THE RE-EDUCATION OF NEISHA-ANNE S GREEN: A CLOSE LOOK AT THE DAMAGING EFFECTS OF "A STANDARD APPROACH," THE BENEFITS OF CODE-MESHING, AND THE ROLE ALLIES PLAY IN THIS WORK

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Intro

The intro of Ms. Lauryn Hill's 1998 release of *The Miseducation of Lauryn Hill* begins: a familiar school bell rings and a teacher asks the students to please respond when he calls their name. "Kevin Childs—Here . . . Alicia Simmonds—Here… Tameka Marshall—Here." He makes it all the way to the end, "Lauryn Hill… Lauryn Hill…Lauryn Hill!" There is no response. As the intro fades and the teacher begins his lesson the beat drops and "Lost Ones" begins to play.

It's funny how money change a situation, Miscommunication leads to complication, My emancipation don't fit your equation…

The music continues, I bob my head, tapping my pencil against my mac as I think, but in the middle of my thoughts Ms. Hill, in a rhythmic and poetic flow mastered only by her, enlightens that,

You might win some but you just lost one. You might win some but you just lost one. You might win some but you just lost one. You might win some but you just lost one…

Ms. Hill borrowed her title from Carter G. Woodson's 1933 book *The Mis-education of the Negro* for obvious reasons, and I borrowed the title for this piece from them both. You see, I, like so many others, was a lost one and would have continued to be lost had things not aligned based on the choices I made and the people I met and stayed connected with along the way. There are so many other lost ones floating within and outside of the academy due to some pedagogical choices that are slow to change. If our goal as educators is to connect and educate all of the students with whom we come in contact then we need to pay closer attention to the fold. Like Ms. Hill keeps repeating in the background, "You might win some but you just lost one." As allies we can strive to reach that one.

This essay is grounded in work from the last section of my graduate thesis entitled "Not Your Average (insert stereotype here): Just Me." As you can probably tell from the title, in it I was finding clarity, but more importantly I was expressing my frustration, as I was finally able to accurately describe the struggles and limitations that I felt as a writer and international graduate student of color. There seemed to be no vocabulary that I was aware of within any of the discourse communities that I "belonged" to, especially ours in the writing center, that adequately summed up and fully described what I felt deep within my being. Because of this, I had not been able to tell anyone that I needed help, or that I was struggling with any one particular thing. No one knew that I fought for years at school to be my best academic self and still maintain a semblance of my identity. It wasn't until very near to the end of my graduate career that I let my guard down and let my emotions and honest to God feelings and frustrations flow.

Let me stop here for a minute and say that when it comes to exploring code-meshing, and the idea that language really is a resource that can encourage students to be their best selves, we all need help.

What strikes me now as I reflect on my journey as a learner is not only what I've learned and how I've gained new knowledge and skills, but, most importantly, the relationships and people who were pivotal in my many revolutions, or rather "The Re-educations of Neisha-Anne S Green." There are three very special people in my life who have helped me release my voice and have nurtured and—when necessary, challenged—my understanding. It is because of them that this essay exists in the form that it now does. What I realize now is that they, unbeknownst to me, helped me figure out how to give myself permission to just be me. They helped me give voice and ink to the words that I assumed I didn't have or that I assumed weren't good enough. This piece focuses on the road I traveled in my re-education as graduate student/ tutor/ budding professional Neisha-Anne. Follow me on this road trip of self-discovery and acceptance.

"Not Your Average (Insert Stereotype Here): Just Me"

National Conference on Peer Tutoring in Writing 2013, my co-presenter Michelle and I walked into a room full of eager onlookers. I was a graduate student

and writing center tutor and she was an undergraduate student and writing consultant. We were well read and prepared to speak on *The New Racism: Discussions of Culture and Identity in Our Writing Centers*. We delivered a well-structured argument for the socio-linguistic term code-meshing that followed the conventions of the ever fluid standard in a way that seemed to bother one of our audience members. We carefully explained that code-meshing provided "an alternative vision of language to teachers, one that offers the 'disempowered' a more egalitarian path into Standard English, a route that integrates academic English with their own dialects and that simultaneously seeks to end discrimination" (Young, *Other People's English* 56). Michelle and I figured that if we were to successfully engage the audience we should all start with some common understanding of the keywords we used to build our argument, so we created a handout defining said keywords. Lord knows that if it's one thing that educators can do is twist and distort the meaning of that which is perfectly fine. I know this now, but as a tutor flying solo for the first time without her Director, entering into this community a bit late, I was not prepared for what happened in the Q&A portion of our presentation. A well meaning writing center director who had been sitting in the audience and agreeing with our argument for code-meshing commented that our definitions were written in a very "standard" way and that there wasn't much code-meshing going on, to this my response was "not hybrid enough huh?" The audience laughed, but three years later, even though I laughed then, that menacing idea entered my thoughts and has been slow in finding its way out, even to this day. I write this piece because I'm still haunted by the idea of how my language appears to others, and as I argue for code-meshing, I am well aware that what is supposed to be liberating and validating is used to judge others. I've realized that the more my recognition of language in all of its translingual varieties as a resource (Horner et al.; Matsuda), and the political and racial paradigms attached to it grows, the more I feel mislabeled by that director who pointed out how "standard" our definitions were. Here's some quick advice: in our efforts to help, we need to beware of creating new issues or making old ones worse. Is it desperate for educators like that director to try to standardize that which oozes through the seams of standard, that which resists such conformity?

