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Reviving 90s Sitcoms to Teach Black Linguistic Justice Concepts

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The vibrant Black hip-hop culture of the 1990s left an indelible mark on American culture. It influenced fashion, with brands like FUBU Sportswear and iconic items like Jordan shoes. Beauty standards were defined by hi-top fade/Gumby haircuts, "dookie" braids, and the elaborate nails of Coko and Flo-Jo. The feel-good flow of R&B and New Jack Swing dominated the music scene while activism surged with anthems like "Fight the Power" blasting out of boomboxes at the Million Man March. Legendary sports figures like The Fab Five and two-time-Prime-time Deion Sanders mesmerized fans while literally "changing the game." Spike Lee Joints and the irresistible charm of Black sitcoms enthralled and delighted audiences. Growing up in the 1990s and becoming a teacher in the 2010s, I sought ways to incorporate 90s Black situation comedies (i.e., sitcoms) into language instruction. These shows encapsulated the essence of Black hip-hop culture, which shaped my identity and connected to the rich linguistic tradition shared by me and my students, spoken fluently at various levels. Despite being born in the late 1990s, my adolescent students were captivated by this seemingly archaic cultural medium. It effectively introduced them to vital concepts related to Black Linguistic Justice, which encompasses the pursuit of equality and empowerment for individuals and communities whose language and communication emerged during the era of U.S. chattel enslavement ("Linguistic Justice").

Black sitcoms can be a powerful teaching tool as television shapes the United States' image of itself and, if used with intention, could serve as a platform to challenge and transform ideologies that rely

on harmful notions of human existence. Thus, shows like *The Fresh Prince of Bel-Air*, *Amen*—both black-produced shows—and *Family Matters*—the longest-running Black sitcom produced by non-Black writers—yield themselves to lively discussions about the rich complexities and racialized tensions of Black language use ("Seventy-Two Hours;" "My Fair Homeboy;" Zook; "Jailhouse Blues;" Giorgis). I have used *The Fresh Prince of Bel-Air* episode "Seventy-Two Hours" with my high school students to teach (a) misconceptions about the Black lexicon (i.e., vocabulary) via Hip-Hop slang terms, (b) concepts such as artful language use via linguistic-flexing skills, and (c) internalized anti-Black linguistic racism.

As such, in this article, I describe how the TV shows *Family Matters* and *Amen* could be used to explore how anti-Black language attitudes get propagated through mainstream media as well as how Black linguistic conscious raising is essential and empowering for those who embody and thus rely on Black Language ("Linguistic Justice"). Before detailing these teaching and learning opportunities, I briefly define Black Language and present why Black linguistic justice must be prioritized in today's English Language Arts (ELA) classrooms.

Justice for Black Language

ELA instruction—if Black Language is regarded—has been historically hyper-focused on eradication methods to reduce its presence in speech and writing and deduced to a raucous dialect spoken by uneducated poor Black people of the past in canonical classics, including Twain's *Adventures of Huck Finn* and Steinbeck's *Of*

Mice and Men (Baker-Bell, et al.). This kind of language instruction further perpetuates stereotypes and mistruths about Black Language and continues to call for Black linguistic justice.

Black Language is a rule-governed linguistic system rooted in West African languages, a system that people of African descent in the U.S. have inherited and embody today. Black Language continuously influences and shapes the English language (“Linguistic Justice”). ELA instruction for all students, then, must be both artful and anti-racist (“Prioritizing Black Language”). In fact, an increasing number of states, to date, have revised or rewritten their standards to equalize emphasis on diverse ways of embodying the English Language in this increasingly pluralistic society. For example, Wisconsin recently revised its ELA standards to prioritize equity-oriented language arts practices. Recognizing the need for K-12 students to effectively utilize complex language in a variety of tasks, one of the overarching standards and key shifts from the previous set of standards is as follows:

[I]terate individuals are flexible; they respond to the varying demands of audience, task, purpose, and discipline. Instruction and instructional materials for English language arts promote flexibility in language use by ensuring every student [l]earns in a classroom community in which educators are careful not to send explicit or implicit messages that one form of English is more correct or acceptable than another...[i]ntentionally determines how to use English in the ways that are most appropriate for meeting one’s communicative goals given the situation and audience (Wisconsin Department of Public Instruction 71).

