

Toni Morrison pointed out that making black literature was not just a matter of dropping the "g's" but rather the linguistic embodying of particular values. Some of her prose contains gaps — actual spaces between words — which invite reader participation in much the same way a black preacher's pauses allow his congregation to respond. Increasingly, writers use the call/response patterns so central to the vernacular and have invented what Morrison calls "unorthodox novelistic techniques" such as the chorus to elicit group participation.

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Morgan 9

Official Language, Unofficial Reality: Acquiring Bilingual/
Bicultural Fluency in a Segregated Southern Community

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Ocala, Florida, is chiefly known today as horse-breeding territory. Numerous horse farms dot the landscape, fixtures of the influx of wealthy retirees, foreign investors, and other real estate speculators in the last twenty-five years. Taking a longer view, however, there is a rich and powerful African legacy in Ocala, located in the north-central region of the Florida peninsula. The very name Ocala is, quite possibly, from the Bantu family of languages in Africa, according to Winifred Kellersberger Vass in her definitive work, *The Bantu Heritage of the United States*. In the nearby St. Augustine area, meanwhile, recent archeological digs have unearthed Fort Mose, the first African settlement in the United States, established in 1738.

One of the most well-known historical aspects of Florida is the relationship between the Seminole Indians and African slaves who fled from Georgia and South Carolina and escaped into Seminole territory. The "mélange" of these two peoples, along with the Spaniards' liberal attitudes toward slaves (Florida was a Spanish colony until 1819), helped to create numerous maroon slave societies around the state. The escaped African slaves' legacy of resistance in turn attracted freed men and women (such as my maternal great-grandmother and her husband and family) to the state after Emancipation.

The Ocala area boasts a particularly impressive history of African-American communities and families. As African Americans in the area received the news of Emancipation, they bought land, established churches,

businesses, and private schools (such as the Fessenden and Howard Academies), and organized women's and men's philanthropic clubs. As late as the 1920s, Blacks owned nearly all of the businesses in Ocala's downtown, including The Metropolitan Negro Bank, a cotton gin (half of whose employees were Black and the other half white), a hotel for Negroes, and the boardinghouse known as St. George Hotel.

Ocala's Black community also shared a belief in community and public service, an attitude that grew out of its strong Christian tradition. From 1868 to 1870, Marion County, where Ocala is located, was served by a Black sheriff. Between 1871 and 1879, seven Black men from the Ocala area served in Florida's House of Representatives in Tallahassee. Dr. Carrie Mitchell Hampton, born in Ocala in 1855, is said to be the first woman medical doctor in Florida. In addition to her medical responsibilities, Dr. Hampton owned and operated a drug store on West Broadway in Ocala, which was used by the town's Black people in the segregated city. Another of these outstanding "early pioneers" was Mrs. Delia J. Brown. The first woman mortician in Florida, she completed her training at the Renouard Training School for Embalmers in Harlem, New York, in 1921 and returned to Ocala and established a business.

OCALA AND MY WORLD

This was the tradition into which I was born, and it is where I learned about myself, my community, and my language. I remember, for example, when Mrs. Brown asked my mother to allow my sisters and me to sing in a radio advertisement for her funeral home. To my knowledge, she was the first Black person "bold" enough to demand equal air time from the Ocala radio station. We weren't allowed to come to the station to sing live; the broadcast was done from the parlor of her funeral home.

One of the main concerns of Ocala's Black community was the education of all Black children, with a particular emphasis on community service. Our teachers, pastors, parents, Sunday school leaders, and others advocated the higher purpose *d'être engagée* — to be engaged. If one was "smart," they said, one was obliged to do something with his or her life.

And, in fact, we could see this taking place all around us. People were not just teachers or doctors or pastors; they were also involved in institution-building and economic development. They owned their own homes, businesses, professional services, land and farms. Their own access to the broader market economy was of paramount importance. Many times I heard my father say, "A man ain't got nothing if he ain't got no land of his own, no matter what else he got."