For me hybridity is both a natural and a performative personal choice. Suresh Canagarajah would also argue that it was a rhetorical choice (404) while Vershawn Ashanti Young would also remind me every time I questioned him that it is quite natural to me. But let's be honest, hybridity wasn't always an option that I had, and even after I was made aware I didn't quite know how I wanted to make use of it. I use the word "wanted" here on purpose.

> **I can't help but be repetitive here and restate that code-meshing is a choice that is as natural to me as the hair on my head, and just as versatile. Just as I have a choice in how I wear my hair that doesn't require permission, so do I have a choice in how I use my codes that too doesn't require your or anyone else's permission.**

Instead of permission, I needed to figure out for myself how to use this new resource effectively. There were a lot of decisions to be made all at once and no examples to use as references that exactly fit the vision I had in mind.

> **I had never seen a thesis like the one I wanted to write. I had never written anything academic like what I envisioned. I had to learn to trust my instincts and draw inspiration from whatever moved me.**

I entered this new relationship with code-meshing just as I was beginning to write the most high-stakes piece of writing of my academic career. To me it felt as though this piece would determine whether or not I had spent the last two years of my life in vain. In spite of the possible consequences, I allowed it to become a bold experiment. I wish I had a Fitbit back then cause I burned a lot of calories running from Carmen Hall, where I frequently met with my advisor Jessica, to the Old Gym, where the writing center and my then boss Sarah's office was. Because this was so new to me I collected advice from them both, carefully analyzing what each of them said, sometimes complaining that I wasn't being understood, but ultimately fusing bits and pieces together to create my own how-to guide. I had to make the best of what I had.

This is what I had. I had Sarah, my unofficial advisor on paper but very official advisor in real life. I also had Jessica, my official advisor, who was learning about this new tool through me as I was figuring it out.

> **I had two caucasian women helping to give rise to my dark self.**
> **Learning something new, especially when the results are as high-stakes as the thesis, can be frustrating. What I see now is that the frustration and uncertainty I felt was actually discovery.**

Jessica pushed my understanding of this new tool and questioned the way I used it. I shyly admit now that her questioning sometimes confused and upset me. When she said back then that my piece wasn't hybrid enough I was angry, maybe even defensive but I respected her

and her guidance enough to let those feelings stay inside where I compartmentalized them with the feelings that I brought back with me from NCPTW that same semester. I was already in my feelings that a stranger at the conference questioned Michelle and my definitions saying that they weren't hybrid enough—not that they weren't accurate enough.

I felt as though a part of me was being judged openly and so I made these two events one.

It took years, but today I can keep these two events separated. The director who made the comment during Q&A was forcing Michelle and me to make a choice that we, as the authors and presenters, had already decided wasn't necessary given our audience and the exact purpose of the handout. Jessica, on the other hand, was pushing me to make what I now call savvy rhetorical choices. I won't speak for her here, but in my mind even though this new thing that I was doing was also new to her, she understood that the best way to help me was to approach advising me from a rhetorical standpoint. Her job was to get me to the point where I would succeed during my oral defense.

When I wasn't with Jessica I was spending countless hours in Sarah's office lamenting and begging for prescriptions to which she often responded with "there are no prescriptions Neish." Sometimes I could tell that she wished she had more to offer yet she was patient and generous as she offered what she did have anyway. Her patience was only the beginning of what I needed and it became the first prescription of many. Sarah listened and spent more time than she was paid for with me during my time at her center and long after I left there for new and higher posts. She made sure that I made it to writing center conferences especially the ones where Young was making his rounds.

Dr. Young, who I now call Vay, is the scholar behind the sociolinguistic term code-meshing. At the time of his keynote, his ideas were beginning to send ripples through the writing center world. Any opportunity to hear him explain this new concept and its applications was not to be missed. But I had no money, and the writing center where I was working wasn't that interested in helping me get there.

