An Examination of Hegemonic Structures: Deconstructing the Myth of Education as an Equalizer

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Abstract

“I will no longer be made to feel ashamed about existing. I will have my voice... I will overcome the tradition of silence.”
— Gloria E. Anzaldúa, *Borderlands/La Frontera: The New Mestiza*

Gloria Anzaldúa’s *Borderlands/La Frontera: The New Mestiza* describes the acculturation process as violent and cruel, effectively muting the voices of minority groups to keep them and their experiences marginalized. This description sparks many questions about the experience of minority groups in higher education, especially concerning language: are marginalized cultures able to keep their ethnic identities present in higher education composition? Furthermore, should there be space for cultural identity in academia?

The poet Ernestine Johnson explained the notion of “talking white” in her spoken word poem, “The Average Black Girl” (2014). Johnson shares her experience of learning to “talk white” in order to succeed. Johnson’s poem portrays issues African Americans experience in higher education, concerning their language and cultural identity. In 1996, the Oakland Ebonics Resolution caused controversy and debate over the legitimacy of Ebonics, which is now referred to as African American Vernacular English, or AAVE (Perry and Delpit xi). Despite the heated discussions, writing reform in urban English Language Arts classrooms does not reflect implications of the Oakland Ebonics Resolution.

Smitherman, the noted linguist and educational activist for African Americans, and other prominent scholars, such Lisa Delpit and Theresa Perry, have continued the sociolinguistic studies caused by the Ebonics movement, yet this work has not been reflected in American classrooms. Considering Peter Elbow’s influential work in the field
of composition, which contributed to the explosion of student-centered instruction, it seems troubling that a connection between cultural identity and writing voice has not been adequately addressed in the field of writing studies for urban education. A quick study of graduation statistics will reveal that not all ethnic groups are receiving equal opportunities. These statistics reveal African American students from urban communities continue to drop out of higher education at a much higher rate than white students ("Fast Facts").

Horace Mann, the educational reformer, wrote in the 1800s about the power and duty of education: he stated, "Education then, beyond all other devices of human origin, is the great equalizer of the conditions of men, the balance-wheel of the social machinery" (16). If education is meant to be an equalizer, why are there still marginalized students in higher education? Furthermore, since this was the goal of education in the 1800s, why hasn’t there been more reform present in the 21st century? In order for progress to be consistent, the debates surrounding composition, writing voice, and cultural identity must be continued. This conversation should also be augmented with a focus on digital rhetoric to acknowledge shifting tides in composition, due to the technological advancements of our time. Chapter One explores the failings of American school systems to properly serve African American students by excluding AAVE in classrooms. Additionally, Chapter Two analyzes possibilities for inclusion of AAVE through the study of digital rhetoric, which presents different types of discourse through digital media.

Examining the assumptions surrounding writing instruction and student voices in higher education will ideally create more value for all student writing voices, not just the
ones who fit in the mold of traditional academic voice. This examination will be especially revealing for African American students, who continue to be left behind in schools, due to the hegemonic structures built into educational systems. Ideally, writing instruction needs to transform to include all types of writing voices, including those influenced by cultural identity, such as African American Vernacular English.
MONTCLAIR STATE UNIVERSITY

An Examination of Hegemonic Structures: Deconstructing the Myth of Education as an Equalizer

by

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# Table of Contents

Abstract ..................................................................................................................................... 1  
Thesis Signature Page ........................................................................................................... 4  
Title Page ................................................................................................................................ 5  
Table of Contents .................................................................................................................. 6  
Chapter 1 ............................................................................................................................... 7  
Chapter 2 ................................................................................................................................ 26  
Bibliography .......................................................................................................................... 52
Chapter 1

Section I: Acknowledging the Failures of the American School System

The achievement gap has long been debated in educational circles. Many factors have been analyzed: socioeconomic status, race, district standing, and others. While all of these factors have their own merit, one such factor which has been too long neglected is language and its connection to cultural identity. Gloria Anzaldúa brilliantly drew the connection between language and cultural identity in her book, *Borderlands/La Frontera: The New Mestiza*, which explores Chicana identity and language. Anzaldúa argues that marginalization of the Chicana people created a history of silencing, leading to cultural shame. Anzaldúa’s influential work reflects current educational problems created by achievement gaps, since students struggle to achieve success in a system which silences their voices; these struggles directly relate to the experiences Anzaldúa explores in *Borderlands/La Frontera: The New Mestiza*. While Anzaldúa examined Chicana experiences, her work connects with many other minority experiences. This argument can be directly connected to African American experience in higher education. Geneva Smitherman expands Anzaldúa’s work into African American history. Smitherman argues that African American language is a vital and rich part of African American history, just as Anzaldúa argues that Chicana language is an essential aspect of Chicana history. Smitherman asserts, “Black Dialect is an Africanized form of English reflecting Black American’s linguistic-cultural African heritage and the conditions of servitude, oppression and life in America... It has allowed blacks to create a culture of survival in an alien land, and as a by-product has served to enrich the language of all Americans”
“Black English/Ebonics” 32). Presently, this view, which represents the value of AAVE, has not been widely recognized in educational school systems.

Section II: An Overview of the Oakland Resolution

However, at one time, the study of AAVE did have an effect on educational policies. The Oakland Resolution presents a fascinating case study to further analyze how educational systems can attempt to include diverse voices in academia. First, an overview of this case study will be presented, and then an analysis of its successes and failings will be reviewed. The study of this case study will provide a thorough analysis of an attempt to include AAVE into educational systems, which will be beneficial in understanding the hidden backdrop of inequality in education, since ultimately, this resolution failed. In 1996, the Oakland Unified School District in California passed a resolution to recognize the legitimacy of AAVE as a step towards improving the underachievement of African American students enrolled throughout the district (Perry and Delpit xi). While the controversy and national debate that followed the resolution has been closely examined by many scholars, the background leading to the resolution is also worthy of mention. The Oakland Unified School District was facing a crisis: the average grade point average for African American students was 1.8, falling far behind the average 2.7 grade point average of white students. Furthermore, although African American students only comprised 53 percent of the student population, “they represented 80 percent of suspensions and 71 percent of students labeled as special needs” (Perry and Delpit xi).

Faced with this disturbing rate of African American student failure, Prescott Elementary School’s above-average performance offered a solution: the Standard English Proficiency program (SEP). This program aimed to improve African American student
growth by acknowledging that “the systemic, rule-governed nature of Black English” should be used “to help children learn to read and write in Standard English” (Perry and Delpit xi). Since Prescott Elementary School drastically improved after implementing SEP, the school board decided to pass an Ebonics resolution to improve the rest of the schools within their district. This resolution sparked an “irrational and racist discourse” which prevented meaningful change for African American education (Perry and Delpit xii). The Oakland resolution could have been a powerful change for African American students because it legitimized their language. Unfortunately, the backlash prevented this from happening due to the manipulation of school systems to create shame regarding cultural identities and voices.

Voice and language are power, and the Oakland School District acknowledged the agency of African Americans by maintaining that AAVE was a language worthy enough to have a place in education, therefore extending and creating space for African American identities within education. As Theresa Perry supports, “The board further maintained that Ebonics, the home/community language of African-American children, should not be stigmatized, and that this language should be affirmed, maintained, and used to help African-American children acquire fluency in the standard core” (3). This was the idealistic goal of the resolution that was distorted by a media backlash: “called lunatics, Afrocentrists, accused of giving up on Black kids, and of legitimizing slang- these were just some of the invectives hurled at the members of the Oakland school board” (Perry 5). It is important to note that the backlash was not only contained to a white audience as many prominent African American figures, such as Jesse Jackson and Maya Angelou, also joined the voices protesting the resolution. Perry argues that African Americans
“missed the point” because “Black Language is largely an uncontented area of Black shame” (6). The Oakland resolution could have been the first step in creating agency through AAVE and removing the shame and stigma. Regrettably, the controversy following the resolution prevented the development of African American voice in education.

