

English(es) in Urban Contexts: Politics, Pluralism, and Possibilities

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English as taught in city schools does not always reflect the Englishes city students travel with. Their urban English landscape is enriched by a procession of many voices that march in various directions in, around, and through the monuments of the city. In them are the spoken souls of the crowded, colored earth, the distinguishable dialects and silences that creep loudly but defiantly down the city block and into the linguistic mainstream.

By definition, language once uttered begins to break apart. Its many pieces assemble a history from their various shards, which “from top to bottom . . . represent[s] the co-existence of socio-ideological contradictions between the present and the past, between differing epochs of the past, between different socio-ideological groups in the present, between tendencies, schools, circles and so forth” (Bakhtin, 1981, p. 291). These languages—Englishes, in this case—which have been traded on through various public and private transactions, have constructed a world of their own, governed by what Bakhtin calls “new socially typifying ‘languages’” (p. 291). These languages, Englishes housed in American cities and throughout the globe, have coalesced into what Nero (2005) sees as the *lingua franca* of the modern era. Hence, Englishes, as opposed to English, are relevant to the twenty-first-century conversations of English education.

This does not mean that the “old” English education is irrelevant. Conversations about English traditions continue as part of new English education (Kirkland, 2008). However, promoting linguistic pluralism means fully appreciating the hybrid and textured nature in which English is practiced and performed by inner-city youth (see Paris, 2009) as elemental to new English education. The exclusive foci on the study of high dialects can bastardize a language’s fluidity, marginalize its speakers who embody

pluralistic identities through their troubled tongues (Ahmad, 2007), and presuppose the process of learning to teach by restricting students' right to their own language (Kinloch, 2005; Kirkland & Jackson, 2009). Placed in this context, language as a monolithic construct loses importance in the pluralized/hybridized linguistic lives of urban youth, and the processes of English education lose emphasis in postmodern classrooms. Indeed, we in English education should be concerned, for according to Bakhtin (1981), "It might even seem that the very word 'language' loses all meaning in this process—for apparently there is no single plane on which all these 'languages' might be juxtaposed to one another" (p. 291).

In this way, Canagarajah (2005) expands the definition of English due, in part, to political concerns that grow out of such "language rights issues [that] are still vexing and controversial" (p. ix). For Canagarajah, "the scope of language issues [in the United States] emphasizes the ongoing presence of multiple versions of English in all our classrooms, linked to real issues of personal and ethnic identity" (p. ix). From this perspective, to understand English teaching today, one must recognize the pliant forces that tug at it and destabilize language standardization, generating an internal variability that locks diversity into any given language system (Fecho, 2003).

Students are exposed to these forces whenever language(s) become the subject of classroom study. In his reflective study of critical language awareness practices, Fecho (2003) explains how his students were suspicious of language and the monolingual hegemony of "mainstream codes" in their city classroom:

Robert grasped that many codes were within his reach, but also grasped that these codes brought advantages and costs. He came to realize that it was difficult at best to operate and sound natural in a language code with which one had little practice using or had mixed feeling about acquiring. . . . What I learned was that, for these students and others like them, it was a matter of *if* they were able to speak and write in the mainstream codes . . . but was more a matter of figuring out why they would feel disposed to do so. (p. 67; emphasis in original)

Fecho's student's suspicion of a mainstream code is not surprising. For these students, appropriating this code was not a politically innocent act. Rather, it "brought advantages and costs." That is, the appropriation of any code is about the politics of language, the competition among codes. It is also about relevance in a world that requires certain ways of speaking, certain sounds and social postures pronounced in various sociopolitical accents.

A pluralistic view of English, then, is key for highlighting the sociopolitical tensions reflected in students' worlds. *Englishes* (as opposed to English)

seem to better capture the complexities of students' lives for conceptualizing their worlds in words and "specific world views, each characterized by its own objects, meanings and values" (Bakhtin, 1981, p. 292). As languages hybridize, new Englishes emerge for students "to make sense of the world around [them] . . . [for] deepening their views on race and its impact in society" (Fecho, 2003, p. 67).