People, Sarah drove me there and back in her personal car, and even took me to her family's house. As if that wasn't enough, Sarah gave me one metaphorical shove that day that shifted my thinking and boosted my confidence and commitment to this work. You see, on the drive down to New Hampshire as we talked about scholarship and questions we hoped would be answered during the conference, Sarah

encouraged and flat out told me that I was going to talk to Dr. Young. "You have something he needs to hear" she said. To which I replied "No thank you; I'm way too shy for that" I protested in vain because at the end of Dr. Young's keynote she shoved me in his direction and walked away.

As uncertain as I was about approaching Vay, I knew I had to. As I waited my turn to ask my questions floods of emotions and anxiety greater than myself, or that moment, poured out of my being. When it was finally my turn I asked my questions through tears so big I could hardly contain them. Vay was patient and despite needing to rush on to whatever was next on the conference schedule, he stood there with me at the front of the auditorium as I explained all that was wrong and why I felt hopeless in being able to figure it all out and successfully write the thesis. Jessica's persistence, Sarah's encouragement, coupled with Vay's patience and later his words etched into my signed copy of his book propelled me towards being able to say this:

Code-meshing and producing hybrid work is a rhetorical choice that comes naturally to me as a multidialectal orator and author, and despite what you assess or assume about me and my literacy capabilities, you have no idea what I battle as I write.

I struggled with this and more as a graduate student and writing center tutor:

How could I help others work on their writing when I myself was confused about the new concepts I was learning in our tutor education meetings at Lehman College, my graduate classes at the same school, and their implications for my practice both personally and professionally?

More than a mic drop occurred when I first learned about code-meshing and eventually started experimenting with it in my own writing. Here's why.

I was born in Barbados and moved to New York right before my fifteenth birthday. We moved because my father had been diagnosed with cancer and needed to be here to be close to his doctors. Even at his best, and in remission some 14 years later, my father is always sick because he has Graft Versus Host Disease (GVHD). GVHD is a complication that may occur in patients who were recipients of bone marrow or stem cell transplants. The name is self-explanatory, but put simply, the new donor cells (graft) that were put into

the body (host) as part of the cure for cancer attack the transplant recipient's body.

Imagine what it must be like to be given a cure that turns around and causes you more harm.

GVHD summed up what I felt as a learner, graduate student writer, tutor and budding professional. It continues even to this day. Think of my Bajan dialect, the native dialect of Barbados, as the supposed cancer because people say it is broken English and wrong cause sum times we does talk like dis I go to school and even in Barbados they try to cure it. I'm told that our language should be left outside of the classroom cause I sound uneducated or from the ghetto when I use it. My Bajan teachers try to cure my Bajan dialect or rather appropriate it, as though it worked when their teachers did it to them, by giving me the Queen's English and heavy doses of grammar drills and such, which act as immune-suppressants suppressing my urge to use my language. Or as Gloria Anzaldúa would say, they tried to tame this wild tongue. What happens instead is that I have good days and bad days; sometimes the immune-suppressants work but many days they don't. This worsens after the move to NY and I end up in a high school in Yonkers where neither my Bajan dialect nor my British English is up to snuff.

My teachers here in America give me another transplant that is followed by more immune-suppressants but this time in the form of Standard American English (SAE). How many times could I really spell colour wrong?

At this point, my linguistic body is racked with pain and confusion—I need a refuge from all that is going on. It takes some time, but I realize that if I am to survive this I need some friends, some support. When my dad was in the hospital he had all kinds of therapists and doctors. Me however, all I had were the three African-American girls who tried to be my friend even though they also didn't understand my spoken Bajan dialect. They made fun of me too.

So I tried the one language that I was forced to take to make me better this time at least that's what my teachers said I try SAE. But this doesn't fly either.

Don't get me wrong, I'm not saying that SAE didn't work for me sometimes cause it did. I did well enough in class for Ms. Rubin to call on me every day because she knew that I had something to say. It worked enough cause I scored a 98 on the English Regents test, but it was beyond hard achieving these things in a new

country while rapidly losing my sense of self and my Bajan heritage.

SAE had its limitations outside of the classroom so my new friends started pumping my body with their own immune-suppressants, they gave me Black English Vernacular. Let's take count Bajan, Her Majesty's English, Standard American English and Black English Vernacular that's four. Some of you might be wondering well what's the big deal? The big deal is that I was continually being forced to switch back and forth from one code to another. In Barbados, I knew when and how to switch back and forth between two codes; I was given no choice. But here in America, this two-step became more difficult every time I was forced to take a new code. Not only was it difficult from an academic standpoint, it was also difficult from a social perspective, as well as a personal one.