Section III: Cultural Shame

Anzaldúa illuminated the strong connection between voice and identity. As her work demonstrated, in order for individuals to have a true sense of their cultural identity, their voices- influenced by their cultural backgrounds- need to be accepted. Throughout Borderlands/La Frontera: The New Mestiza, Anzaldúa describes the brutal struggle of attempting to reconcile her academic voice with her cultural voice. This struggle created a cycle of shame, regarding her “wild tongue.” Therefore, when voices of diverse backgrounds are not accepted, this creates shame, negatively impacting one’s sense of cultural identity. Through educational practices which do not accept AAVE, the language of African American students becomes wrapped in shame. I argue that this shame stems from the marginalized place of African Americans in American society. Language is power, and if African American students are taught that their language has no place in the classroom, their agency will not develop and marginalization will continue. The worth of AAVE is often hidden beneath more acceptable discourses of traditional academia. Yet, we must recognize that AAVE is not a “poor sister to English but a language system with roots in West Africa. It is a language that evolved in struggle and under conditions of extreme oppression- a creative response to a slave society that did its best to erase African language and culture” (Perry and Delpit xiv). Although AAVE may be shamed as
“slang,” African American students recognize AAVE as their language, their voice, and a representation of their identity. As Delpit states, “It is the language spoken by many of our African-American children. It is the language they heard as their mothers nursed them and changed their diapers and played peek-a-boo with them. It is the language through which they first encountered love, nurturance, and joy” (17). When African American students enter the school system, they are taught their language is shameful. The impact of this influence obviously has serious consequences in damaging the value African American students place on their language. Furthermore, African American students are not given the same opportunity to succeed if their voices are corrected since “forcing speakers to monitor their language typically produces silence” (Delpit 18).

If classrooms only allow space for Standard English, African American students do not have opportunities to gain agency for their own language and voice, which are influenced by AAVE in urban communities. Therefore, African American students will feel as if they do not truly belong in academia, which I would argue is a contributing factor to the high drop-out rates and low college attendance demonstrated by African American students throughout America. Therefore, our current educational practices are failing African American students, sentencing these students to silence and shame. However, if African American students are given the space to speak in their language, influenced by AAVE, the value of their identity will be reaffirmed and they will feel as if they do belong and have a place in academia. Furthermore, speaking in AAVE will help African American students to gain agency typically denied to them in their marginalized positions in society. When African American students speak AAVE, they “assert the power of the tradition in the quest to resolve the unfinished business of being African in
America” (Smitherman, “Black English/Ebonics” 37). The Oakland resolution was a strong starting point for the African American community. Unfortunately, among the following controversy, the resolution and possible change sputtered and died.

Section IV: Hegemony and School Systems

How do school systems contribute to the development of this unequal educational landscape? The development of this landscape builds through educational practices, in particular the English Language Arts classroom is a space which breaks down African American language and culture into speech that must be modified and shaped into Standard English. This process reflects racist attitudes: “Research on sociolinguistics in the education process has been most fruitful and convincing in uncovering underlying attitudes about language... In the educational context, negative linguistic attitudes are reflected in the institutional policies and practices that become educationally dysfunctional for Black English-speaking children” (Smitherman, Talkin That Talk 140-41). Despite this, educational systems may believe that helping African American students learn Standard English is the best strategy for ensuring that these students have a chance of success. Furthermore, this belief is reinforced by the notion that Standard English is the language of success: “A few researchers call for acceptance of BEV in education and employment (in other words, completely ratified acceptance of the code). Most, however, view the social realities as inevitable and argue instead for the education of teachers to eliminate negative attitudes toward BEV speakers” (Speicher and McMahon 388). However, as the achievement gaps in American education demonstrate, rather than helping African American students succeed, these practices are widening the gap into an unsurpassable fissure.
It is vital to note that the purpose of the Oakland Resolution was to utilize AAVE to teach Standard English. Therefore, AAVE was never meant to replace Standard English as an acceptable means of communication, but as a means to grant access to Standard English. While this was revolutionary at the time, the Oakland resolution failed to develop into a fight for African American language and identity in the classroom because its goal still reinforced AAVE as a marginalized language. As previously explained, African American students will continue to be left behind in the classroom if their language continues to be shamed. Although the Oakland resolution attempted to provide a space for African American language, the movement still regulated this language as inferior by reinforcing the notion that the only value of this language was as a stepping stone to leave behind AAVE. The conversations following the Oakland resolution reflected many teachers’ concerns about implementing the use of AAVE in their classroom. Delpit further explains, “Most teachers of those African American children who have been least well-served by educational systems believe that their students’ life chances will be further hampered if they do not learn Standard English” (17). Delpit recognizes the concerns caused by this resolution as valid, and it would be a blind mistake to assume that there is no truth to these concerns.

Although some of these concerns surrounding AAVE in academia are valid, that does not imply that the concerns are valid. Teachers who worry that not correcting AAVE in their classroom will prevent their students from achieving success fail to realize that this mentality is created by racist discourses present in academia. To better understand how education works to reinforce racist ideologies, I examine Antonio Gramsci’s theory of hegemony. Gramsci’s concept of cultural hegemony, influenced by
Karl Marx's analysis of capitalism, explains how cultural and societal institutions are manipulated by the ruling class to continue marginalization. While Marx and Gramsci focused on the working class as a whole, the exploited workers in the United States are often African Americans (Gabriel and Todorova). Through the conditions supported and maintained by the ruling class, African Americans are positioned at the oppressive end of the hierarchy of workers. Additionally, language is an enforcer of hegemony that primarily affects African Americans whom employ AAVE. Indeed, the hegemony of language has a much deeper meaning than simply not speaking the mainstream, primarily White, version of English. The linguistic and stylistic differences between languages reflect diverse cultural backgrounds. Language functions as an enforcer of hegemony not because African Americans may struggle with the dominant language, but because language differences between dominant groups and other ethnic groups cause many—especially African Americans—to feel shame about their voice and cultural identity.

I argue that academia reinforces this shame when African American students are consistently corrected and taught that their language is wrong. Therefore, schools become enforcers of hegemony by further solidifying marginalization of “others.” A school functions as hegemonic apparatuses because it is the “ensemble of ‘private’ bodies through which the political and social hegemony of a social group is exercised” (Mouffe 187). The strength of hegemony lies in its absolute insertion in all aspects of social life: “Time and time again Gramsci stresses the fact that every single hegemonic relation is necessarily pedagogic and occurs amongst the different forces of which it is composed” (Mouffe 193). Therefore, the influence of hegemony is supported by educational structures to spread “this worldview which will include ideological elements from
varying sources, but its unit will stem from its articulating principle which will always be provided by the hegemonic class...Gramsci calls this articulating principle a hegemonic principle” (Mouffe 193). Although there may be competing discourses in education, Gramsci argues that the role of school and education as hegemonic apparatuses will ensure that the ideology produced and reinforced in schools will reflect the “unified ideological system of the hegemonic principle” (Mouffe 193). The hidden influence of hegemony within school systems impacts African American students: “Racism among scholar-elites exists within an institutionalized tradition based on a set of assumptions... The fact that scholarly racism is subtle, rather than blatant, and institutional, rather than individual, makes it all the more an insidiously oppressive and effective dimension of the ideological apparatus that justifies and supports patterns of racist thought and behavior…” (Smitherman, Talkin That Talk 67-8). Additionally, because hegemonic ideals are often hidden, African American students are not able to identify and realize that the educational system (whether intentionally or not) is working against them to promote hegemony.

Section V: Influence of a Racist Bias in Academia

The ideas present in educational practices escape beyond the classroom and permeate societal thinking: “Myths and misconceptions about language and negative attitudes toward language diversity are fostered in the school and perpetuated in the general populace from the public school experience” (Smitherman, Talkin That Talk 141). However, what is especially troubling is that African American students internalize these expectations and attitudes about their language and cultural identity. As Anzaldúa declared in her influential work, “So, if you want to really hurt me, talk badly about my
language. Ethnic identity is twin skin to linguistic identity- I am my language. Until I can take pride in my language, I cannot take pride in myself.” Smitherman restates Anzaldúa’s claim for African American children: “the children’s language is them is they mommas and kinfolk and community and black culture and the black experience made manifest in verbal form” (Talkin That Talk 149).