Calls for extending the conversation in English education are far from new. It has been four years since Swenson, Young, McGrail, Rozema, and Whitin (2006) called for an evolved conception of English education due to "newer technologies [that] are reshaping our lives and communities" (p. 353), definitions of texts, and conceptions of reading and writing, of readers and writers. For Swenson et al., these "new literacies" invite English educators to rethink the evolving contexts of our work. Boyd and colleagues (2006) also express this need, arguing, "Never in the history of education in the United States has there been a more urgent need for educators to join forces to create literacy classrooms that meet the needs of linguistically and culturally diverse learners" (p. 329). The new English education is "crossing cultural boundaries" (p. 335), recognizing "student's funds of knowledge" (p. 337) by fostering for students "varied educational experiences" (p. 340) through "socially responsive and responsible teaching" (p. 338). All students should be "taught mainstream power codes/discourses and become critical users of language while also having their home and street codes honored" (p. 344).

While I find merit in Boyd et al.'s (2006) call for rethinking English education for the twenty-first century, I tend to agree with Smitherman and Villanueva (2003), who contend that paying tribute to linguistic diversity isn't enough. English by definition is diverse, pluralistic, and always changing. And the dynamism of English (plural) can be witnessed from New York (Fisher, 2007) to Los Angeles (Alim, 2006), from the United States (Gee, 1996) to South Africa (Ball, 2009; Sailors, Hoffman, & Matthee, 2007; Smitherman, 2006) to Australia (Luke, 2004). In each context, brave new voices are emerging. These voices are evident among urban youth in the United States, who are bending vowels and verbs, shattering stale syntaxes and sounds, and embodying the vernacular Englishes that constitute new century spaces—online social communities (Kirkland, in press), multiethnic communities (Paris, 2009), and global communities (Nero, 2005).

The transnational dispersion of Englishes into the urban, digital, global, and youth mainstreams has not taken place without complexities. These complexities usually appear in heated debates over what constitutes English and increasingly are highlighted in urban education language debates (Beykont, 2002; Kinloch, 2005; Kirkland & Jackson, 2009; Smitherman,

1999), where English can never be accurately described as stable, fixed, or singular. The pluralistic, dynamic, hybrid, and fluid nature of English swells, shifts, and is ultimately transformed in urban contexts, which are themselves complicated by linguistic legacies of survival and oppression.

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For this article, I draw on data taken from two original research studies conducted on literacy and urban youth—my “Boys in the Hood” and “Literacies in Online Social Communities” projects. In the “Boys in the Hood” project, I examined how six young Black men practiced literacy from 2005 to 2006. In the “Literacies in

Online Social Communities” project, my most recent study spanning more than two years, I examined the discourses of urban youth in online social communities. Using these studies, I seek to answer the question: How do urban youth use language(s) for social, cultural, and political purposes?

Data Collection, Analysis, and Researcher’s Role

Data sources for this article include (1) digital texts collected from the social media sites in which the youth participated; (2) ethnographic field notes of my observations (Emerson, Fretz, & Shaw, 1995); and (3) ethnographic interviews (Spradley, 1979) with the participants. I analyzed data, using ethnographic and critical discourse approaches (Rogers, Malancharuvil-Berkes, Mosley, Hui, & Joseph, 2005), grounding all interpretations in the youth interviews and my observations of them. All data were coded and then displayed using narrative vignettes (Dyson & Genishi, 2005) to examine claims and interpretations made within and across texts and observations (Rogers et al., 2005). I often relied on the youth to help me make sense of observations, privileging their analyses when available.

Blending the two approaches—ethnography and critical discourse analysis—I explored emergent patterns in the data to chart the expansion and intensification of variance in the youths’ language practices. This process has been guided by a “grounded theory” (Piantanida, Tananis, & Grubs, 2004) approach to allow for the development of theories as to how urban youth today are using, hybridizing, and inventing languages across multiple sites of interest. Through various media portals (Dyson, 2003), I have attempted to understand urban youth language—if only as a curious outsider. To best (re) present Maya’s, Kisha’s, and Derrick’s languages, I have tried to be honest and accurate in my reporting. The language that follows is theirs, includ-

ing their definitions of terms and plays on discourse grammars and genre (Bakhtin, 1981, 1986). Any error in representing them and their languages belongs solely to me.

(New) Sounds of Blackness: Derrick Plays on Discourse Grammars to Extend Language Meanings

Derrick—a young man featured in my “Boys in the Hood” study—used language for social, cultural, and political purposes. He blended languages—English and a hip-hop influenced form of African American Language (AAL)—to create meaningful expressions that characterized particular aspects of his life. For example, “keepin it real” for Derrick was an “expression we use to talk about who frontin or not . . . like being fake. It says to you that you don’t have to be fake or try to act like something you not. You can keep it real.” Derrick’s explanation illuminates the social and political dimensions of a phrase that itself plays on various cultural discourse grammars, or rules for being that are tied to language where phrases define functions or norms for human behavior. The phrase also plays with ideas presented in the *Language of Wider Communication* (LWC; Smitherman, 2006), where terms like “real” stand for the state of things that actually exist.