You see, each new code demanded a different persona, and it became difficult to be Neisha-Anne.

In his on-going "Argument Against Code-Switching" Young partly grounds his stance by explaining how W. E. B. Du Bois's double consciousness and language intersect ("Nah We Straight" 49–52; "Other People's English" 55–65). Du Bois opined that "the Negro is a sort of seventh son, born with a veil, and gifted with second-sight in this American world—a world which yields him no true self-consciousness, but only lets him see himself through the revelation of the other world" (9). It's a "peculiar sensation" he says, "this double-consciousness, this sense of always looking at one's self through the eyes of others, of measuring one's soul by the tape of a world that looks on in amused contempt and pity" (Du Bois 9). He further adds that "One feels his two-ness—an American, a Negro; two souls, two thoughts, two unreconciled strivings; two warring ideals in one dark body whose dogged strength alone keeps it from being torn asunder" (Du Bois 9). This is the same thing that Geneva Smitherman refers to as "linguistic push-pull." I offer their definitions but I also attempt to add another layer of complexity. For me, as a black international student who has completed high school, a B.A. and a M.A. here in America, the idea of double consciousness feels more like a triple consciousness.

The two-ness that Du Bois referred to feels more like a three-ness; three souls, three thoughts, three unreconciled strivings; three warring ideals in my one dark body. Being at war with one's selves is not ideal.

I first had to let the peace talks begin to even realize that I was at war with my selves. These peace talks became a coping strategy and a regular part of my

writing process. These peace talks became possible as a result of my experiences and the influence of those who experienced them with me, but ultimately I had to do the doing. With support and encouragement I chose to go to school and pursue multiple degrees. I chose to work in the writing center. I chose to fight to go to conferences even though there weren't many people there who looked like me. I chose to surround myself with allies who would push me and encourage me to walk up to scholars like Vay and say "I have a love/ hate relationship with you. I love the stuff that you're saying, but I hate the fact that I don't get it all and you ain't around to explain it to me." It is only because of these choices that I met Vay, began volunteering in the writing center and kept in touch with Jessica and continued growing my village of like-minded allies, who have guided me even when they themselves weren't sure. It is only because I built these relationships and kept them going via email, phone call, texts and the frequent chat in an office, and also because I read and read and kept reading all the scholarship that I could find that enabled me to now be capable of describing what keeps me from being torn asunder. What sometimes settles the three-warring ideals in my dark body. I found my strategy! But the story doesn't end here, what about the "others"—you know, the students who look like me, or weren't born here like me, or the ones who were born here but hell, for all purposes, coulda been born anywhere cause they ain't guaranteed much of anything. You know all the students I'm talkin bout, the ones with the marginalized languages who weren't encouraged to make similar choices to the ones I've made and don't have people in their corners making things happen. The answer for me came late in my academic career and it came at a time when I was the only graduate student in my program even remotely interested in writing center work. The idea of code-meshing came at a time when I hadn't yet given myself permission to explore and to be me because I was too busy figuring out what it meant and how to apply it so that when I got to class and was pushed beyond my limits by my professor and told by my classmates, who also spoke marginalized registers of English, that I was promoting ghetto language that I had some chance of waking up from the knock out. That answer is code-meshing, a discovery I was able to reach with help from those who I once saw as mentors, but see clearly now as my allies.

> **I have worked at, and resigned from positions where I didn't receive similar encouragement from supervisors who were either too privileged to care or too comfortable with their privilege to be brave**

enough to understand me and this movement.

Code-meshing allows me, as Young professes, to be able to self-consciously and un-self-consciously blend my own "accent, dialect, and linguistic patterns as they are influenced by a host of folks, environments, and media, including momma, family, school, community, peer groups, reading material, academic study, whatever" ("Keep Code-meshing" 140). Code meshing says *girl ain't shit wrong wid you.*

Like Janelle Monae and Wondaland let me explain what the hell I'm talmbout and why I needed their help. What I'm talmbout is chronic linguistic graft vs host disease. Remember the disease I told you about when I referenced my dad? You remember? The one he got cause of all the cancer treatment? Well all of the immune-suppressants that I was forced to take to cure all of my bad languages have made me sick.

> **This is me when I don't code-mesh. Cue the drum corps!**

1. Vision changes: These vision changes are characterized by extreme triple consciousness. This causes me to see what I think is myself through my own eyes while simultaneously forcing me to see myself through others' eyes. But this is where it gets tricky because these vision changes are further complicated because there's the Bajan girl, the British English girl, the SAE girl turned young professional, and the BEV sista. Ya'll ain't never seen a cat fight like this.

