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Teaira McMurtry PhD

University of Alabama at Birmingham, mcmurtry@uab.edu

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Cover Page Footnote

This is dedicated to my students. Black gems of 53206. I am grateful for the humanizing editorship of LAJM.

NARRATIVE

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Teaira McMurtry

During my time as an ELA teacher in historically underserved high schools, I recall the district-mandated, standardized-test-frenzied professional development sessions we 11th-grade teachers had to attend so that we could prepare our juniors to do well on the ACT (American College Testing) exam. These usually took place the January before the test date, which occurred in April. I always pondered: “Isn’t it too late to be talking about ACT prep? Shouldn’t we be “developed” on how to embed the skills of the ACT test throughout their P-20 academic careers?” I also questioned why test prep seemed so disconnected from the *art*, or the study of poetry and prose, in the English Language Arts discipline. I believed that reading skills required for the ACT, such as identifying the main idea, analyzing details, sequencing events, making comparisons, understanding cause and effect, interpreting context, forming generalizations, and analyzing the author’s voice and method, should be integrated into Tier One (“MTSS for Success,” n.d.)—the core, foundational instruction—that students receive from the onset of formal schooling. I also believed that this could be done in engaging and rigorous ways that connected to students’ identities and experiences (i.e., Ladson-Billings, 1994). My status as an early career teacher—and thus my fear of being dismissed in more ways than one—mandated that I keep these thoughts to myself.

In my classroom, however, I actualized my beliefs daily as I strove to be the teacher that I needed as a K-12 student. To do this, I had to “bring it.” My students—many of whom I saw some piece of myself in—expected that I challenge them with engaging content that sharpened their skills, reflected their identities, incited their intellect, and fostered their criticality; thus, very early on my career, I knew my responsibility as their ELA teacher was to cultivate their genius and joy (Mu-

hammad, 2020; 2023). I acted on the healthy pressure of their expressed confidence in me to deliver more than just information, amid district expectations that I administer practice ACT tests as isolated reading skills rather than embedded in rich literary contexts that the practice passages offered.

Today, when I talk to my pre-service teachers about the students who transformed the way I thought about English Language Arts, I often talk about a specific student named De’Onna (pseudonyms used throughout), who never shied away from questioning the status quo of instruction she received (see McMurtry, 2022). I attribute this critically conscious adolescent to developing my methods of planning for and teaching ELA back before these methods were named in the field of language and literacy: *anti-racist language practices* (Baker-Bell, 2020) and *Pro-Black Language approaches* (Boutte & Compton-Lilly, 2022), which are ways to teach language and literacy as liberation by incomparably centering Black Language—a rule-governed linguistic heritage of African Americans—in academic content. Through embracing these equity-oriented ELA methodologies, I have been able to create a learning environment that celebrates and validates the linguistic heritage and cultural identities of both my students and me.

In this article, I discuss how trusting my cultural and professional instincts led me in creating a classroom for my students with whom I shared African ancestry. I showcase culturally relevant teaching that takes up Ladson-Billings’ (1994) tenets of CRT, including the promotion of academic success, the cultivation of cultural competence, and the fostering of critical consciousness among students. The culturally relevant activities that I highlight here also provided embedded and ongoing preparation for standardized tests as they were authentic, engaging, and equally rigorous for my students. I learned from De’Onna, 10 years after my time in the classroom, that

these learning experiences were not only academically necessary, but they were also integral for her positive racial identity development.

Unknowingly Enacting an Engaged Pedagogy

“Engaged pedagogy’ [...] emphasizes well-being. That means that teachers must be actively committed to a process of self-actualization that promotes their own well being if they are to teach in a manner that empowers students.” (hooks, 1994 p. 15).

It wasn’t until years after my time in the classroom that I realized I was enacting what bell hooks refers to as an *engaged pedagogy*, a pedagogy that stretched beyond the limitations of the district-mandated curriculum, one that extended beyond rigid, school-sanctioned definitions of literacy, one that surpassed status-quo state standards that boxed in students’ brilliance, and one that offered literature that featured characters that looked like my students, reminded them of their kin, and journeyed through familiar experiences in familiar neighborhoods. I often looked for non-anthologized texts written by frequently canonized authors. For example, albeit I taught *The Color Purple* (Walker, 1984), I often sought out Alice Walker’s lesser-known short stories from her compilation *You Can’t Keep a Good Woman Down* (1981). Similarly, *Spunk* (1925) and *Sweat* (1926) by the author of the classic *Their Eyes Were Watching God* (1937), Zora Neale Hurston, were hits with my students.