Another noted inclusion in the standard is a rationale for language choices employed

throughout the document that essentially aims to actuate such equitable goals, including the use of (a) “standardized English” rather than “Standard English”, (b) “code-meshing” over “code-switching”, and (c) a preference for “communicative competence” to indicate that standardized English may not be practical depending on the communicative event. Hence, as described in the revised standards, standardized recognizes that “political, social, and cultural privilege have determined and continue to uphold which varieties of English have prestige and are socially desirable” (Wisconsin Department of Public Instruction 111). Using precise terms to name language such as White Mainstream English (WME) explicitly recognizes that language is not neutral or universally standardized. Likewise, employing the term “standardized” acknowledges the need for inclusivity, allowing for the presence and acceptance of all languages and language varieties within classrooms and society’s linguistic landscape. Further, because race constructs ideas about language and vice versa (a la *raciolinguistics*), specifically here in the United States, justice-seeking standards such as these call for language instruction that is actively against racism in its focus and agentively artful in its design, such as the learning opportunities described in this article.

Black Language Must Matter in *Family Matters*

Family Matters was a popular, nine-season syndicated sitcom with a wide audience gathered around the television set on Friday nights for T.G.I.F (Thank God It’s Friday; a popular sitcom lineup) to witness the annoyingly clumsy and clever mad-scientist nerd, Steve Urkel, who incessantly upset his neighbor, Carl Winslow, with his pesky antics. In the

episode “Jailhouse Blues” of season two, Carl’s wife, Harriet’s “rude and unpleasant” second cousin, Clarence “Easy C”, comes to town and steals the company of their son, 16-year-old, Eddie, and 15-year-old Steve during an unlawful adventure. In a scene wherein Eddie introduces Steve and Easy C, Steve antagonizes the West African influence syntactic construction, *optional copula* (conjugated be verb) *use* that Easy C utters:

Eddie: Hey, Steve. This is my cousin, Easy C.

Steve: Oh, I’m Steve Urkel.

Easy C: Yo-ski bro-ski

Steve: [seemingly impressed] Howdy Doody. Put ‘er there. [The two exchange in an awkward directionally-misunderstood handshake].

Easy C: Yo, you a serious lil’ nerd.

Steve: No, I *am* a serious little nerd. You see, I use verbs; verbs are our friends. They help move along sentences.

Even inherent in the episode’s title, “Jailhouse Blues,” this episode—particularly this scene—illustrates how standardized language ideologies are upheld. It reinforces the notion that baggy-pants-wearing, troublemaking Black youth use a “restricted code” rather than an “elaborate code”—a limited vocabulary versus an expansive vocabulary, respectively—according to Bernstein’s deficit-oriented theory (“Elaborated and Restricted Codes”). This portrayal reinforces negative stereotypes and implies an inherent flaw or inferiority in their communication style. To mitigate and halt these linguistic stereotypes, students’ attention could be drawn by this by posing a few prompts such as:

- Notice and describe what is happening in this scene.
- Why do you think Easy C changes the topic after Steve hypercorrects

his language use? Put another way, why might the sitcom’s writers choose to end this exchange between Steve and Easy C at the insult?

- What does this scene say about Black youth who may not use as much Black Language? What impact on the audience might this depiction have on these language users?

One could argue that because the show was written by mostly white writers who arguably did not understand Black culture and often rejected the input from Black writers who lacked seniority, *Family Matters* lacked Black authenticity (Zook). Whether or not the writers were conscious of this, this episode serves as a launch pad for discussions centered on issues of what Giorgis highlights as “negotiated authenticity,” which is how Black writers of Black sitcoms were expected to produce authentic expressions of Blackness but only the kind that is acceptable to wider audiences, particularly White viewers (“The Unwritten Rules” 34).

“Homeboys” and their Home Language in *Amen*

The sitcom *Amen*, specifically the episode “My Fair Homeboy,” centers around the adventures of Earnest Frye, a cunning lawyer, and deacon, alongside his daddy’s-girl-daughter Thelma and Reverend Dr. Ruben Gregory. In this episode, 17-year-old Clarence “So Fine” falls in love with Courtney, the daughter of Mr. Whitaker, a wealthy friend of Deacon Frye. In his pursuit of Courtney’s affection and Mr. Whitaker’s approval, Clarence is willing to change himself into a “high-class young man” and assist Deacon Frye in securing a business deal with Mr. Whitaker (“My Fair Homeboy”). This means that he must learn to speak in ways that are aligned with White linguistic norms. In doing so, Courtney instructs that Clarence “So Fine” take some

of his “common phrases and put them into English” (“My Fair Homeboy”).