It also causes me to wonder who I could be and what I would sound and write like without all of these interferences and cat fights.

These vision changes also include blurry or cloudy vision that sometimes causes a depleted sense of nationalism and pride. You see, I'm not fully accepted here but I've been here in America for so long that I'm no longer Bajan enough either.

2. Dry mouth brought on by anxiety: Persons experiencing dry mouth often keep their mouths shut. I do it sometimes because when I open my mouth I am not always sure which voice or accent will come flying out. Sometimes I can't trust that the BEV sista and the Bajan girl won't join forces cause them two are a handful and before I know it all types of sassy ish would be flying out. The "professional" side of me keeps her mouth shut sometimes cause she don't have tenure and she work in a writing center.

3. Fatigue, muscle weakness, and chronic pain: Brought on because I am always fighting, da fight is real. I battle my codes when I write and my codes battle with me when I interview for your jobs. Would you hire me to work in your writing center if you saw and heard this first hand?

And then I battle some of you who think you know what's best of me, and students like me. Please stop trying to protect me cause my momma's been prepping me for years long. See, I've always got one hand up fighting for what I believe to be right and the other hand pushed straight out, stiff arm pose, fighting and pushing back everyone else's ideas of who they think I should be or how I should act as a young black professional woman who has thrown herself into this debate . . .

. . . let me be honest, the debate along with its conflicting views leaves me weak. Other black women tell me to watch my mouth and my actions cause not only am I a woman, I am also a black woman. Like I missed the mirror everyday or the micro-agressions everywhere. Be professional (read white) so that you'll be taken seriously.

On top uh all that BS, apparently I get jobs not only cause I'm qualified, I get jobs at "diverse" institutions cause I'm black and I can police and herd the other blacks and minorities and I get them at predominantly white institutions because they want to be more diverse and I happen to be good at my job . . . what happened to being inclusive?

I am thinking of adding certified angry black woman/indentured servant experienced in policing and herding others and increasing diversity to my CV.

4. Anxiety: This is a new symptom that I recently developed. Given its nature, its timing, and that way in which is metastasized, it is the one I presently struggle with the most. I'm talm bout employee assistance program used, resignation letter written and submitted only to have my then supervisor further prove how unworthy that place was of my time and talent cause he stopped speaking to me and responding to work emails, I ain't neva going back cause ain't nobody got time for that, type of anxiety.

5. Shortness of breath: This occurs as a result of my always having to justify my belief in linguistic respect and the proper use of everyone's right to their own language. But the struggle is as long as it is hard, so until things change I will never catch my breath.

As I was thinking through this paper I shared the idea of LGVHD with someone who then asked me "so how do you cure this disease?" My response was, well I don't know, I haven't figured it out yet. I haven't asked Vay about this yet but in response to this I'd bet that he would ask "Neisha, why do you need a cure?" and Sarah would chime in with, "Neish you know this stuff!!" She's right, I do know this stuff, and Vay would be right too. I don't need a cure because code-meshing allows me the flexibility to work with what I have and not be wrong cause without code-meshing I'm Drake and I'm stuck on repeat:

I just wanna be, I just wanna be successful.
I just wanna be, I just wanna be successful.

LGVHD is chronic and can't be cured, there are ways however to cope with it and prevent it. Because of code-meshing my goals have changed. As a student in Barbados, the two-ness Du Bois referred to ruled and I knew how to perform. My goal as a younger student in Barbados was to suppress my native habits and traits while in the presence of teachers, parents, my friends' parents and older family members. When I moved to America my goal shifted to suppressing the three-ness; especially "the American Negro" and the "Bajan" and to instead strive to be a better and truer "American" self. My goal now is to continue the peace talks and blend all of my selves into one rhetorically savvy being. No more trippin on a two step ya'll, I've moved on to something that looks more like chi-town steppin...but with more hips and a stronger bass line.

Elbow*ed* Out

Peter Elbow argues that the dialect we grow up speaking influences our academic and professional writing. I'd like to take it a step further and stand firmly when I say that there was and will always be more than some influencing going on. Without code-meshing, check-ins with my village, and the peace talks, there is some bullying going on in my academic, professional and social selves that seeps into my speech and writing.

My goal now as a more learned student is to continue merging my selves, even the so-called "bad," into the best most true self that I can be.

I could have avoided LGVHD. I could have avoided some of these struggles.
But as a younger student everyone kept trying to change me, shape me into a "newer, better" version of myself by policing and limiting my use of my codes and pushing agendas that focused on a standard that we know doesn't exist in the way that is usually professed.

