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Under Surveillance: Interrogating Linguistic Policing in Black Girlhood

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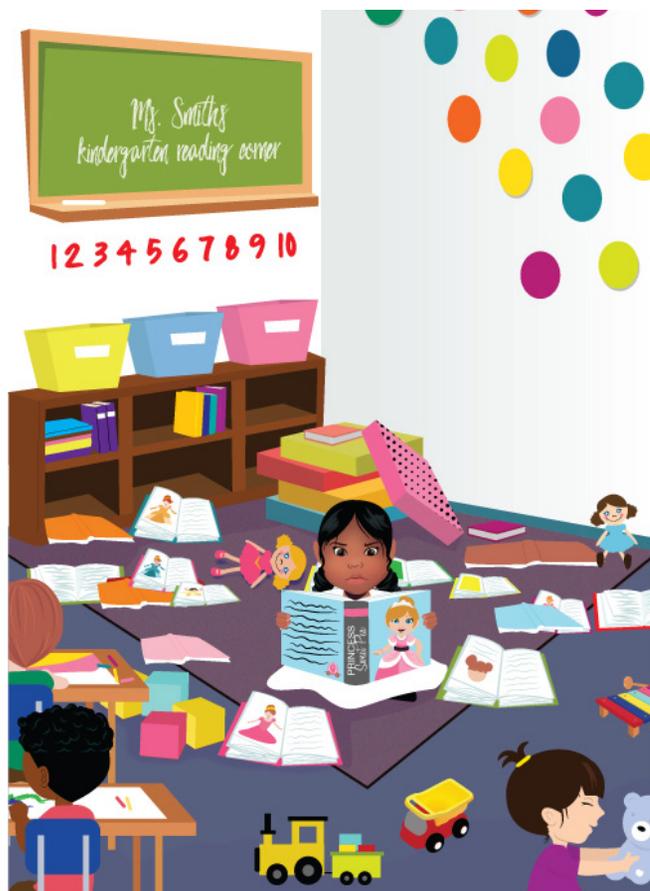
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Cover Page Footnote

I am indebted to my family for honoring my Black girlhood and teaching me how to adapt to and resist within a range of schooled contexts. I am grateful to my niece, Alia Jones, for providing helpful comments on an earlier draft of the manuscript. The views and opinions expressed are solely those of the author.

Under Surveillance: Interrogating Linguistic Policing in Black Girlhood

Pamela M. Jones



The many privileges I've been afforded often mask the violence perpetrated against me as a female in a Black body. The sobering reality is that no girl or woman with Black skin can escape the far reach of race, age, class, gender, sexuality, and nation (Brown, 2009; Collins, 2000; Crenshaw, 1991; Gholson & Martin, 2014). I am acutely aware of the fact that Black girls are not a monolithic group (Collins, 2000), but I imagine that many young Black girls have had experiences similar to mine (Brown, 2013; Morris, 2016).

Ever on the border between linguistic worlds, my childhood self felt this liminality, this double-consciousness (DuBois, 1903/1994). I couldn't always make sense of the vulnerabilities I faced, but nevertheless, they

were there. In my Midwestern city, which has a long-standing history of racism, school personnel sometimes used language to incite violence within Black girls' lives. In this autobiographical essay, I use an intersectional lens to engage in critical self-reflection as I explore how language-based micro- and macroaggressions conspired to eclipse opportunities and shape my identity.

Finding My Voice

As a young Black girl in the late seventies and early eighties, I was located at the center of interlocking oppressions. Because I was Black and from a middle class family, I could potentially be relegated to

the academically at-risk category by some people; being of childhood age rendered my voice less audible, and being a girl marginalized me by virtue of my biological sex and gender identity. Seemingly unaware of these constraints, I perceived my linguistic range of motion to be limitless. I used both “ain’t” and “isn’t,” sometimes in the same conversation; deployed “y’all” with reckless abandon; and tried on the adverb “generally” to see how it fit. I hadn’t begun to wonder whether I needed to shift my linguistic style to accommodate my interlocutors or the contexts I inhabited. Word play was alive in my childhood home with an eclectic mix of English dialects in the rotation but, akin to the hit track on an album, African American Language (AAL) (Lanehart & Malik, 2015) played on repeat. My AAL was a beautiful thing—until it wasn’t.