However, for Derrick, the phrase goes beyond explaining “how things really is.” It illustrates the human ability to float in and out of place, compelled by forces that bend otherwise-authentic existences into counterfeit performances of life. “People need to know they can keep it real,” Derrick explains. “There’s a lot of fake people out there.” This time, Derrick’s explanation slips slightly away from the social principles that “keeping it real” seemed to capture. In the latter explanation, the phrase points out distinctions between the real and the imagined (Paris & Kirkland, in press) but also reveals individuals who trade their authentic identities for what they perceive to be expected of them (Young, 2007)—a kind of ideological treason revealed in the social politics of language.

In this way, Derrick and his friend’s use of the term “keep” troubles traditional uses. For example, in LWC, to “keep” something means to store it, to hold it precious, or to take care of it. I could argue that these meanings of “keep” are not lost in Derrick’s use of “keep it real.” Rather, they lie within in it and imbue “keep” with other possibilities: “keepsake” as in an heirloom, “brother’s keeper” as in defender or caretaker, or a “keep” as in a fortress or citadel. As the word breaks up, it is picked up by Derrick and his friends, who played with it like a linguistic toy. In their hands, terms such as “keep” and “real” were redefined. For them, “keep” meant protecting but

also doing or being something. “Real” had a moral quality, as it seemed to equate something close to honesty.

I am interested in the shattering of words such as “keep” and “real” that takes place in urban settings. This shattering points to the ways that all languages deconstruct and pluralize under the contingency of use (Derrida, 1967). This is evident in Derrick’s and his friend’s use of the term “rage.” When I asked him about it, Derrick smiled and said, “That’s our word.” There was something intimate about the term, as the possessive pronoun “our” carried much weight in that moment: “We don’t use it like we suppose to,” Derrick explains. “For us,” he continued, “‘rage’ means when you are fierce on the mic. You like . . . you rage.” The term was appropriated for a particular situation. Derrick and his friends were self-described “young emcees.” Why they chose “rage” to describe their mic skills is unknown to me. However, their redefinition was part of their linguistic play and “rage”—much like “keep” and “real”—was a linguistic toy, picked up, played with, and changed. In the process, they also began to alter, or add to, the languages they spoke.

In many cases, the words they used held onto but also extended and veered away from traditional usages. They also extended traditional AAL usages that sociolinguists have worked tirelessly to describe (Makoni, Smitherman, Ball, & Spears, 2003; Rickford & Rickford, 2000; Wolfram & Christian, 1989). Derrick and his friends used these “new” terms, shaping what I see as a new language to suit what they described as new purposes (e.g., emceeing). For Derrick and his friends, this new language expressed a way of life (e.g., “keeping it real”) much different than their mother’s AAL and their school’s English could.

In this way, the language of Derrick’s beyond-school reality did not always match the language he was expected to learn and know for school. For Derrick:

Walking into school is like walking into a whole nother world. Out here, people be talking all kind of ways. I mean, they just be real. They use the language I be using. I can tell you this, it ain’t the language of school, which makes you wonder: What are they teaching in school if ain’t nobody gone use it?

Just as the LWC taught in schools and the AAL learned at home were set apart in their urban worlds (Ahmad, 2007; Smitherman, 2006), these young men’s play on English and AAL formed a hybrid of hybrids, fusing richly the new Englishes and African American Languages of the day. Of course, these languages shared similar linguistic patterns to their pasts. For example, the extravagant discourses of AAL, its copula-less syntax, and its ever-refreshing

expressions of the urban American experience along with the vocabulary of LWC remained alive in their language use. But the young men's use of these languages was not the same as their predecessors. "Rage," for example, was at once an expression of blackness that also constituted a new English that did not replace, but set alongside, histories of Englishes.

There was a pragmatism to their splintering of words. That is, their words sought to recognize and bravely articulate understandings of them as users (Bakhtin, 1981; Smitherman, 1999). As those understandings shifted, their language became pluralized. That is, speakers too become hybrids when they mix languages, somewhat like mixed-raced individuals who do not claim both races but embody new races altogether (Williams, 2009).

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In merging as in "remixing" (Knoble & Lankshear, 2008), newnesses occur that capture the fluidity of transcendental realities. Though they enter urban classrooms with students, such languages, such realities—as Derrick quietly reminds us—are rarely admitted for official use (Dyson, 2008; Kirkland & Jackson, 2009).