While selecting and teaching with “mirror texts” (Bishop, 1990) or texts that reflected the diverse Black cultures of my students, a shadow of doubt did hover over me as these were not the traditional “American” literature that 11th graders were typically exposed to. But as hooks (1994) described, I was “deeply committed to progressive pedagogical practices” (p. 17). To fulfill my commitment, I recognized the need to embrace the potential challenges associated with unorthodox teaching methods (i.e., resistance from administrators or parents), as my teaching itself could be considered a “site of resistance” (p. 21).

I vividly remember the moment of defiance that sparked within me. It was the time when I made a bold choice that went against the grain. Instead of following the prescribed reading list for 11th-grade students in my district, which included the classic novel *The Scarlet Letter* (Hawthorne, 1850), I decided to introduce *The Women of Brewster Place* (Naylor, 1982). This act of prioritizing stories that resonated with my

students’ lived experiences over the traditional canon enforced by the district was a deliberate act of rebellion.

Self-Actualization Leads to Relevant Text Selection

The Women of Brewster Place (Naylor, 1982) is an interwoven tale of seven Black women from different walks of life and spaces who survive through solidarity as they struggle to find their place in a society hostile to their very existence. By the finale of the novel, these resilient women face and tear down—literally and figuratively—a brick wall of their housing development situated in a poor, urbanized neighborhood in the United States. Each of the seven chapters is focused on each of the women—some young and full of hope, others older and more world-weary. Forming deep bonds of friendship, the women find strength and support in each other as they face systemic obstacles regarding poverty, violence, discrimination, and social isolation.

I was first introduced to the novel’s film adaptation of *The Women of Brewster Place* (Zadan & Meron, 1989) in my late teens during a “Lifetime Movie Saturday” with my mother. Even though she was already familiar with the movie and although a twenty-year age gap existed between us, our relationship with each other seemed

a bit fonder on this special Saturday as we watched the individual yet collective experiences of Black women in the United States depicted in the movie. As we viewed the visual portrayal, our eyes welled from the intertwined and interrelated stories, which included struggles in relationships, financial hardships, the pursuit of spiritual fulfillment, and the unwavering resilience of women while mothering. These elements evoked

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powerful emotions within us, validating our own experiences and instilling a sense of pride. The stories we witnessed either mirrored our own lived experiences or reminded us of beloved individuals whose triumphs and struggles we intimately understood and shared. bell hooks would describe what was hap-

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pening to us at that moment as a form of *self-actualization*, a sense of self-awareness and discovery that is necessary for teachers if they are going to empower their students.

A few years later, I stumbled upon the novel and—though I was not yet a classroom teacher—committed to one day sharing this text with my students. I wanted to teach

content and texts that I needed as an adolescent in high school as I wondered why I didn't have experiences like I shared with my mother on "Lifetime Movie Saturdays" during my high school years.

That opportunity came one fall day as students complained about boring stories in the district-adopted, commercial textbook we "had to" read. Two moments of clarity helped me shift gears right away: (1) a fear that my students would feel as disconnected from school texts as I did and (2) their gentle protests professing that they believed I had it in me to teach content more meaningful and authentic.

The next week, I stood before my students and confessed my truth: we were switching gears because I wanted to teach a text that I was fond of (but hadn't read at that point) and I was going to journey with them to start selecting and using texts they were interested in, texts that reflected their identities and/or experiences (Bishop, 1990).

At the onset of launching the new text, my students were engrossed with the novel. Many of them instantly rooted for the women of Brewster Place as they journeyed through their lives with them. As they read, many students began to wonder deeply about the flat, male characters who were minor yet significant woven in the women's lives. Learning the interests of my students, I decided to have them create extended stories, developing the men of Brewster Place into round characters with their own stories. As I excitedly told my ELA counterpart, she shared my zest and told me that she was sure there was a companion novel that did what I wanted students to cre-

ate. Sure enough, I located *The Men of Brewster Place* (Naylor, 1998).

Engaged Reading Instruction with *The Men of Brewster Place*.

Before I laid the news on students that I had found a companion novel, I proceeded with the plan of having them infer and create extended stories by drawing from the men's substories in *The Women of Brewster Place* (Naylor, 1982). This writing task mirrored the reading skills that the ACT assessment demanded, including imitating Naylor's writing style and sequencing their created events to be in alignment with Naylor's. Not only did this tap on and surpass ACT goals, but this also allowed students to tap into their own stories as many of them used this creative writing experiment to tell the unsung stories of men they admired and had unresolved feelings for (i.e., fathers, brothers, uncles, etc.). I then revealed *The Men of Brewster Place* (Naylor, 1998). What amazed students was how close or far off their rendition of their chosen character was to the companion novel and later the film adaptation (Zadan & Meron, 1989) of *The Women of Brewster Place* (Naylor 1982).