Educational systems promote a cycle of inequality for minority students. African American students are particularly affected by this cycle since AAVE is regularly shamed in our classroom, causing African Americans to feel shame about their identities. Shame is reinforced by the hegemonic ideals present in academia. When school systems promote hegemonic ideals, African American student growth is stunted, contributing to a vicious cycle of oppression and poverty. Since African American students are not given the same opportunities to succeed, these students will have limited opportunities for future success. Therefore, the connection between socio-economic status, ethnic background, and academic achievement cannot be overlooked when analyzing how school systems promote hegemony. While generalizing achievement is a real and present risk, the data demonstrates that “the vast majority of them [minority children] become at-risk for academic underachievement” (Gonzalez 20). There are obvious migrating factors when considering why this is the case. Is poverty to blame? Is racism to blame? While the answers to these questions remain obscure, an examination of school structures will help identify how educational systems work to reinforce these statistics, rather than fighting to close the achievement gap.

As well as the multitude of issues created by socioeconomic challenges, minority students face additional challenges, such as the school environment and teacher
influence. As Gonzalez writes, “Teachers’ attitudes, school values, school and classroom
environment are significant factors influencing low SES children’s achievement,
especially when they are from minority backgrounds” (21). Although teachers and school
officials may not realize it, the entire educational system is influenced by hegemonic
principles, which promote marginalization of minority students. Since hegemony
promotes marginalization and an “othering” of minority students, these students are not
given as many educational opportunities. This lack of educational equity is exacerbated
by low teacher expectations: “Teachers’ expectations were based on their non-cognitive
negative perceptions of the low SES children’s speech and dress patterns (using these
misleading clues as behavioral signs of lack of cognitive maturity)” (Gonzalez 21).
Societal ideas of success and intelligence are seen through the mainstream, white
viewpoint, which results in the denial of a just and equal educational experience for
minority students. The effects of these biases create a cycle of oppression: “these
negative attitudes in teachers translate into less positive attention, fewer learning
opportunities, and less reinforcement of instances of good performance” (Gonzalez 21).
Therefore, minority students who already have the disadvantage of socioeconomic
challenges now face additional challenges due to unequal treatment in the classroom.
This unequal treatment stems from the hegemonic notion that minority groups are below
the dominant group.

Additionally, due to the lack of minority voice and identity in higher education,
many teachers have limited experience with minority backgrounds, which further
contributes to inequality in educational systems: “These negative perceptions,
expectations, and attitudes are more likely to be present in middle-class teachers, who are
more prone to hold racial and social biases, stemming from their unfamiliarity with poor and minority students' language and culture” (Gonzalez 21). Therefore, unless educational systems recognize that these biases negatively influence how African American students succeed in educational systems, there will continue to be a huge achievement gap present in the American school system. Another major issue created by these practices and beliefs is the devastating effect on African American cultural identity.

If AAVE is consistently portrayed as a lower, deficient language, this can lead to poor self-esteem, low confidence, and a lack of pride in their cultural identities. African American students are confronted with this message in school systems because “research on language attitudes consistently indicates that teachers believe Black English-speaking youngsters are nonverbal and possess limited vocabularies. They are perceived to be slow learners or uneducable; their speech is unsystematic and needs constant correction and improvement” (Smitherman, *Talkin That Talk* 141). Educational research, started by John Dewey, has found that students respond to the expectations of their teachers. Unfortunately, teachers see their roles as “guardians of a national tongue” and school systems focus on guarding this system, rather than encouraging equal opportunity and growth within classrooms (Smitherman, *Talkin That Talk* 141). This is a direct result of racism; therefore, educational systems are partaking in the spread of racism, contributing to marginalization in our society, by working as a hegemonic apparatus. The attack on AAVE is an attack on African American identity and place in society: “negative language attitudes are directed toward the ‘blackness’ of Black English; the attitudes and that language itself are the consequences of the historical operations of racism in the United States” (Smitherman, *Talkin That Talk* 143). When African American students are
confronted with low expectations set by their teachers, they are limited in their growth and development, which will negatively impact their future success.

The educational system maintains that AAVE is substandard English, essentially muting the voices of African American students and evoking shame in African American students. These views contribute to building a racist and marginalized society: “this negative attitude toward BEV [Black English Vernacular] has contributed to sustaining our economically, educationally, and racially segregated society” (Speicher and McMahon 385). As well as contributing to marginalization, these views deny the rich historical background of AAVE, limiting African American students both in and out of the classroom by ignoring the possibilities of AAVE as a culturally rich and well-developed language.

Section VI: In Defense of African American Vernacular English

Until AAVE is recognized as its own powerful language with purpose and validity, African American students will continue to be marginalized in academia, destroying the promise and purpose of education as an equalizer. AAVE has unjustifiably been regarded as illegitimate speech. This idea has poisoned our educational system and must be dismantled. To ignore the influence of Black culture on AAVE degrades this language as an “illiterate, illogical code without rules; in short, poorly learned English” (Speicher and McMahon 384). However, as research conducted by prominent scholars has illuminated, AAVE is a representation of a rich culture and should be treated as such in academia: “In the 1960s and 1970s, with the advent of black activism and black pride, of civil rights and social reforms, these traditional views were finally questioned. Linguists demonstrated unequivocally the rule-governed nature of BEV’s phonological
and syntactic rules and, more controversially, its creole origin with traceable ties to African languages" (Speicher and McMahon 385). When AAVE is shamed in educational settings, the impact on African American students is detrimental to African American achievement and success both in and out of academia. Language evolves and AAVE has evolved in America as a reflection of Black identity in America: "BEV has been described as a direct reflection and result of black culture in American, uniquely suited to the needs of American Americans both during times of slavery and today" (Speicher and McMahon 385). When language is denied in academia, students learn that their cultural identities have no place in the classroom.

The significance of cultural identity in the development of successful students cannot be overlooked: "Cultural identity gives us a sense of self and a frame of reference in our interpretation of our own behaviors and our relationships with others. A person’s identity can be manifold as he/she plays multiple roles in society" (Lu 72). If African American students learn that their language is not acceptable in a classroom, the effect on their cultural identity will negatively impact their present accomplishments in academia, thus further affecting their futures. This is why students feel in order to be successful one must “talk White.” This erroneous notion promotes the idea that AAVE, and students whom speak AAVE, do not belong in academia. Throughout their educational experiences, Black students will face threats against their cultural identities, which will promote changes in self-views and representations: “Cultural identity is not a set of static, never-changing cultural traits. Instead it is being negotiated and challenged all the time in cross-cultural situations” (Lu 74). Challenges against cultural identity are present for all cultural backgrounds. However, these challenges are especially disturbing for students of
African American identity, since the views on African American language and culture are distorting and inaccurate, which efficiently damages African American cultural identity.

