thus reducing their need to become white as a way to achieve success. It threatens to make the classroom a location where students can explore the many types of English that are part of their world, the curious and creative uses of new words, the media’s inventive spirit, and the place of music in inventing new forms of English. This is not something educators are willing to do “It goes without saying,” argues James Baldwin (1998), “that language is also a political instrument, means, and proof of power. It is the most vivid and crucial key to identity” (p. 68).

Again, as with Wheatley two centuries earlier, we see the importance of location, of place in the teaching of students.

When literacy and language are simply places where “official language” is to be inculcated into students, there is the inevitability of conflict, as students choose between their home lives—and the cultures that thrive there—and the expectation in school for adopting and even emulating the language of the people who have little to do with their world.

In her own work, Signithia Fordham (1999) has documented the “guerilla warfare” that is often waged by Black students when faced with the expectation to speak and write in Standard White English. According to Fordham, students often actively subvert the Standard White English of the school by using it only when necessary and returning to their own African American English when outside of the academic classroom. If school refuses to move beyond the elaborate performance of Phillis Wheatley in 1773, the response is simply to acknowledge the need for political resistance, while maintaining their home language and the identification and power that goes with it. Fordham describes this linguistic and cultural battle:

Language is a, or perhaps the, basic medium of group identity, welding disparate individuals into a closely knit, bonded social group . . . Capital students commitment to Black identity compels them to diss the standard because it is viewed as an inappropriate speech form. (275-276)

Language is power, and students will not replicate the subjugation suffered by Phillis Wheatley simply to be accepted. The price, as can be seen in Wheatley’s own life—her failure to ever be truly accepted as an equal—is simply too high, especially for a group that has come to question the promises that learning the master’s English will result in success and empowerment.

So what can we glean from the trials and tribulations of the diminutive Wheatley, her heroic and tempestuous journey and her tragic end? What can we learn from the responses of Ogbu, Fordham, and others who have studied the place of language and power in the language arts class? First, it seems clear that language is not free of ideology. It wasn’t in Wheatley’s eighteenth century interrogation and it isn’t today for millions of students. When teachers ask writers to simply replicate the Standard English of the academy—and to do so with the knowledge that it will provide them with the tools of success—many are rightly suspicious. More importantly, many feel that the ticket to success and prosperity is not worth the cultural genocide that often occurs when one changes cultural and linguistic locations.

No level of linguistic acumen could have won Phillis Wheatley acceptance into the world of the white colonist. In the same way, even the most standard and obedient allegiance to Standard English will not provide the student in 2014 with all of the linguistic skills needed to be successful. Our language is too rich and too intimately connected to our students’ lives. Many recognize the power it has in their existence and are unwilling to adopt the white way of success that never worked for Wheatley.

Indeed, as we look at the linguistic terrain in front of us, we see it as hardly monolithic. Commercials use a lexicon that is rarely taught in classrooms, and magazines review music and movies with virtually no attention to the Standard English that was so important to Phillis Wheatley. We have heard political commentators speak of being “dissed” and mainstream English has incorporated African American terms such as “bling” “my bad,” and “dawg.” While many of these terms and phrases would not be appropriate for the scholarly paper, they represent a part of our linguistic world and the people who use and change it. And while it will always be important to learn the rules and expectations of Standard English, most students do not aspire to lives or careers that embrace that form of English. The truth is, we do not know what our students will do after high school and college, but we must be cognizant of the fact that there are many Englishes that they should learn if they are to function effectively.

Many have suggested that language classes should be more diverse, teaching students the many ways with words that are part of our forever dynamic social world. In truth, we already do this in real life, and it is time that schools adopt this reality. When going to the store, I use a dialect or register that is markedly different than when I talk to my colleague at the college where I work. My mother is addressed in a different way than my friends, and I would be totally ineffective if I spoke in a formal tone when having a beer with friends. To address these differences is, of course, to expand our students’ repertoire and to help them expand their linguistic skills. Standard English—the English of formal academic papers—is still important and should be a part of every language class we teach. But to limit our classes to

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this is to close the door on the language communities that populate our classes and invigorate our language.

Vershawn Ashanti Young (2010) has suggested that language pedagogy adopt code-meshing as a major element of its curriculum, exploring the various ways English is used in different social contexts and meshing dialects and languages as a way to reflect the realities of communication. “Code-meshing begins with the belief that it is possible for people to live their lives free of compulsion to choose between language varieties. It is not necessary to demand total assimilation into one privileged dialect” (p. xii). To do this is to make the English class much more interesting and more dynamic. It is, also, to make it a location that respects the various communities who use English in their own cultural way. Young’s book, *Code-meshing as World English*, provides ways to make the language arts classroom more dynamic, providing ideas for writing papers that address the diversity of our communication.

Research Papers and Code-Meshing

In my classroom, I have devised a way for students to mesh the language of the academy with the less formal language of the community in which they live. Instead of doing the formal research paper, my students assume the role of a syndicated columnist who writes a weekly advice column. In their “Dear Andy” column my students answer questions that they generate from their own lives, using research and a less formal language to meet the requirements of both an MLA research paper and a person who can operate outside of the college or university.

With the added autonomy the assignment gives them, students write well-researched, well-documented papers on issues of young children sleeping with their parents, interracial dating, date rape, and the meaning of race and gender to their lives. The language of their papers is much closer to their daily lives, engaging them in topics that are truly relevant to them. At the same time, they are expected to do scholarly research and to defend all conclusions with thoughtful logic and reasoning.

An African-American woman in my class writes an advice column on the place of rap music in the lives of African Americans, placing special attention on the impact it has had on her life as an older and less accepting person of color. In doing the paper, she blends scholarly research and eloquent prose with the occasional African-American word or expression, revealing an impressive ability to cross over and back

from one type of English to another. In what part of her paper, she writes, “rap music might be popular but it ain’t ever gonna be in my house. I didn’t abide by the word *nigger* as a young mother and I ain’t starting now.”

Of course, the use of non-standard English only makes her point stronger, more authentic, more personal. It is something that Phillis Wheatley could have probably taught to our founding fathers had they been advanced enough to know that languages and dialects are not inferior or superior to others but simply reflections of a certain speech community and its way of communicating.

A second student—also African American—writes about her experience dating a white man and her attempts to bridge cultural chasms that separate them. In answering this question—one that she generated as a way to answer a question in her own life—she blends academic scholarship on the differences between races, the language and cultural diversity, with experiences she and her friends have had in dating outside of their race. In the end, the paper is an interesting meshing of formal and less formal language and formal and more empirical research. It is a paper that permits the student to participate in terms of her culture, her language, and her life.

Two centuries ago, Phillis Wheatley was brought to our colonial shores as a slave. She was invisible as a person and language user and her only hope for success and liberation was to imitate the values and language of the white leaders that surrounded her. Today, almost twenty years after the Oakland School Board debacle and four decades after the National Council of Teachers of English declared a student’s right to one’s own language, we still grapple to make the English classroom a safe and diverse location for learning. It is time that we stop forcing students to “act white” as a way to succeed in school. It is time that our schools—both K-12 and college—acknowledge the rich and vibrant world of language. This will make our education more democratic as well as more consistent with what we know about student identity and the importance of welcoming all of our students—and their languages—into our classrooms.

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