The Block Party: A Culturally Responsive Culminating Experience

In addition to this and other culturally responsive learning tasks that I designed based on the learning progression and interests of my students, I wanted to create a culminating experience that tapped into a familiar cultural event and one that got students moving around and talking to each other as they embodied their characters. I modified Linda Christensen's (2000) literacy routine called *The Block Party*, which was extended from the original strategy, *The Tea Party*. Both are mixers wherein students embody characters from a novel or historical event to incite interest, inquiry, and even interrogation. The name of this engagement activity, The Block Party, coincidentally shares the title of one of the last chapters in *The Women of Brewster Place* which unfolds the climactic scene (i.e., a block party) and the novel's denouement, or the actual tearing down the symbolic of the brick wall.

In Christensen's (2000) version of the Tea or Block Party, she writes the descriptions of the main characters to get students excited before reading a novel. In my rendition, students wrote the first-person descriptions of their characters. To do

this well, I had students read only the chapter of their chosen character rather than reading the entire novel together as we did for *The Women of Brewster Place*. Through a mini lesson, I modeled for students how to “keep tabs on” (i.e., take notes on details they learn) their character.

Through this engaged reading instruction and the culminating experience of The Block Party, my students have not only developed critical reading skills but also engaged in meaningful exploration of their own identities and connections to the text. By centering Black Language and fostering cultural relevance (Ladson-Billings, 1994), I have witnessed a transformation in their enthusiasm for learning and their ability to authentically connect with literature.

10 Years Later: Long-Lasting Transformational Impact

“[Miss McMurtry] taught me how to love my hair which I was able to pass down to my sisters. When we read *The Women of Brewster Place*, I saw my mama, her mama, and my aunts. The strength that runs in our blood, whew.”

—De’Onna (c/o 2011), current middle school ELA teacher.

As a Black, Womanist teacher-educator and Black language scholar, I spend much of my time today with in- and pre-service teachers, co-constructing ways to prioritize Black Language in their existing curricula. One of the ways we approach this is by critically confronting their curricula materials to redesign learning segments that feature African American authors by prioritizing Black Language.

Ten years after having De’Onna as a student, I recruited her for a special project to be a part of a learning series that I co-designed and facilitated with three other educational leaders in a Midwestern state in 2021. In our very first session, my co-facilitators followed with an inquiry, asking her, “What was most memorable about being in Dr. McMurtry’s class?” I presumed she would say something about how she learned the names of the linguistic features of Black Language that I imparted (see McMurtry, 2022) with every African American-authored text we read. She excelled in those tasks. However, what she said had an even more astounding impact on me.

As De’Onna recalled, it was through the texts I selected to teach for another course she took with me, African American Literature, that cultivated a love of self, her hair, her voice, where and who she comes from: her *herstory*. She added how

she remembered spreading that self-love to her pre-adolescent sisters. Through culturally responsive texts like *Hairstory: Untangling the Roots of Black Hair in America* (Byrd & Tharps, 2002), *Good Hair* (Stilson, 2009), and scenes from *School Daze* (Lee, 1986), we indeed learned the necessary “school” literacy skills required for the “real world.” In doing so, my students and I foregrounded this by celebrating and cultivating the cultural practices rooted in African traditions and the language that most of which my students were born adept users: Black Language, African American English, or Ebonics. De’Onna vividly recalled and named *The Women of Brewster Place* (Naylor, 1982) as the text that helped her see herself. Her fond sentiment took me back to that sacred “Lifetime Movie Saturday” I shared with my mom.

As someone who is just as much an educator as I am a learner, I have discovered over the years that replacing *The Scarlet Letter* with *The Women of Brewster Place* and *The Men of Brewster Place* was not as

oppositional as I thought when I did it. I came to realize that both texts share similar themes taught in an American literature course such as (a) social exclusion on grounds of race, gender, and sexuality, (b) the impact of societal expectations, (c) the consequences of non-conformity, (d) the power

of community and (e) redemption and forgiveness. I have also come to know and impart to my pre-service teachers that certain texts are always taught simply because they have always been taught. Widening the canon to include diverse perspectives and identities, ones that reflect the students we teach are necessary as we not only prepare them for skill-based tests on standardized assessments but also—and more importantly—the tests of life.