Why is it that this representation of AAVE and African American identity continue to be misrepresented as less or other? Historically, the portrayal of Africa has been obviously racist: “images and power interact on a national and global scale and the practice of representing Africa with negative images that started in the nineteenth century still prevail” (Demissie 132). Unless these historical images of Africa are attacked and dismantled in the classroom, these negative stereotypes will continue to infect African American identity and prevent equality in education. Instead of maintaining that AAVE does not deserve a place in the classroom, educational systems need to recognize the value of AAVE: “the absurdity of claims of verbal deprivation within a community where verbal acumen is a source of prestige and pride signals the widespread ignorance of the norms and values of that community” (Speicher and McMahon 385). When educational systems recognize that AAVE is a language in its own right, African American students will have the opportunity to properly develop their cultural identities in educational systems. As Perry and Delpit established in their study, AAVE has strong ties to African Languages. This has been further supported by many other linguists: “Besides the grammatical and phonological rules, stylistic traditions such as verbal repartee, repetition, and call and response were recognized as features of BEV and traced back to oral traditions of Africa” (Speicher and McMahon 385). Therefore, marginalization and oppression will continue to infect our educational systems until AAVE is recognized in its own right and given a space in academia for an inclusion of African American voice and experience.
Section VI: A Statistical Analysis of African American Experience in Academia

While there has been some progress made in academia with the inclusion of multi-cultural literature and further modification of the canon to include diverse voices, the data regarding African American achievement continues to remain extremely troubling. Therefore, the current steps taken to create a more equal educational system have failed. Lindsey Cook, a data editor for US News, recently determined that education in the United States remains “separate and unequal.” Despite the amount of money that the United States spends on education, our educational systems continue to be problematic for African American students (Cook). There continues to be “gaping differences between white students and students of color: More than 60 years after Brown vs. Board of Education, school systems in the United States are separate and unequal” (Cook). The need to repair this inequality and mend the achievement gap has always been dire, and this need is even more necessary today as the “number of multi-racial students is expected to grow 44 percent” by the year 2022 (Cook). As the United States becomes a more diverse nation and minority groups become the majority, the need to properly fix our educational systems grows, as the “U.S. will be left with an education system that doesn’t serve the majority of its children properly” (Cook).

Of course, we must acknowledge that ethnic background is not the only factor affecting the achievement gap in America: “Lower wealth, lower health, lower parental education levels, more dealings with the justice system and other circumstances create a perfect storm that leaves blacks without the same educational opportunities as whites” (Cook). Yet, I would argue that these factors stem from educational inequality in American school systems. As previously discussed, African American identity and
language is distorted in American school systems, which can cause African American students to internalize this institutional racism, which then adds to a cycle of poverty and underachievement. Cook supports this argument by further explaining, “Lower expectations become self-fulfilling prophecies, contributing to lower expectations from the student, less-positive attitudes toward school, fewer out-of-school learning opportunities and less parent-child communication about school.” White students also have more educational opportunities at home, since white parents are much more likely to be educated. Additionally, white students have multiple advantages over black students: they speak the mainstream and socially acceptable language and they have more opportunities outside of school to develop academically. Cook illuminates, “While 91 percent of white children aged 3 to 5 who weren’t enrolled in kindergarten were read to by family members three or more times per week, 78 percent of black children were read to with the same frequency.” Now, while some critics may argue that this should be addressed at home if black parents are the ones not providing enough educational opportunities to their children at home, research demonstrates that there are additional factors which affect this percentage: black parents face additional challenges in having access to materials; black parents also have less time due to job obligations; additionally, black parents also face more challenges in reading fluency than white parents (Cook). Even if black parents read more to their children, this is not the same educational opportunity as a white parent reading to their child, since “the average number of words read correctly per minute for white adults with basic reading skills was 102, for blacks it was 85” (Cook). Regarding materials, children’s books are more appealing to white parents and children: “While about half of children under 5 are non-white, characters in
children's books are overwhelmingly white” (Cook). These disparities serve to widen the gap between white and African American students as early as the age of 2: “Fewer black children demonstrate proficiency in development skills such as receptive vocabulary, expressive vocabulary, matching, early counting, math, color knowledge, numbers and shapes” (Cook). Early development is essential to ensure that students will be successful and develop the skills and strategies to academically perform. Although all children have the opportunity to start school at the critical age best for development, all children do not start on equal footing. Along with the inequality at home, “black children are much more likely than white children to be enrolled in low-quality day care. High-quality care environments have been shown to provide a lasting impact on the child’s education...” (Cook). This research demonstrates that even before black students enter a classroom, they are already starting an unequal footing with their white classmates.

This unequal footing is then only reinforced in classroom. For instance, black students are held back at a much higher rate than white students: “When all grade levels are combined, black students are nearly three times more likely to be held back as their white peers” (Cook). While the benefits of holding students back are unclear, one result from holding students back is clear: it puts students at a much higher risk of dropping out before graduating high school (Cook). Another telling statistic about African American experience in education concerns test scores. The discrepancies in testing begin as early as kindergarten: “Black students entering kindergarten for the first time score lower than their white counterparts in reading, mathematics, science, cognitive flexibility and approaches to learning — every category tested” (Cook). Unfortunately, this imbalance continues throughout the higher grades: “On the SAT, black students had a mean score of
428 for critical reading and 428 for math, compared with mean scores for white students of 527 for critical reading and 536 for math” (Cook). As if retention and testing disparities did not create enough challenges for African American students, issues in discipline also adversely affect African American students: “While blacks make up 18 percent of students in preschool, they account for 42 percent of students with an out-of-school suspension and 48 percent of students with multiple out-of-school suspensions” (Cook). This extends beyond the classroom as well, as black students are more likely to be arrested and referred to law enforcement than white students (Cook).

These issues continue to build and build, impacting all aspects of educational experiences, including higher education. Black students are much less likely to attend college than white students; however, even black students who do make it to college, face the additional challenge of graduating: “For the class starting at a four-year college in 2006, only 20 percent of black students graduated in four years versus more than 40 percent of white students. Within six years, 40 percent of blacks finished, but 60 percent of whites did” (Cook). Cook’s article illuminates the “unequal educational landscape” which must be reformed. Socioeconomic status, an important factor in educational inequality, contributes to this phenomenon as middle-class African Americans maintain that Standard English is “one of the major vehicles to success, and act on that belief” (Speicher and McMahon 388). Low expectations become self-fulfilling prophecies, which doom our society to maintain inequality in education and limit African American students. This statistics about educational inequality demand action to even out the landscape of education, so that education’s role as an equalizer may come to fruition in American society, enabling African American students to achieve their full potential.
Chapter 2

Section I: The History of Writing Studies

The landscape of education must be developed into an even playing field. The purpose of education is to provide all students, regardless of race, socioeconomic status, or language, the necessary tools to succeed. This chapter will examine ways in which educational system can gain the tools to level out the playing field of education, in writing instruction. The discipline of writing studies is especially important, as communication is a vital aspect of any profession. Since writing is a reflection of an individual’s unique voice, this discipline has a duty to preserve cultural identities and encourage space for all types of voices in academia. Therefore, current writing instruction must change to reflect the growing tides of inequality still present in our educational system and practices. Digital rhetoric, which presents new and exciting methods for writing instruction, is one such discipline which can usher in these new changes. However, before arguing for change, we need a closer examination of writing composition over the years to assess the progress in writing reform.

In the introduction to Landmark Essays on Voice and Writing, scholar Peter Elbow outlines three major debates in composition which continue to be unresolved: 1) discourse as text vs. discourse as voice, 2) ethos as real virtue in the real person vs. ethos as the appearance of virtue, and 3) voice as self vs. voice as role. For the purpose of this chapter, the third debate, voice as self vs. voice as role, will provide the strongest connection to the place of cultural identity in academia. The issue of voice in composition has been continuously discussed and debated within the field of composition; Elbow explains, “Indeed with Derrida’s focus on what he called the
metaphysics of voice and presence, this issue of voice/discourse/identity has become one of the main critical issues in all of English studies, cultural studies, and critical theory" (xix). Elbow's work clarifies the issues driving the ongoing debate surrounding voice and identity in written discourse. Unfortunately, this discussion has somehow mystified voice even further. Voice has now taken on a godly stance, referring to some magical property in written discourse. Elbow acknowledges the metaphorical layers surrounding the term voice and attempts to clarify voice by establishing five features: audible voice, dramatic voice, recognizable voice, voice with authority, and resonant voice (xx). These five features clarify some of the mystique surrounding voice and provide specific measures of assessment. However, these five features are challenged and complicated through the inclusion of cultural identity. Would all cultures recognize the same voices as dramatic, resonant, or authoritative? This question demonstrates the inability to narrow voice into one small category. Therefore, it is improbable to maintain that writing instruction should only focus on one type of discourse, which primarily has been the academic essay.