When he grows weary and frustrated at the undue ploy during this “rehearsal”, Clarence “So Fine” extemporaneously belts out: “This isn't even gonna work. This is a sham—a cruel charade. We should forego this scurrilous and deceptive undertaking” (“My Fair Homeboy”). This inherent ability to *linguistically* or utilize higher level—and even archaic—vocabulary is reminiscent of my student, Deion, who upon dismissal after class one day, pensively paused as he called out “aight den” during the “dapping” process with his friend *flex* (“Prioritizing Black Language”). With a mix of amazement and shock, Deion gazed at his hand still positioned in the air and expressed his bewilderment at his own verbal artistry, as he proclaimed: “‘Aight den’...what a complex way to bid farewell to somebody!”

When students get to Clarence “So Fine’s” age, they have been exposed to this kind of seemingly archaic language throughout their PK-12 schooling experience (via canonical texts), but opportunities to experiment with language in culturally stylistic ways may not have been afforded. A problem-posing opportunity presented in this scene is to ask students: Does Clarence ‘So Fine’s’ use of WME after hours of skill-and-drill exercises indicate that the “language training” worked? This inquiry lends itself to several learning opportunities:

- Language skills are quickly acquired (and performed) once immersed in the environment where the language is spoken.
- Black youths’ “ways with words,” linguistic dynamism, and inherent ability to “code-switch” is underestimated (Heath). The act (and potential art) of switching or meshing codes in one communicative event is not the

problem; the problem is the instructional imposition of eradicating BL and how getting Black youth to switch to WME remains an unquestioned, desired goal in ELA (“Articulate While Black”).

- While one can momentarily switch the way they speak, there are other factors that cannot be switched, hidden, or denied (i.e., race and class). Because language is a speaker’s audible marker of identity, the touting of code-switching for Black students can lead to a false sense of achievement and preparation for the “real world” (“Linguistic Justice”).
- There is not a single “correct” way to speak English; there are several stylistic ways one can use English (i.e., linguistically flex) to achieve a desired effect.
- Identity is subject to compromise if one is forced to speak in a way that is peculiar to him. As James Baldwin notes: “If (through language), I am forced to deny my origins, I become useless, an imitation white man...” (qtd. in “Black English Doesn’t Get Any Respect” 6).

Raising Black Linguistic Consciousness

“My Fair Homeboy” demonstrates how language is inextricably tied to the embodiment and expression of identity. Thus, it is important to maintain students’ native language patterns and to draw on this “linguistic capital” while obtaining what they define as success, which is not limited to economic prosperity (Yosso). This idea is affirmed—in a Black, sermonic tone—by Reverend Dr. Ruben Gregory after Clarence “So Fine” becomes visibly uncomfortable after performing the rehearsed WME in

front of his family, his love interest, and her father:

Clarence, I can't stop you from going through with this charade, but you should know there is nothing wrong with you the way that you are or were. Hmm? Doesn't matter how you talk or the way you dress or what school you go to. What matters most are your values and your integrity. ("My Fair Homeboy")

Through Black Language, Clarence "So Fine" articulates this realization to Courtney's father, proclaiming that he chooses his authentic self and, thus, publicizing the rise of his Black Linguistic Consciousness:

Yeah man, Courtney's right! Yo, I'm not down with this frontin'. Just like the Rev [Reverend Dr. Ruben Gregory] says: I gotta be who I am, man. Besides, this wig itches like crazy, man. ("My Fair Homeboy")

This scene allows the opportunity to talk about the limitations and costs of code-switching and moves to the idea that BL articulates one's existence in the world. To hide it is to hide a sense of self. From this, students are then able to discuss other aspects of Black Language (i.e., phonology, paralinguistics, etc.). Thus, as most characters on the show did not use Black Language syntax or semantics, there were other linguistic characteristics that marked them as Black Language users (i.e., how they sounded and their complementing nonverbals). Mr. Whitaker, himself, pronounces the word "on" as "own" and "your" as "yo", when Clarence "So Fine" reveals the facade, strips himself of WME-parroting and the accompanying wig, and offers his Black cultural haircut: "You got stripes own yo' head!" ("My Fair Homeboy"). These pronunciation patterns are consistent with the phonological rules of Black Language ("Talkin and Testifyin" 17).