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The Men of Brewster Place Becomes Standardized Text

In 2022, I was gathering sources to assist a lead teacher, Mrs. Sanders in a predominately Black, rural school district in a southern state to create an ACT test prep experience for

students who were interested in getting prepared outside of school. I visited the ACT website and I literally fumbled my mug of coffee when I witnessed that one of the prose fiction passages used for the practice test was from *The Men of Brewster Place*. Seeing an excerpt from *The Men of Brewster Place* affirmed my 10-year-ago classroom teacher self as I didn't always know if I was doing or teaching my students the right thing. All I knew is that I listened to my students and tended to my intuitive proclivity and selected materials that centered their identities, identities of people they knew, or people they could relate to. Plus, I was able to hone students' reading skills

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with seemingly unconventional literature that, 10 years later, would appear on the official ACT website.

As I expected, the practice questions for this passage involved point-of-view, making inferences, drawing conclusions, and meaning in context—skills of what ACT considered good reading. I immediately began to wonder what if Mrs. Sanders, who also

participated in a Black Language Learning Series I facilitated in a southeastern state, could add ACT-like questions from a Pro-Black language approach (Boutte & Compton-Lilly, 2022), ones that prioritized the study of Black linguistics (i.e., syntax, semantics, etc.) and rhetoric (i.e., the art of language use). Using a Pro-Black language framework requires teachers to use methods that reject the centering of Eurocentric epistemologies. Hence, essential elements of a Pro-Black language approach include prioritizing the literacy strengths, perspectives, and experiences of Black students by highlighting their voices and African traditions from which they are rooted. The next section illustrates what a Pro-Black Language ACT preparation through Tier One ("MTSS for Success," n.d.) instruction could look like considering the selected passage from *The Men of Brewster Place* on the ACT prep website.

Using ACT Prep Items as a Springboard for Pro-Black Language Approaches

I started generating ideas to design learning experiences that could harness and capitalize on the linguistic versatility

present in many Black students, who possess language repertoires that enable them to navigate and blend multiple linguistic boundaries. This phenomenon is commonly referred to as code-meshing (Young & Martinez, 2014) or translanguaging (García & Wei, 2014; Frieson & Presiado, 2022). Ultimately, these experiences create a welcoming space for students to experiment with language by incorporating their native tongue into their academic writing. This is akin to what hooks (1994) encouraged her students to do so they don't feel as though the school setting would "estrangle them from that language and culture they know most intimately" (p. 172). Three ways to do this are presented below.

Ethnolinguistic Idioms

ACT mimicked questions could be created to draw out the linguistic and rhetorical elements of Black Language with other chapters of this text and *The Women of Brewster Place* (Naylor, 1982). This would get at the essence of what Naylor *does* with language to create image-filled scenes and realistic, relatable characters, particularly what makes it a discernable Black style like ethnolinguistic idioms, which are proverbial phrases that have dynamic meaning within Black culture (Smitherman, 1986). To illustrate, the excerpt reads "...Abshu, as he preferred to be known in the streets..." (lines 1-2) and "His motto was: Lose no child to the streets..." (lines 75-76). Those who are skillful users of Black Language know that *in the streets* or *to the streets* are phrases that take on a unique meaning in the Black community. To further illustrate, if you are "known in the streets" by another name, this means that you may have established a different identity or reputation within the community. It signifies that those who have a close relationship with you are familiar with your true self beyond what others may perceive. On the other hand, the phrase "to the streets" holds a different connotation within the Black community. It implies being consumed by or succumbing to negative influences, engaging in wrongful activities, or even falling victim to violence or unfortunate circumstances. These linguistic nuances highlight the rich depth and cultural significance embedded within Black Language, offering unique perspectives and interpretations of social dynamics within the community. Ethnolinguistic idioms such as this and others from students' linguistic knapsacks could be explored. Finally, this activity promotes the analysis of Naylor's style or what the ACT calls "author's voice and method".

Playing the Dozens with Shakespearean Insults

Naylor makes it known that Abshu, an influential man of Brewster Place, loved the arts and language study, particularly through Shakespeare's plays. To help his neighborhood mentees access and appreciate rather than abhor Shakespeare, Abshu takes them to a Hip-Hop rendition of the play, "A Midsummer's Night Dream" (1595). In the classroom, could be homed in on to segue into the teaching of Shakespearean plays. For example, students could be asked to ponder the following prompt:

When the idea of going to see a Shakespeare play is introduced to the children, they are apprehensive about it. Then, at the onset of the play, students were deeply enthralled in the production. Why do you think this was the case and what might have contributed to their change of interest?