Although the academic essay provides the format of most writing in higher education, this format is not the only available option for writers in higher education. Other methods, such as narrative, can also be utilized for academia writing. In narrative, voice is clearly developed to represent a specific character. Of course, there is a difference between narrative writing and academic writing; however, narrative writing provides other methods of sharing knowledge, outside of academic writing. Additionally, narrative writing is present in digital rhetoric, as social media and new forms of writing have transformed human communication. This form of communication is typically reserved for private life, but these ideas should also be applied to academia. Notably,
qualitative scholars have contributed to a growth of personal narrative as a method of inquiry. Bud Goodall is one such scholar who examines this development in his book, *Writing Qualitative Inquiry: Self, Stories, and Academic Life*. Goodall explains “the idea of narrative knowledge as a special form of reasoning” and connects this idea with recent changes in education (13). Goodall addresses the value of this new form of writing and maintains that it just as valuable as academic writing; he argues, “The basic idea is that when we engage in writing or telling a story, we create alternative pathways to meaning that are imaginative and analytical ... it alters the way we think about what we know and how we know it” (14). While Goodall goes on to provide advice for developing writers who want to attempt this new mode of writing, his original points reinforce the value of this type of writing, which could provide an alternative to traditional academic voice. This connection between narrative and voice in composition is further expanded in Walker Gibson’s article, “The ‘Speaking Voice’ and the Teaching of Composition.” Gibson uses examples from literature to demonstrate the presence of clear, distinct voices in narrative writing, yet he claims this type of writing is not as apparent in academic writing. Gibson explains possible reasons for this by declaring, “The problem that all writers face is the loss of both voicebox and kinesics. The writer’s task is to so surround his words with other words on the page that readers may infer the quality of the desired speaking voice” (13). Narrative writing, such as the writing present in digital rhetoric, may be a tool for writers to successfully complete this task. Clearly, narrative writing cannot replace academic writing, but it certainly can be an alternative for student writers. Alternative methods of writing move written discourse beyond the traditional academic essay, which allows more space for differing types of voices.
The call for alternative methods of writing in education is not a new one. Scholars of composition have continually examined shifts in composition and proposed changes for writing pedagogy to reflect these developments. It is even more vital that these changes are addressed in today’s society, as the digital revolution has provided new avenues of discourse. In his article, “Rhetoric, the Enabling Discipline,” Edward P. J. Corbett explains the purpose of rhetoric as dynamic. Corbett begins by stating, “One of the things revealed by the history of the successive eras of rhetoric is the remarkable adaptability of this discipline to the changing spirit and needs of the times” (26).

Rhetoric, then, continually adapts for the purposes of writers at different times. This declaration complicates pedagogy by raising questions about writing instruction. If rhetoric changes to better suit a changing society, surely then writing instruction must also adapt. For the past several centuries, writing instruction has remained relatively similar: students learn writing strategies and write traditional essays. The issue created by static instruction is that it does not reflect changing societal movements—such as digital rhetoric—in which students need to develop new types of skills and strategies to be successful. This is a critical aspect of education since students must be proficient in rhetoric to be active members of a society. As the technological advancements of our time reveal, digital fluency is absolutely necessary to gain success. Corbett further explains that the study of rhetoric is “the discipline that can best equip our students to perform most of the social offices that devolve on them as citizens of the human community” (27). As communities evolve and change, rhetoric then must evolve and change, as well as uniting pedagogy. First, we must examine the scholarly conversation regarding the change in rhetoric. Then, that examination must be analyzed in connection
with pedagogical movements to determine if changes in rhetoric are being properly supported in classrooms.

In the 1990s, Peter Elbow began this conversation regarding shifting attitudes of rhetoric and pedagogy with a public debate with another composition scholar, David Bartholomae (Bartholomae 62). These two scholars represent two different sides of a debate concerning the role of the writer in higher education. Essentially, Elbow argues that writing should belong to the writer from the start of the writing process, while Bartholomae counters that the writer needs to first gain the right to own their writing (Bartholomae 65). Although the debate has not been resolved, it has created new ideas and thoughts about writing pedagogy. In his article, “Embracing Contraries in the Teaching Process,” Elbow further explains this new way of thinking. As the title suggests, Elbow recognizes that the process of teaching writing is complicated by not only the process of teaching but also the types of students. Elbow explains one of the key issues causing contraries: “We are invited to stay true to the inherent standards of what we teach, whether or not that stance fits the particular students before us” (55). Although Elbow focused primarily on student need, education must also recognize societal needs. Therefore, traditional writing instruction that ignores the shifting tides in our society toward a more technological world fails to adequately prepare students with the tools and skills necessary to become productive members of society, while still developing a unique voice.

While Elbow believes that student writers should be at the forefront of our pedagogical practices, we must also remember in order to properly serve these students, we must also examine new developments in writing instruction, created by digital
rhetoric. Referencing psychologist Jean Piaget’s influential theory of cognitive
development, Elbow argues that writing instruction must involve “both assimilation and
accommodation” (58). If writing instruction involves both of these two methods, student
writers will be the focus of instruction. However, it is important to note that Elbow is not
arguing for a one-sided focus solely on student writers. As Elbow clarifies, “In short,
there is obviously no one right way to teach, yet I argue that in order to teach well we
must find some way to be loyal both to students and to knowledge of society” (64).
Elbow acknowledges that both of these aspects are important. Therefore, writing
instruction must support and value students and their writing, while still changing to
reflect new types of discourse and rhetoric as our world advances. In order for this to
occur, I suggest that Elbow’s method of pedagogy, which values the writer over the text,
should be implemented. This is especially important for urban education, since the
backgrounds of these students will have a heavy influence on their language. Although
Elbow provides a generalized view of education, his ideas should be further applied to
urban education to recognize and address the value of diverse types of writing influenced
by ethnic background.

In the 1970s, Mina P. Shaughnessy took a stand for students by addressing issues
in basic writing courses that focus solely on the writing product and not the students or
the world around them. Since then, Elbow and other scholars have continued this stance
with their own work. Min-Zhan Lu is one such composition scholar who has connected
Shaughnessy’s ideas to current issues within writing instruction in her article,
“Redefining the Legacy of Mina Shaughnessy: A Critique of the Politics of Linguistic
Innocence.” Lu’s work is influential in understanding the dynamics behind language and
the societal constructions which influence our instruction of writing. Lu studies a "politics of linguistic innocence: that is, a politics which preempts teachers' attention from the political dimensions of the linguistic choices students make in their writing" (152). Aligning with Marxist and poststructuralist theories of language, Lu argues that "language is best understood not as a neutral vehicle of communication but as a site of struggle among competing discourses" (152). This further complicates ideas surrounding writing instruction because it connects to troubling issues of agency and voice for different ethnic groups. Lu states, “Because different discourses do not enjoy equal political power in current-day America, decisions on how to respond to such dissonance are never politically innocent” (153). As Elbow argues, student writers deserve loyalty in the classroom. Lu agrees with this statement, while also acknowledging the dire need for changes in thought regarding appropriate types of writing for this loyalty to be true and just. As Lu explains, “Meaning is thus seen as a kind of essence which the writer carries in his or her mind prior to writing ... Such a view of the relationship between words and meaning overlooks the possibility that different ways of using words- different discourses- might exercise different constraints on how one 'crafts' the meaning 'one has in mind'” (154). Lu is challenging the notion that written discourse can be defined by one idea. If written discourse is valued only as the style acceptable in Bartholomae's academic world where a writer has to work towards creating a discourse that fits into traditional academic discourse, how will different voices be heard? Furthermore, as Lu also questions, why are other types of discourse not as valued? In this type of situation, writing instruction then becomes not about the student writer, as Elbow envisioned, but
more about molding a student to write in a traditional style, instead of allowing for different voices.