Differently, in my practice I seek to help students, if they'd like me to, to merge their-selves and languages so that all live and perform together in harmony. To help me do this I have taken the time to get to know the student populations at the schools where I have worked, figuring out ways to relate to them.
When I do this I'm particularly looking for the distinct characteristics of their language varieties focusing on not only the differences, but most importantly the

similarities. Because I've done this I can sometimes recognize the difference between honest grammar errors and savvy rhetoric. If it's a grammar mistake, we talk about grammar. If it's rhetoric we talk about rhetorical choices—their possibilities, limitations, and their implications.

> **Notice that what I don't do is see difference and think error, I just see difference and think difference (Krall-Lanoue).**

I talk to the student about audience and how some people might view their writing and misjudge their capabilities and label them as dumb or having a "cognitive deficit." I use the language "as a reader this is what I see" "some readers may interpret this as . . . " "you as the author have choices." Then and only then—after I've informed the student—do I say "well what do you want to do?" I let them choose. Never once am I forcing any agendas.

> **Never once do I say that their codes are only useful in the brainstorming portion of an essay and then must be erased for fear of judgment. Never once are their codes and their use seen as a crutch or deficit. My approach is very ally centered.**

Elbow was absolutely right when he said that some students will not be interested in code-meshing. However, I believe that will only be a temporary infliction for some until they are supported as I was by people who were brave enough to do so without this irrational fear and need that I often hear some educators echo. You've heard it too, or perhaps you've said that you have to protect minority students. What you don't know is that our parents have already prepared us for the world's judgment in ways that most people would never understand well before we are even old enough to wait for the school bus alone. For the students who already chose to be brave, I never tell them what the final product has to look like or what it should sound like. It's their work, with their ideas and their voices. Hybridity is sometimes a choice and sometimes a nonchoice, when it just comes pouring out and I see it as my job to foster learning and to help guide students so that they make educated choices that are suitable for them the way my village made it possible for me. I am also honest about my own struggles. This honesty creates the space for us all to be vulnerable which in turn produces more authentic writing. I have undoubtedly had a much easier time writing for my allies, and as I write this right now with "conventional readers" in the back of my mind I have no problem getting my thoughts onto the page because I know that regardless of the outcome my allies will support me.

In spite of the anticipated hesitance from some, Elbow also said in his *Vernacular Eloquence* that "Young and Canagarajah are right to pursue the value and importance of what might be called 'in your face' code-meshing, but writers at this very cultural moment will have a much easier time writing for conventional readers . . . if they learn how to 'fix' the few features of their vernacular that set off error alarms" (332). As the only African-American female, tenured or otherwise, in the English department at an institution where I worked once said,

> **"I can read context clues," and so when I read that and I see "cultural moment" I feel racial tension, and when I see "conventional readers" I see gate-keepers and people who aren't as brown as me. I also see brown people who are too caught up in a fake sense of elitism to realize the harm they are perpetuating.**

All that between the lines reading leads me to questions and had I been sitting in a coffee shop chatting it up with Elbow right now, or happened to sit on the same panel with him at C's in 2015 thanks to Jessica, I'd turn to my left and say

> **"Peter, am I right in my understanding of your argument, that you would rather writers practice 'invisible' or 'under the radar' code meshing?"**

And I'd then resist the urge to let triple-consciousness and schizophrenia take over and follow my question with a finger snap, a head roll, a flick of my imaginary braids and a very rhythmic

> **"Hold tight, hold tight! Let's back this *all* the way up"—I'm categorizing this "advice" in my rolodex where I politely and hastily compartmentalize those who are afraid to empower students with strategies and tools for code-meshing, because they want to "protect us" or rather their own privilege, under the category of *ain't nobody got time for that.***

I instead offer this clap-back, who exactly would have a much easier time, the marginalized writer or the already privileged, sorry "conventional," audience? You can't say that code-meshing is right but you ain't ready for it yet cause this ain't the right cultural moment. Sorry, my mom would tell me I'm wrong cause I shouldn't say that you can't, my bad. You can say it, but you'd be dead wrong.