"The Poem That Sits between the Two": Genre Play and Hybridity in the Social Syntax(es) of Maya's Dialogue with Kisha

In my most recent study of literacies in online social communities, I witnessed two urban youth—Maya and Kisha—adapt their language to suit the complexities of digital contexts (Kirkland, 2009, in press). Here, these two young women play with discourse grammars and genres in their day-to-day communicative exchanges (Bakhtin, 1986; Perry, 2009). This genre play—the transposition between poetry and prose or styles of integrating meaning borrowed from complex sites of history and society—is typified in Maya's and Kisha's dialogue.

MAYA: Every person is an integral part of your spiritual amassing

KISHA: Thank u, darlin. u got so much wisdom and r so poetic. lol. i love me some Maya . . . she's hands down my all time favorite. did u hear this yet

MAYA: urgh! i didn't!

KISHA: Girl, don't be mad. "Happiness is only real when shared," and pain is all relative. what hurts more, a broken arm or a broken leg?

MAYA: neither . . . whole bodies, mending not breaking because coming together is a spiritual act. it hurts because it stretches u,

like reaching 2 heaven. sometimes we make excuses 4 inexcusable things. Besos!

KISHA: strong women misuse their strength all the time. they still deserve humility & understanding. u were a retweet & I like what I read. So I checked your Time line, it's some awesome stuff. Much props on that. girl, we can write a book.

MAYA: thank u. i appreciate that . . .

KISHA: thank u. i try to speak what i know. much love lady . . .

MAYA: u deserve the best this life has to offer. dont settle. u are life's greatest mystery.

KISHA: i dont think i'll ever know what that means.

MAYA: some people are simply scared of lonely. you will never be alone as long as there is a me ☺

Research is beginning to describe digital dialects such as those Maya and Kisha used in their tweets (Paris, 2009). These descriptions make a powerful case for expanding our definition of English. Therefore, I focus on the systems of style the two young ladies employed in their tweets as opposed to describing their digital dialects. That is, Maya's and Kisha's play on style underscores the pluralism of today's urban Englishes.

Maya's and Kisha's flexibility in language use, from English to Spanish (e.g., "besos"), characterizes a code of integration, what Young (2007) sees as "code-meshing." Maya's and Kisha's meshing of codes blurs the distinctions between languages. According to Maya, "I didn't know 'besos' was Spanish . . . I just thought it was another word, a synonym for 'kisses.' I know what it means so I use it." Maya recognized the context-specific use of the word as "an intimate [but not erotic] expression of love." As for genre, "besos" was accorded to her as poetry, a metaphysical expression "like the word 'Amen'" that declares the end of prayer.

This type of genre play runs throughout the Twitter exchange. For example, Kisha responds in prose to a statement Maya makes ("Girl, don't be mad") but later slips into her poetic stance as she sees, "'Happiness is only real when shared,' and pain is all relative. what hurts more, a broken arm or a broken leg?" This switching is a language of its own, operating in Maya's and Kisha's exchange as a kind of new English. For them, it is a language that consults "wisdom," although it seems "so poetic."

In their poetry/prose, Maya and Kisha modify LWC and AAL to suit new communicative purposes, answering the question of how one might carry a dialogue online. Indeed the cadences of their poetic/less-poetic performance,

neatly woven together, are melodic. But beneath this hybrid symphony of sounds are broken pieces of thought, echoes and whispers of what English and even AAL used to be. As Smitherman (1999) has described, the relationship between AAL and English was one born in servitude, which by definition pitted the two languages as adversaries—one embodying the establishment, the other fiercely resisting it. However, Maya and Kisha brought these linguistic rivals together in what Maya calls “sister-girl talk.” For Maya, “in order to explain who I am, I have to use what people call Ebonics, but Ebonics alone don’t explain me. I have to use English too, but English don’t explain me either. I am the poem that sits somewhere between the two.”

In her self-analysis, Maya alludes to a new language that exists in the borderlands, what Anzaldúa (1987/1999) calls “the new mestiza.” In this urban vestige—the border between English and AAL, between poetry and prose—language gets made over. Such phenomena are not exclusive to Maya and Kisha. Fisher (2007) highlights a similar linguistic makeover when examining the “Power Writers” who use “Bronxonics” to express their lives in vivid poetic terms such as “Wifen.” Fisher’s insight into the urban linguistic landscape is just one example of the many forms of language mixings occurring in urban America as a result of sophisticated youth genre play. In addition to “Bronxonics,” other hybrid Englishes are emerging in American cities. Fisher’s “Bronxonics” joins the “Yellow Englishes” of Reyes and Lo (2008), the Black noise of Smitherman (2006) and Rickford and Rickford (2000), and the Spanglishes of Stavans (2004) and Morales (2002), to name a few.