Lu further explains the effect of this way of thinking: "That is, it might teach students to ‘write something in formal English’ and ‘have something to say’ but can help students obtain only a very limited ‘freedom of deciding how and when and where’ to use which language” (154). This would mean that the purpose of writing pedagogy is not to inspire the development of students’ own voices, but instead to mold student writing into a single traditional method of writing. Lu further clarifies the dangers of this type of instruction: "It may very well lead students to see the function and form of English as a timeless linguistic law which they must respect, adapt to, and perpetuate rather than as a specific existing circumstance resulting from the historically unequal distribution of social power, and as a condition which they must recognize but can also call into question and change” (159). Lu’s view inspires students to challenge educational structures which attempt to confine their voices in traditional writing styles. Traditional writing instruction ultimately fails students because it does not acknowledge and respect the variety of different discourses present in a society. Students come from different backgrounds and have different ideas about the development of their own writing voice and style. If writing instruction does not provide space for differing types of written discourse, the student writer is not given the chance to develop their own writing voice in academia.

Section II: Disconnections between Students and Educational Systems

Disconnections between student writing voice and higher education are further examined in Gerald Graff’s article, “The Academic Language Gap.” Graff takes the ideas of Lu one step further by analyzing student reactions to the “rhetorical posture of
argument-maker” (24). This rhetorical position is one often used in secondary and higher education as a type of writing assessment. Graff clarifies how a gap is created between a student and their education with three reasons. He begins by arguing that the role of an argument-maker “rests on a conception of citizenship that has become increasingly unreal” (24). Graff argues that the diminished role of citizens in society causes students to feel as if their writing is “hollow” because it is likely that their written discourses will not have effects beyond the page. Although Graff does not address the role of audience in his argument, this also connects to the function of audience. The article “Audience Addressed/Audience Invoked: The Role of Audience in Composition Theory and Pedagogy” by Lisa Ede and Andrea Lunsford analyzes the function and importance of audience in writing studies. Throughout their article, Ede and Lunsford argue that the role of audience is often overlooked in composition courses as a way to engage writers within the writing process. If students are to engage in genuine writing, audience must move beyond the teacher. Therefore, students will be more authentically engaged when writing. Ede and Lunsford explain the goal of addressing audience in composition by stating, “A fully elaborated view of audience, then, must balance the creativity of the writer with the different, but equally important, creativity of the reader. It must account for a wide and shifting range of roles for both addressed and invoked audiences” (169). Although the addressed audience might only be the professor teaching the course, if students are taught to consider the invoked audience, their written discourse will have a powerful focus. Furthermore, invoked audiences will also provide opportunities for “hollow” writing to become meaningful writing. Although Graff, Ede, and Lunsford do not acknowledge digital rhetoric as a method in which audience can be addressed in writing instruction, I
suggest that the amazing global connectivity of digital rhetoric can expose students to publishing online, which will enable them to actually have an audience. The impact on young writers to know that their thoughts and writing can be shared and connected with an audience through digital rhetoric will empower students in ways previously unattainable through traditional writing instruction. Digital rhetoric, with its endless possibilities, explores all different types of discourse, which are not limited by a still, formal style present in traditional written discourse.

The unequal balance of power in regards to writing voice parallels the unequal balance of power in society. Although educational reform has attempted to make progressive changes, there are still “homogenized views of ‘the student’ that ignore cultural and cognitive differences” (Graff 28). This view is especially damaging in an English Language Arts classroom, as it is in this setting that students should be given the opportunities to develop unique writing styles suitable to their identities. Academic discourse has consistently remained in the same format: academic essays, which follow strict, traditional guidelines. However, this format requires all students to distort their writing styles so that their writing fits into this mold. It is no wonder that educational systems continue to experience issues with student achievement when this system promotes a one-size-fits-all writing instruction approach. This type of approach directly refutes the purpose of education. Bell hooks is one scholar who has analyzed the true purpose of education in her enlightening book, Teaching to Transgress: Education as the Practice of Freedom. Hooks’ experience in higher education directly represents the struggles African Americans students face in education, as discussed in Chapter One. Hooks shares, “In graduate school I found that I was often bored in classes… I wanted to
be a critical thinker. Yet that longing was often seen as a threat to authority. Individual white male students who were seen as 'exceptional' were often allowed to chart their intellectual journeys, but the rest of us (and particularly those from marginal groups) were always expected to conform” (5). These expectations of conformity begin when teachers allow their biased and racist views of marginalized students to influence and dictate their teaching.

Since educational systems are hegemonic apparatuses, teachers must analyze their educational practices to ensure that these biases are not present in their educational philosophies. Conformity in the classroom translates into the damaging notion that only the white, standard version of English is acceptable. This view obviously damages marginalized students. As hooks elaborates, “In those days, those of us from marginal groups who were allowed to enter prestigious, predominantly white colleges were made to feel that we were there not to learn but to prove that we were the equal of white. We were there to prove this by showing how well we could become clones of our peers” (5). Hooks’ experience evokes the experience of minority children in education. When these children are confronted with the expectation that they must conform, students begin to spurn their education and fall behind, as indicated by the statistics examined in Chapter One. Furthermore, as previously discussed, the purpose of writing instruction is to encourage diverse writing voices so that they are nurtured and developed, not destroyed in an attempt to ban cultural identity from educational spaces. In order for this type of learning to take place, educational philosophies must shift to reflect this type of thinking.

Section III: New Attitudes in the Examination of Language

Just as there should not be the notion that there is only one type of writing
instruction and style that is appropriate, there should also not be one type of teaching style. This thesis focuses on English Language Arts and writing instruction in higher education. However, I recognize that these ideas regarding education can and should be applied to all disciplines. Since language is dynamic, our instruction of language must also be dynamic. However, often times, language is viewed as a static part of our society:

“One of the hardest notions for a human being to shake is that a language is something that is, when it is actually something always becoming. They tell you a word is a thing, when it’s actually something going on” (McWhorter 3). The transformation of language is not just a reflection of societal changes. Language itself requires change: “It isn’t that language changes only because new things need names or because new developments bring people into new contacts. Language changes because its very structure makes transformation inevitable” (McWhorter 3). This view of language is not yet accepted in classrooms, since writing instruction still maintains that academic essays are the only method in which knowledge can be demonstrated. While this is certainly the main way scholars present their information, a philosophy which aims to encourage all types of writing voices will create differing methods, which reflect that “language is not self-standing orations howled into the either; it is a vehicle for talking about life and emotions directly experienced, recalled, or predicted from moment to moment” (McWhorter 27). Academic classrooms should encourage the use of language in this way to create a more inclusive classroom, filled with unique voices, instead of encouraging students to view language “as if it were written sentences out of a Language Arts workbook” (McWhorter 27). With these exciting philosophies, beliefs, and attitudes about language, written
instruction can and should morph into an inclusive discipline, creating spaces for unique writing voices.

**Section IV: Digital Rhetoric and the Transformation of Writing Studies**

How can writing instruction begin this transformation? The recent study of digital rhetoric has exploded into new ways of thinking about writing. These new ways of thinking about writing can be the catalyst to change writing instruction. However, we must acknowledge the validity of certain concerns over writing instruction. Teachers worry that their students will not be prepared for future success if they are not fluent in dominant, Standard English. However, I would argue that these concerns are no longer as pertinent in the 21st century, due to the many different forms of discourse caused by the digital revolution which now provides a space for all voices, including those influenced by AAVE. It is important to recognize that although the Internet has provided a space, this does not guarantee that all voices are being heard, or that all voices carry the same weight and agency. The Digital Divide complicates how African Americans (and other low-income groups) are able to access technology as a valuable and “transformative” tool (Banks 12). However, as the use of technology continues to expand as an essential skill for today’s society, educational systems are implementing programs to address the Digital Divide and provide access to low-income students. Unlike the achievement gaps in education, the gaps created by the Digital Divide have begun to close. While it is true that African Americans still continue to be “less likely than whites to use the internet and to have high speed broadband access at home,” that percentage is much smaller than it once was: “Today, African Americans trail whites by seven percentage points when it comes to overall internet use (87% of whites and 80% of blacks are internet users), and
by twelve percentage points when it comes to home broadband adoption (74% of whites and 62% of blacks have some sort of broadband connection at home)” (Smith). While the disparity between Internet use and accessibility still exits, it is not an unsurpassable gulf. Additionally, this statistic also does not consider the other types of access available to African American students: “blacks and whites are on more equal footing when it comes to other types of access, especially on mobile platforms” (Smith). As these statistics illuminate, the Digital Divide is no longer preventing African American students from working with digital rhetoric. Therefore, educational systems need to provide opportunities for new avenues of writing instruction.