> **When will the right cultural moment for marginalized people be?**
> **When will it not be okay to have lost one?**

It wasn't right back in '74 when those on the right side of C's gave us SRTOL cause then NCTE pickled

it by adding vinegar in an attempt to preserve their own privilege by using words like "deal" implying that dialect is an impediment, it wasn't right when ya'll distorted the original meaning of code-switching and instead of blending codes ya'll made them "equal but separate," it most certainly wasn't right back in '96 down in Oakland, and it still wasn't right back in '09 when President Obama said "Nah, we straight." I already know that many of you out of protection for your own privilege will disagree with me, but I have to be honest; right now in my thinking I need to approach the idea of under the radar code meshing with extreme caution like I would certain situations cause we can't figure out whose lives matter. But let me quickly check myself and return instead to the panel at C's in 2015 to what I actually said,

> Peter, the way I see it, if part of the purpose of code-meshing, as Young puts it, is to present "an alternative vision of language to teachers, one that offers the 'disempowered' a more egalitarian path into Standard English, a route that integrates academic English with their own dialects and that simultaneously seeks to end discrimination," then if we instruct students to use their vernaculars only for free writing or brainstorming aren't we still upholding that some languages are equal but separate? If I tell them to code-mesh only with some of the words in their vocabulary, the words I know are right but others will see as wrong, am I not upholding linguistic racism still? Aren't we still saying to them that only some parts of them have merit?—especially if the rationale is that they should do it so other's don't think that they're wrong or so that they aren't judged? Doing that unfairly places the responsibility that educators should carry directly onto students. I thought the plan was to protect them? What I suggest instead is that students made aware of the warring ideals, the two-ness or three-ness. They have to be made aware that they have linguistic choices and the freedom to make those choices. They might as well be educated so that they can make the best choices for themselves because, what I am positive about is that, regardless of how you try to shield them by pushing for under the radar code meshing they will in fact be judged any damn way and if we keep waiting for the 'right' time ya'll will never be ready.

I was blessed enough to have mentors who knew that the right time was and will always be right now. I've been doing my "meta" work in an effort to make the shift from full time student to full time student/educator. I realize that with this shift I must also be aware that I am a mentor myself. Those are the responsibilities that I carry with me every time I enter the classroom. As the assistant director of the writing center at a small rural predominantly white liberal arts college, this responsibility was even greater because it is not unusual for me to be the only person of color in the room. I was sometimes blessed to have a student of color in my class and when I did I felt that undeniable pressure to show them what is possible.

Recently I co-taught the tutor-training seminar class with the director of the writing center. In my last semester there, as I stood in front of what was supposed to be the most diverse class to date, I realized that I was still donning the darkest shade of brown. This was the weight that I carried with me to my lesson plan "code-switching? code-meshing? . . . what's up with that?" to prep the class for a special visit from Vay. As I second guessed my lesson plan I called the same writing center coordinator Sarah and lamented that I wasn't fond of being the only black woman in the room, but I was even less fond of being the only black woman in the room who then also had to be the one standing in front of the class "preaching" about code-meshing.
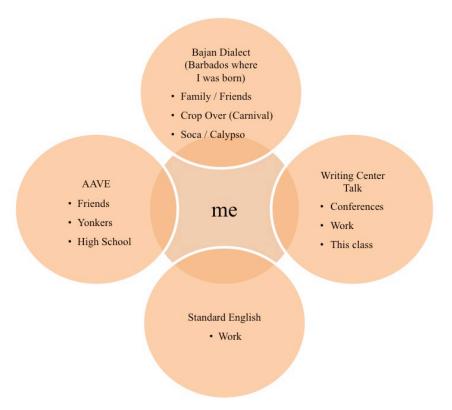
I had this vision of somehow involuntarily channeling Fannie Lou Hamer and Bishop T. D. Jakes because I truly was "sick and tired of being sick and tired" and out of breath from being passionate about the word so much so that I was desperate for a change.

Omi Osun Joni Jones, Associate Professor at NYU, offers her reflection on what it means to be an ally. In her reflection she gives "6 rules for Allies." Rule number 2, "Be loud and crazy so black folks don't have to be . . . allies step up, they do the work that has left others weary and depleted". In this very moment I needed an ally but only had a co-teacher. Nonetheless, by the end of my conversation with a true ally I had a plan. Here's what I did.

I began my lesson by telling my students that never once during the class would I ask them to agree with Vay's argument. What I asked instead was that they understand it. With that said I moved directly into the first activity for the day. I gave all sixteen of my students a large sheet of paper and a marker and walked them through creating concept-maps. I asked them to draw a circle in them middle of the paper and write the word 'me' in it. I then asked them to create branches that stemmed from the middle that represented the discourse communities that they belonged to. Lastly I asked them to create one more set of branches that would explain the significance of their

discourse communities to who they are as individuals. I modeled this for them on the whiteboard. Mine looked something like this:

```
                    ┌─────────────────┐
                    │  Bajan Dialect  │
                    │ (Barbados where │
                    │  I was born)    │
                    │ • Family/Friends│
                    │ • Crop Over     │
                    │   (Carnival)    │
                    │ • Soca/Calypso  │
    ┌──────────┐    └─────────────────┘   ┌──────────────┐
    │   AAVE   │          ┌────┐           │ Writing Center│
    │ • Friends│          │ me │           │    Talk      │
    │ • Yonkers│          └────┘           │ • Conferences│
    │ • High   │                          │ • Work       │
    │   School │    ┌─────────────────┐   │ • This class │
    └──────────┘    │ Standard English│   └──────────────┘
                    │    • Work       │
                    └─────────────────┘
```