Presumably, students would attribute the archaic language to their disinterest in Shakespeare. My students could relate to the sentiments of the children in *The Men of Brewster Place*, particularly in Abshu's chapter. Abshu's students' interest peaked when the vibrant actors pranced on stage speaking their language, literally, Black Language. This discussion could lead to a comparative study of Black rhetoric, particularly *Playin the Dozens* (Smitherman, 1986), a witty, verbal exchange involving insults, an oral legacy rooted in the enslavement of African Americans, and the creation of Shakespearean insults. Both explore ELA concepts like diction and wordplay (i.e., what we can *do* with language).

The Dynamic Be Verb

Elizabethan English has evolved into the modern-day English that we speak today. My students did not always make that connection. In fact, they rejected that idea as we trudged our way through *Othello* (1603), until we got to the good part: when *Othello's* bamboozlement led to him murdering his wife, Desdemona. To foster the idea that language is evolutionary and to foreground the language that many Black students are adept users of (i.e., Black Language) would be to explicitly examine the syntactic construction of commonly relied upon verbs in the English language, and one that is mocked and misused by non-native speakers of Black Language: the "to be" verb. The be verb was conjugated differently in Elizabethan English than it is in modern English and Black Language. For example, in Elizabethan English "we be" or "ye be" were used

for the first-person plural and second-person plural, rather than "we are" and "you are." To illustrate, in Act 4, Scene 1 of *Midsummer Night's Dream*, the Queen of the fairies, Titania utters: "Fairies, begone, and be always" to dismiss herself and the other fairies from the King's presence. Likewise, with nuanced differences, the be verb is also conjugated differently in Black Language. For example, "we be" would be used to signify a habitual action (Green, 2002). As such, "we be here." As commonly mistaken by non-native users, the habitual be is not translated to "we are" like in Elizabethan English. This phrase could be translated as "We are always here." Hence, in Black Language, this verb phrase did not evolve—presumably due to racial segregation resulting in linguistic isolation among Black people—rather it is in addition to the other be verbs (i.e., is, am, are).

Not only do these activities create opportunities to teach about the evolution of language, but it also makes space to examine how the standardized American English—or codified variation of English that is mistakenly referred to as the most correct variant—that we know today looks and sounds wholly different than it did in Shakespeare's day. Thus, it could prompt critical discussions on *who* gets to decide what becomes the standard of English (Delpit, 1995; Christensen, 2000). That is, about the intersection of race, power, and language, how ideas of language and race are socially constructed, and how language is often used as a proxy for race (Alim & Smitherman, 2014), an idea that is conceptualized by language scholars as *raciolinguistics* (see Flores & Rosa, 2015; Alim et al. 2016).

Concluding Thoughts

The space I shared with my cherished students was one that was a bi-directional teaching and learning experience (i.e., Freire, 1970). It was one that allowed for engaged pedagogy because I "share[ed] in the intellectual and spiritual growth of [my] students; it "respect[ed] and care[d] for the souls of [my students]" (p. 13). Not only did I prepare them for standardized tests and beyond, as De'Onna affirmed, but I also helped students *see* themselves through the literature and experiences that I co-created with them in the classroom.

While the Pro-Black Language ACT project is underway with Mrs. Sanders, I understand that there are risks involved in creating teaching and learning experiences that center Black Language—including resistance from stakeholders or navigating potential misunderstandings or misconceptions about the

value and legitimacy of Black Language in academic settings. These risks, though, are consequences of liberation worth taking; this allows me to remain steadfast. As bell hooks (1994) articulates:

“When I need to say the words that do more than simply mirror or address the dominant reality, I speak [B]lack vernacular. There, in that location, we make English do what we want it to do. We take the oppressor’s language and turn it against itself. We make our words a counter-hegemonic speech, liberating ourselves in language” (p. 175).

This, through an engaged pedagogy, is what I actualized (and hope to continue to actualize) with my students and for myself.

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Teaira McMurtry, PhD, Assistant Professor at The University of Alabama at Birmingham, is a former high school English Language Arts teacher, literacy leader, and curriculum specialist for Milwaukee Public Schools. She has published articles on the promising outcomes of centering Black Language in curriculum and pedagogy in the *Journal of Adolescent and Adult Literacy*, *English Journal*, *English Teaching: Practice and Critique*.