For African American students, digital technology and rhetoric provide opportunities for African American history and identity to flourish. These opportunities are vital for this community because “even within a definition of African American rhetoric as being about the word, careful considerations of how current technologies can extend its study will provide a much richer body of work for rhetorical criticism and analysis” (Banks 25). A strong example of the power of digital technology to create agency for African American students in their own language is eBlack, created by Abdul Alkalimat, an African American Students director at the University of Toledo (Banks 22). Alkalimat, a vocal proponent for African American involvement in technology to gain agency, created eBlack to generate, in his own words, a “virtualization of the Black experience.” As seen by the explosion of digital activism, digital rhetoric is a meaningful form of discourse, which has a real audience and purpose, while also creating a space for individual voice: the goals of composition theory discussed by Elbow. For African American students, this new form of discourse creates not only a space for their voices,
but also a method to cause change and to fight for agency. The digital revolution has allowed “African American rhetorical scholars far richer analysis of those speeches and writings considered to be within the tradition, but can also open those traditions up beyond just the word and show it has always been multimedia, using all available means in resisting racism and pursuing justice and equal access on behalf of African American people” (Banks 38-39).

The multiple types of discourse available within digital rhetoric are varied and intricate. This thesis studies the prominent types of discourse available through digital literacy which allows for a development of unique voices reflective of cultural identity and language; however, I acknowledge that there are many other types of digital rhetoric, which can be powerful tools for African American students. Johndan Johnson-Eilola and Stuart Selber have argued that we currently write in a “remix culture,” which distorts previous notions regarding “plagiarism, originality, and assemblage” (375). The remix culture refers to different types of discourses, such as text, video, and audio, which change the purpose of writing to be more interactive and collaborative. Furthermore, the remix culture also demonstrates a deeper understanding of a text. Instead of asking students find sources on a text, and then attempt to restate previously discussed ideas in their own words to fit into traditional academic essays, remix culture requires students to understand their sources by remixing to create new meaning instead of restating sources to attempt a re-wording of ideas. Johnson-Eilola and Selber believe that remixing can exist in education as assemblages, which are texts “built primarily and explicitly from existing texts in order to solve a writing or communication problem in a new context” (381). Assemblages recognize that text should be created within pre-existing discourses.
Furthermore, assemblages create communities of knowledge to share; this is especially present in online, digital communities. African American writers of all types of texts would be able to utilize assemblages to create their own community to reflect their language and cultural identity. These communities reflect a much more democratic and interactive way of learning that should be mimicked in classrooms. Additionally, assemblages also encourage new types of text, such as media, which can create engaging instructional methods and assessments. There are changes which must happen for assemblages to succeed beyond academic structures: “Remixing as a form of composition inhibits a contested terrain of creativity, intellectual property, authorship, corporate ownership, and power” (Johnson-Eilola and Selber 392). However, this terrain provides a “new notion of creativity” that is more valuable for students and much more aligned with today’s digital society (Johnson-Eilola and Selber 400). Furthermore, remix provides African American writers a method of expression in which “the mix delivers a message more powerfully than any original alone could, and certainly more than words alone could” (Lessig 71). Therefore, this exchange of ideas and thoughts online is not limited by strict regulations of traditional academic discourse. Remixes are one strong example of how the digital revolution is creating spaces for African American discourse to fully develop and strengthen their language and cultural identities.

Considering the rich, cultural background of African American history and language, written discourse seems limiting. Digital rhetoric moves beyond the written word: hypertext is one such discourse which demonstrates the power of digital rhetoric. Hypertext employs visual techniques to create varied and complex meaning, utilizing methods unavailable through written discourse. Alejandro Tapia and Helen Hodgkinson
explain the deep value of hypertext in their article, “Graphic Design in the Digital Era: The Rhetoric of Hypertext.” Tapia and Hodgkinson explain, “Their visual nature does nothing to lessen their cultural importance. On the contrary, the image is a powerful way of bringing home a point, both logically and emotionally. As David Olson has pointed out, the way information is presented in the graphic media has helped to position us in the world, at least in those cultures such as ours where the use of the symbolism of visual communication is predominantly social” (5). As digital technologies expand and grow into multiple facets of our society, all students- not just African American students- will need to be proficient in a new language. Hypertext, with its use of visual elements demonstrates a new understanding of language, which is no longer bound to written expression. Therefore, hypertext reveals new opportunities for students to add meaning to their text through the use of visuals.

Additionally, hypertext focuses on the structure of the English language through “the conscious articulation of syntax and punctuation, in the organization of paragraphs, pauses, silences, and digressions…” (Tapia and Hodgkinson 5). Through this formatted structure, focused on the visual nature, writers are exposed to new ways of thinking about writing and the purpose of writing; as Tapia and Hodgkinson further support, “Different typefaces, grids, and graphic signs in a text are not only important for their perceptual or formal qualities, they also play a cognitive and symbolic role, and regulate our interpretation as we read” (5). Thus, how we read and interpret information is also transformed through the use of digital rhetoric. The unique format of digital rhetoric will completely transform writing instruction. This transformation will closely align with the technological developments of our world today. Therefore, digital rhetoric will better
prepare students to succeed, since “the digital media has become foremost among
production processes, allowing for a greater and faster flow of information” (Tapia and
Hodgkinson 5). The main benefit of hypertext for African Americans students is that the
encoding of meaning is no longer tied solely to Standard English. As digital rhetoric is a
relatively new field, its development is not tainted with racist ideologies, such as low
teacher expectations, regarding African American students and language. Furthermore, as
digital rhetoric continues to develop, the make-up of a new type of language will be
created, due to the “capacity of electronic bits to encode the information making up an
image, a text, or a sound, using a simple binary principle” (Tapia and Hodgkinson 6).
This capacity allows students to view language as dynamic since it permits students to
“manipulate, fragment, and connect these images, texts, or sounds” (Tapia and
Hodgkinson 6). Therefore, students who may feel that their writing voice is not supported
by traditional academic essays will have the prospect to communicate in a new type of
language since this “transformation of analogical into digital data has given rise to a new
logic in the production of symbols and signs, and new rules and networks for cultural
exchange and communication” (Tapia and Hodskinson 6). Visual rhetoric is not a
completely new topic for writing instruction; however, “its importance has been
amplified by the visual and interactive nature of native hypertext and multimedia writing”
(Hocks 630). This amplified importance is critical in closing achievement gaps in
academia, since “new technologies simply require new definitions of what we consider
writing,” which creates spaces for different, unique writing voices of all cultural
backgrounds (Hocks 630).
Section V: African American Experience with Digital Rhetoric

Digital rhetoric allows African American students the opportunity to develop unique writing voices through other avenues of communication. As seen by the statistical analyses in Chapter One, African American students are continuing to fall behind in education. Since educational systems promote hegemonic ideals, African American students will continue to remain unjustly serviced in their educational experiences. However, digital rhetoric provides a chance for teachers to create new types of written discourse in their classroom, which are more inclusive of differing writing styles. Through the use of digital rhetoric, teachers allow all students to develop their writing voices, in connection with their cultural identity: “Written language reflects or conveys a writer’s social identity, but it also constructs or instantiates it” (Rubin 4). Since digital rhetoric is a new type of written expression, the use of digital rhetoric in the classroom will prevent marginalized views of writers. In typical academic writing, evaluators are influenced by their biases—correct or not: “Writing evaluators are not always accurate in discerning the actual social identities of writers. But if they decide (for any reason, plausible or not) that a particular writer is a member of a socially stigmatized group, then they are more likely to perceive the writing as nonstandard and error-laden” (Rubin 5). In standard writing evaluations in academia, such as essays, evaluators search for writing that is devoid of unique writing voice and characteristics since they are viewed as nonstandard and improper. However, this style of writing of writing is just not possible: “no text can be completely devoid of persona, without voice” (Rubin 6). Yet, academic essays typically have similar styles and language choices. This is because educational systems do not promote students to develop unique writing voices, instead students are
taught to mimic the standard, typical style of academic writing: “What linguists and stylisticians sometimes call ‘unmarked forms’ are really just normative forms, that is, representing social and political prestige” (Rubin 6). With new ways of understanding and presenting writing, digital rhetoric is free from the limitations caused by the expectation to regurgitate writing in a style free from any sort of individual features.