As the students posted their concept maps around the classroom I asked them to take a tour to learn about each other and what made us all unique. This prompted a very spirited discussion as they admired each other. What I did next shocked them, but it was necessary. I walked around the room and randomly started drawing huge Xs on their discourse community branches one by one. In response to their shocked faces, I then asked the students to join in and randomly do the same to someone else's map. Their reactions were priceless. Shock, confusion and maybe even slight anger. When we came back together as a class I asked "What happened just now? What did I do? What did I ask you to do?" There was some silence but their response was collective. They said, "You crossed out parts of our identities." My next question was " . . . and what does that tell us about the connection between language and identity?" We quickly concluded that language and identity are directly connected and rather intertwined.

> **Now you tell me which one of your codes I can cross out.**

An Ally's Promise

In the prelude for the piece I invited you to join me on an exploration of the re-education of Neisha-Anne Green. This re-education was made possible in part by three people whose support was crucial during my graduate education. Since graduation each one of my mentors has continued to play a unique role in my life, providing help and encouragement, but also at times a much needed "no." As each relationship matured, and I along with them, I began to identify my allies' individual strengths and the roles that they play as part of my village. These relationships all started in different ways, but what is common is that they moved away from the academy-generated roles towards mentor-mentee relationships and ultimately towards the role of ally. These shifts began when our relationships became equally beneficial in an obvious way and I was able to make the shift to being a thinking partner, no longer were they just giving to me, but I found ways to reciprocate the time, patience and energy they had so generously given me. Just as they have committed to helping me I have also committed myself, and learned how to support them in what little way I could. I have become an unofficial RA, auntie to their little ones and friend. I could go on forever but

I'd much rather show you how these relationships have evolved.

> **Sarah**—supervisor - tutor - mentor - friend - thinking partner and co-presenter - really good friends - ally
>
> **Jessica**—professor - mentor - thesis adviser - friend - thinking partner - ally
>
> **Vay**—scholar stranger who answered my questions - thesis adviser - mentor - friend - thinking partner - ally

These relationships have worked and continued because in their roles as my mentors they first chose to help me and then as our relationships matured I then chose to figure out how to support them as well.

As I strive to be a good ally to my village, my students and the tutors in the writing center, I am reminded of the poem "An Ally's Promise" by Anthony J. D'Angelo. This poem was originally meant to support and encourage the LGBTQ community in their fight. One of the things that I have learned along the way is that

> **we are better off, despite of our differences, when we are united.**

D' Angelo says it beautifully, so I'll shut up for now and let him shine.

I Believe

I believe success is the freedom to be yourself.
I believe nobody is wrong; they are only different.
I believe your circumstances don't define you, rather they reveal you.
I believe without a sense of caring, there can be no sense of community.
I believe our minds are like parachutes; they only work if they are open.
I believe we only live once, but if we live it right, one time is all well need.
I believe we must first get along with ourselves before we can get along with others.

I Will

I will seek to understand you.
I will label bottles not people.
I will grow antennas not horns.
I will see the diversity of our commonality.
I will see the commonality of our diversity.
I will get to know who you are rather than what you are.
I will transcend political correctness and strive for human righteousness.

I Challenge You

I challenge you to honor who you are.
I challenge you to enjoy your life rather than endure it.
I challenge you to create the status quo rather than merely accept it.
I challenge you to live in your imagination more than your memory.
I challenge you to live your life as a revolution and not just a process of evolution.
I challenge you to ignore other peoples' ignorance so that you may discover your own wisdom.

I Promise You

I promise to do my part.
I promise to stand beside you.
I promise to interrupt the world when its thinking becomes ignorant.
I promise to believe in you, even when you have lost faith in yourself.

I Am Here For You.

While looking in-depth at these relationships and writing about the work that I have been able to achieve I pause in my excitement as I realize the work that is yet to be done. We have become allies partly because we are not yet at the end of our journey towards seeing language truly become a resource, but I am confident that until our emancipation fully fits the equation of the academy my allies will be here for me, and "I Am Here For You."

Finally, I would like to thank the ever fleek Vay. Vay, you provided the missing piece to my thinking as I was originally working through the ideas for my graduate thesis and have been an important presence ever since. Thank you for continually being invested in me.

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