While the languages that are juxtaposed are not explicitly named in this episode (i.e., BL and WME), the opportunity to discuss this phenomenon and lean into the linguistic and rhetorical patterns of Black Language is presented.

Opportunities also arise to explore metalinguistic awareness, which involves studying how language operates and changes over time. Through this, students gain an understanding that language is in a constant state of evolution. They get to experiment with this as they translate BL phrases from the 1990s to Black Language phrases of today.

For instance, among youth of Clarence's age, the term "cappin'" would likely be used to imply "lying" or "being fake" instead of the term "frontin'." Due to the persistent expectation for Black Language speakers to translate from Black Language (BL) to White Mainstream English (WME), there is an opportunity to explore Black Language as a distinct linguistic system by translating historical Black Language terms into modern Black Language equivalents (Boutte). This approach not only enables students to study Black Language independently but also allows them to educate authentic audiences about Black Language through their compositions.

Lastly, the concept of linguistic self-defense should be endemic to language instruction for all students (Hillard). Criteria for linguistic self-defense include (1) knowing one's own culture and language origins and those who created it (2) knowing the culture in which the English language came to be; (3) knowing how languages are created or basic sociolinguistic principles of language. "My Fair Homeboy" opens the opportunity to discuss linguistic self-defense and its implications. Thus, if Clarence "So Fine" developed linguistic self-defense, the likelihood of his desire to *linguistically flex* might increase, and his confidence in

intentionally employing Black Language might strengthen.

Concluding Thoughts

The two sitcoms discussed here share ironies that could be up for critical analysis, such as both “homeboys” in both are named Clarence who prefer to be called by their clever nicknames, “So Fine” and “Easy C” and who hold a fluent command of Hip-Hop slang that is frequently either mocked or admired by family or close acquaintances. Like *Family Matters*, if uncritically presented, the showing of “My Fair Homeboy” may become a pitfall to the stereotype that only “homeboys from the hood speak Black Language”; however, critical examination reveals the rich complexity that supersedes this single story. Hence, Black youth who are born and raised in systematically repressed neighborhoods are “verbal geniuses” (Smitherman quoted in “Dismantling Anti-Black Linguistic Racism” 8) who continue to advance Black Language (and the English language) with their brilliant “ways with words” (Heath). However, their intellect is often questioned or denied in classrooms.

Moreover, it would behoove teachers to show that Black Language has a diverse range of Black people who embody it in some form or fashion. This linguistic heterogeneity could be shown through the middle to upper-class Black Language users on another popular Black 90s sitcom, *Living Single*. Characters like Maxine “Max” Shaw, a sharp attorney, and Kyle Barker, a witty stockbroker demonstrate to viewers their dynamic use of linguistic and rhetorical features and they “perform” their identities through language (Weldon). Sitcoms such as this one not only destroy popular myths that Black Language is only spoken by poor and uneducated characters of the past or trouble-making African American youth from the “hood”, it also brings to light that

linguistic flexing is—as novelist Toni Morrison articulated before the 1990s—“the thing that black people love so much—the saying of words, holding them on the tongue, experimenting with them, playing with them” (“A Conversation With” 123) Thus, Max and Kyle (and other characters on the show) demonstrate the intellectual dexterity of concurrently employing standardized English and Black Language in one communicative event.

In essence, these sitcoms discussed here aim to actualize Baker-Bell’s invitation to accompany her on “the frontlines...to transform our language education and create something we ain’t never seen before!” (*Linguistic Justice* 101). It is this kind of artful instruction that begins to change the course of the long-running ELA tradition. Mastery of standardized forms of English becomes a by-product of antiracist language pedagogies as students will have the opportunity to analyze language in meaningful ways as they learn to navigate and create their world(s) wherein linguistically flexing is recognized as culture shaping and, thus, expected and encouraged. This kind of instruction calls for teachers to shift—as many state standards have—from what Bomer (“What Would It Mean”) calls “culturally colonizing, restricted, or tolerant” approaches to ELA curricula and instructional approaches to those that are what Paris and Alim (“Culturally Sustaining Pedagogies”) coined as “culturally sustaining.” No matter where a language arts teacher begins, the efforts and end goal must be aimed toward linguistic liberation.

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