African American experience with digital rhetoric has demonstrated the power of this movement for marginalized students. In their informative and eye-opening article titled “Digital Expression Among Urban, Low-Income African American Adolescents,” scholars Christina Baker, Amanda Statiano, and Sandra Calvert studied 24 African American adolescents to analyze their experiences with digital rhetoric. Their article began with a focus on “media content” as a “venue for self-expression” (532). Acknowledging the value of self-expression is vital to understand a fundamental purpose of education. When students use digital rhetoric as a means of self-expression, they are exposed to a type of learning and creation which enables them to take ownership over their own learning and develop their own ideas and thoughts: “provided with the proper tools... the individual can gradually perceive personal and social reality as well as the contradictions in it, become conscious of his or her own perception of that reality, and deal critically with it” (Freire 32). There are many sources through which African American students can express themselves in connection with a digital world so that they can have these types of experiences: “Similarly, Lange (2007) found that the video-sharing website YouTube provides a means of social interaction between video makers and viewers. Video production and photography, then, are media formats through which adolescents can express themselves” (Baker, Statiano, and Calvert 532). Through these
avenues of self-expression, students are able to communicate ideas effectively in differing types of styles. This communication enables students to fight against their marginalization since “those who have been completely marginalized are so radically transformed [through the ability to express and communicate], they are no longer willing to be mere objects, responding to changes occurring around them; they are more likely to decide to take upon themselves the struggle to change the structures of society, which until now have served to oppress them” (Freire 33).

African American students can use means of digital rhetoric to engage with thoughtful dialogue about real and present issues facing African Americans in today’s society. Video is one avenue to share ideas and thoughts, similar to written expression. Just as students critically analyze their writing choice, they must also critically analyze their choices when creating digital rhetoric, such as videos: “Perceptually salient features, such as prominent foreground music, sound effects, visual special effects, rapid pace, moderate to rapid character action, and rapid camera cuts... Reflective features, such as singing, camera zooms, and moderate character action, provide viewers with opportunities to rehearse and think about content” (Baker, Statiano, and Calvert 532). Teaching and exposing students to new ways of thinking about expression, utilizing digital rhetoric, allowed the 24 African American adolescents in Baker’s, Statiano’s, and Calvert’s study to use film in their educational experiences to develop unique writing voices, reflective of their cultural identities. This experience had a positive effect on these students’ outlook on education: “Of the students who verbally spoke or included written titles in their digital productions about class and/or teachers, all were in a positive manner” (537). These positive attitudes will destroy the self-fulfilling prophecy of
African American expectation currently set in educational systems to create a more just educational system for the inclusion of all types of self-expression.

The benefits of digital rhetoric for African American students are particularly poignant when considering American history. Education is a powerful weapon. This power of education and literacy is well-known, as oppression begins with the prevention of access to knowledge. After all, one only needs to examine African American history here in America to understand how the oppressors prevented slaves from learning to read and write in order to keep them enslaved: “However, slave narratives described how slaves risked being punished with whippings, amputations, and even violent deaths in their desire to become literate. As a result, access to literacy became a hallmark of the slave’s humanity and an instrument of liberation” (Hall and Damico 80). This desire to learn, despite the consequences, represents the African American spirit: “African Americans have always striven to become literate people using whatever forms of communication were available. When written communication was illegal, African American slaves creatively used songs and rhetoric in the fields and in churches to communicate” (Hall and Damico 80). Digital rhetoric is a new space for African American scholars to creatively use different techniques to develop unique voices, despite oppressive structures created by hegemonic marginalization.

One such study which successfully implemented a new type of language for African American students was created by scholars Darryl Ted Hall and James Damico. These scholars published their illuminating results from this study in their article titled, “Black Youth Employ African American Vernacular in Creating Digital Texts.” This study examined “how a group of African American youth in a summer program accessed
and used particular aspects of AAVE in composing digital texts with iMovie video editing software... the research design of this study focuses on four linguistic modes of AAVE to better understand the ways the youth accessed and used their linguistic resources and knowledge in constructing their digital texts” (82). This study was designed for a group of 91 African American high school students. The final assessment of this course was to create a multimedia text that explored a “social justice problem related to their respective communities” (Hall and Damico 83). This assessment reflects higher level thinking, as well as a real-world application. By utilizing this type of assessment, the instructors of the course were able to guide students into developing a voice about an actual issue, which has an authentic and important purpose. Therefore, this assessment truly reflects the goals of education. Additionally, this assignment not only encouraged use of African American language, but provided a space for that language to flourish through the use of tonal semantics, sermonic tone, call and response, and signifying (Hall and Damico 83). Since these four features play heavily in the formation of African American language, these students were able to develop a rhetoric in which their cultural identity was reinforced, while participating in a societal discussion about real and present issues. The analysis of this opportunity revealed “the rich ways this group of African American youth mobilized their linguist and cultural knowledge through these discourse modes as they composed a digital text” (Hall and Damico 83). By promoting a space in education for African American students to participate in academic work, while still creating in their language, the instructors of this study demonstrated the power of digital rhetoric. This study reveals the changes which must be made in academia so that this type of educational success and achievement can be present
for all students. When this happens, education will finally achieve its goal of the “great equalizer.”
Conclusion

"Living on borders and in margins, keeping intact one's shifting and multiple identity and integrity, is like trying to swim in a new element, an 'alien' element."
— Gloria E. Anzaldúa, *Borderlands/La Frontera: The New Mestiza*

It is time for educational systems to stop sentencing African American students to the “borders” and “margins” of our society. Instead of being forced to “swim in a new element” as an “alien,” the implementation of digital rhetoric in writing instruction will provide tides of inclusion. As the statistics have revealed, African American students continue to be marginalized in academia, sentencing these students to a vicious cycle of inequality. The purpose of education has been polluted with hegemonic principles, which have infected our society. Marginalized people now have an opportunity to fight back against hegemony through the power of their voices. There has been some criticism that technology and the digital revolution have made us passive and victims of “slacktivism.” However, these critics fail to understand that the digital advancement does not create passivity, but will instead create the system in which power and equality will be gained for all individuals.

An influential example which demonstrates that digital rhetoric is destroying the culture of silence is the #BlackLivesMatter movement. This movement is “an ideological and political intervention in a world where Black lives are systematically and intentionally targeted for demise. It is an affirmation of Black folks’ contributions to this society, our humanity, and our resilience in the face of deadly oppression” (blacklivesmatter.com). This movement developed as a response, which was the refusal of African American protesters to accept the vicious and continued murder of African American individuals: “the spectacle of unchecked police brutality and murder has
morphed into a political crisis” (Taylor 4). This political crisis has demonstrated the powerful changes that can take place when African Americans are given space to use their voices to fight for change. The creation of the #BlackLivesMatter movement was made possible through the digital revolution. Although African Americans, and other marginalized groups, have been typically denied a space for their voices, the Internet has created a space for all voices. It is important to acknowledge that although the Internet has created this space, this does not necessarily mean that all these voices will be heard. Nevertheless, the #BlackLivesMatter movement has revealed the potential that voices can and will be heard through this new medium. Therefore, it is imperative that digital rhetoric is embraced and supported in academia as a fight to include voices of all marginalized people.
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