A Change on the Horizon

By age six, I had begun to lose my linguistic innocence. I wondered if who I was and how I sounded was wrong. Both inside and outside of school, I often felt the accusations and suffered microaggressive looks and reprimands when I dared to speak outside of the standard. What did it mean for me to be a Black girl? Was I expected to language my way into Whiteness? These questions took up residence within my soul, and in my Black girlhood I couldn’t find answers that left me feeling whole. I didn’t realize that how I languaged was tantamount to performing identity. Open School Night during my first-grade year was a clarifying moment and marked a shift in how I was to be perceived.

As one of the only children in attendance, I stood out like a snowstorm in spring. When my teacher asked me to read the information she’d written on the board for the benefit of the parents, I did so with little hesitation. My parents and I received numerous “At-a-girls!” for my performance. This struck me as odd, especially since I knew all too well that I could decode and comprehend text as a result of the time and energy spent by my parents, siblings, and select educators to grow me into an avid reader with a burgeoning academic identity. By reading the Standard English (SE) message on the board, I was ascribed the identity of “articulate while Black” with the potential to perform Whiteness (Alim & Smitherman, 2012, p. 35).

Under Surveillance

While I was fortunate to have many teachers who accepted me in my entirety, I encountered others who launched campaigns to rob me of my dignity. For every reassurance I received (e.g., “Good job on your reading, Pam”), I was sometimes met with denigrating comments (e.g., “Will someone please tell

Pam where we are in the story?”). When one teacher nominated me for science club, another teacher challenged my inclusion, asserting that I didn’t measure up. I grew accustomed to some teachers seeking to prove me unworthy of scholastic accolades by using language and race as proxies for the degree of one’s intellectual capacity.

I felt surveilled for my use of unsanctioned languages and dialects during (a) daily interactions with school personnel and peers, (b) in-class work, and (c) in-class assessments. These actions were tantamount to invoking a “mechanism for normalizing Whiteness” (Kirkland, 2010, para. 5) at the expense of acknowledging the stark reality of multiple oppressions and language-based discrimination. Eventually, I internalized a bias against my AAL so formidable that I sustained considerable damage to my self-concept. I grew less comfortable leaning into discourse styles that are part and parcel of being African American, and in school contexts I distanced myself from the words, syntax, and overall style associated with AAL.

Showing up in my life as my whole self was seen as an “act of rebellion” (Tippett, 2015), and with each rebellion I mounted, the dominant culture grew more resolved in its stance. Thankfully, the “resistant capital” (Yosso, 2005, p. 80) instilled within me by my family counteracted the language bias I’d internalized and led me to seek refuge in AAL features like habitual be, BIN, suck-teeth, and calculated silences (Richardson, 2003; Smitherman, 1977). My AAL had not been lost after all; the challenge, however, was that some of my teachers did little to honor my vernacular. School felt increasingly unsafe.

In Search of Justice-Oriented Pedagogies

The fault lies not with those who believe that Black girls need to master what Delpit (1992) called literate discourse; rather, fault resides with those who denigrate vernaculars to perpetuate the myth of a standard language (Lippi-Green, 1997). Unconscious language bias (Scott & Smitherman, 1985) and an absence of explicit instruction in language varieties render educators ill-suited to teach to students’ full linguistic repertoires (Shelton, 2009). I wish my teachers had engaged us in critical conversations about the politics of language, race, and power because I would have better understood why I was expected to speak differently in disparate contexts. More importantly, having this knowledge would have stemmed the tide of self-doubt and blame that ensued when I dared to speak AAL (Kirkland & Jackson, 2009).

Ideally, my peers and I would have been best served by code-meshing pedagogy, which calls for “blending vernacular language and dialects of English in speaking and writing” (Young, 2014, p. 76) that were “previously considered...unmixable” (p. 81). My inner Black girl compels the Black woman I’ve become to foreground pedagogies like code-meshing in my work as a teacher educator because I need my students to realize that teaching is an inherently political act in which they are uniquely complicit (Freire, 2000; Gilyard, 1996; hooks, 1994). In a classroom that “promotes linguistic democracy,” Black girls are encouraged to “blend language and identities” (Young, Martinez, & Naviaux, 2011, p. xxiv) instead of being surveilled relentlessly when they embrace the “skin that (they) speak” (Delpit, 2002, p. xvii). Teaching for social justice requires nothing less.

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