I would be remiss not to consider the emergence of “new Englishes” peppering the globe. English as the franchise language of capitalism has spread to the farthest reaches of the planet—from Mumbai to Suva, from Abu Dhabi to Georgetown. The linguistic pluralism that has overtaken most U.S. cities is an instantiation of the larger linguistic phenomenon of Kisha and Maya’s digital dialogue. However, the rapidly diversifying contexts of urban America make it unique, as the linguistic pluralities of a globe seemed to catalyze in their conversation.

Implications for English Education Research, Policy, and Practice

Many lessons can be learned from Derrick, Maya, and Kisha. First, if languages in urban settings are bending and breaking apart and essentially forging new languages, then English educators must revise curricula to match the languages of the day, the Englishes of our youth. This does not mean abandoning our study of LWC, the current code of power. To protect diverse students from cultural domination, absorption, and social margin-

alization, such instruction is not optional (Delpit & Dowdy, 2002). Rather it suggests acknowledging the power of codes other than LWC in twenty-first-century English classrooms (Boyd et al., 2006; Smitherman & Villanueva, 2003; Tochon, 2009). In doing so, English education no longer stands as a monolithic subject upholding the colonial pillars of England and the imperial ambitions of the United States. This new English education acts more holistically and accurately as language education, incorporating a study of the various Englishes of our country.

Second, this framing for English(es) education must be reflective of the research, policies, and practices that guide our field. If English language arts and literacy classroom practices are to respond to linguistic change in new century settings, then accrediting organizations such as NCATE and English-teacher preparation programs must change with these “new times” (Bean & Harper, 2008; Dressman, McCarthey, & Prior, 2008; Sperling & DiPardo, 2008) and in line with the research that describes them.

The major publications on research and pedagogical practices in language and literacy, English, and English education seem to be making this shift by pointing to new directions in ELA, emphasizing developments in our field for the twenty-first century, and noting comparisons between past and present competencies and future needs of students and teachers (Bean & Harper, 2008; Dressman et al., 2008). However, in rethinking, re-voicing, and reframing the definitions of “literacy” and “English” for the twenty-first century, the field needs to pose new questions for teacher educators to consider in relation to program standards by highlighting salient issues of equity, diversity, and social justice. I acknowledge Luke’s (2004) insights that “the future of English as field and curricular practice depends less upon a sovereign host discipline, and more on changing sociologies, economies, and demographics of English speaking and learning communities, and our travels as teachers and English speakers across and through them” (p. 87). For Luke,

This needn’t mean a discarding of literary theory, aesthetic theory, language acquisition theory, and so forth (which we may need now more than ever), but a reframing of them as part of a trans-disciplinary response to new contexts and conditions. . . . [Without these adjustments], we risk becoming a profession involved in the systematic production and distribution of particular brands of linguistic capital, without an ongoing critical appraisal of the force and consequences of our actions. (p. 87)

What Luke and other language and literacy scholars, myself included, are beginning to recommend involves the re-casting of English language arts curriculum so that it includes the particular voices of today’s youth.

Importantly, English educators must rethink how youth voices, the Englishes of urban contexts, can be understood within Bhabha's (2004) postcolonial notions of culture and language. These notions highlight specific points of linguistic location that have led me to rethink English. The linguistic *third space* created in urban contexts can provide a basis for rethinking English in expanded, pluralistic, and internally internationalized ways. For Bhabha, "What is striking about the 'new' internationalism is that the move from the specific to the general, from the material to the metaphoric, is not a smooth passage of transition and transcendence. The 'middle passage' of contemporary culture [and language] . . . is a process of displacement and disjunction that does not totalize experience" (p. 38).

Increasingly, English in the lives of urban youth complicates the political and pedagogical perspectives of Standard English, English Only, and English as an Official Language. It also raises important philosophical and social anthropological questions as to what English is in the twenty-first century. How might an examination of English in urban contexts push us to think about English differently? The most significant effect of these questions should not simply be the acknowledgment of hybrid Englishes producing pluralist chaos in otherwise stable systems of LWC. "New English" represents a revision in the concept of English and of English education itself, since "languages live a real life, they struggle and evolve in an environment of social heteroglossia" (Bakhtin, 1981, p. 292).

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