It was most important to be morally upright, which meant being a member — a committed member — of a church. It was not enough to just attend; one had to be involved. When we children reached the age of fifteen or sixteen, we were expected to take our places as teachers of the younger ones during Sunday school classes. This practice extended the learning activities beyond the academic classrooms at school and fed into the formal process that was synonymous with education. As part of this formal process, for Christmas and Easter programs we had to perform speeches, skits, and other presentations for our parents and other community members. These were the "children's days," and all attention was focused on us. I couldn't "mess up" because I would be "shaming" everybody (on both sides of my family) back to my great-grandparents, whose names are engraved on the cornerstone of the Calvary Baptist Church in the Santos area of Ocala.

"Messing up" did not just refer to missing or forgetting lines. It particularly meant "code-switching" to Black English grammar and/or using Black English enunciations — leaving the *g* off an *-ing* word, for example, or putting stress on part of a word where there was none in Standard English. The Sunday school teacher or one of the church mothers would scold you first; then you could count on an older cousin, sister or brother, or your parents to get you when you returned home. What were you going to school for, they'd say, if you couldn't remember how you were supposed to speak in front of an audience, that is, to use your "public voice"? We were taught specifically that we had a public and a private face, and different languages through which the two distinct personas could be animated. These languages were in a dialogic relationship with each other,

and our responsibility was to understand and master this linguistic paradigm rather than to perceive the languages as in conflict with each other.

I learned very early, in the home, that there was a place for both languages in our communal experience. My mother taught me the beauty of both Standard and Black English by reading to me when I was young, first the classic fairy tales, then later Dickens and English and American poets. I especially liked her to read the Sunday funnies aloud; sometimes she would ad lib on the characters' dialogue using the Black vernacular. My mother was, and remains, a true storyteller, with a vast repertoire. I always knew what kind of story she was about to tell by the language she slipped into. European tales, such as "East of the Sun and North of the Wind" or the legends of Thor or Zeus, were read or told in Standard English. Local folktales, lore, and African-American animal tales were told in the Black vernacular.

One of my aunts instructed me further, by her example, in the process of code-switching. I could always tell to whom she was speaking on the telephone by her use of language. She had a "formal" Standard English voice and an "informal" Black English voice. She made the distinctions, first of all, in how she identified herself. If she were speaking to someone from the family or a close friend, she would say, "this Sustah," or "yeah," or "no, I ain't." If she were "speaking proper," as we called it, that meant she was talking to either an older or professional person from the Black community or to a white person. At those times, she was "Mamie Lee" or "Miz Boyd," and the responses were always, "yes," "no, I am not," or "no, it isn't." The verb *to be* was used according to Standard English grammatical rules.

EDUCATION AND SCHOOL

School was where language training was routinized. Education was also a formal affair at our local elementary and senior high schools. Between 1950 and 1962, when my brothers and sisters and I attended Belleview-Santos Elementary and High School, it was an all-Black, segregated public school. Instruction extended beyond mere academics to include dress,

behavior, and comportment. The educators, who continuously modeled behavior in addition to mentoring us, were concerned with producing young people who would continue in a tradition of academic excellence, moral uprightness, and social commitment. They made it clear that education was not just an end in itself but that we also had an obligation and responsibility to our parents, our community, and our race.

During special events planned by the faculty, we learned even more about responsibility by actually assuming roles of leadership. One of these events was Student Government Week, when students were in charge of the campus. The principal and each of the teachers selected a student from the high school to substitute for them during this week. This was a true honor, for it reflected the teachers' faith and belief in their students. I remember being chosen in different years to teach junior and senior English classes, history classes, and math classes. The faculty never intruded during the week and we never failed them. The students we taught also never questioned our authority. These roles required "formal" behavior and only Standard English could be used. Perhaps it was due to our ability to move so easily between the languages that we were not challenged by our classmates, friends, and younger sisters and brothers.

English classes were designed to teach Standard English. I remember that we devoted the entire first semester of tenth grade to a review of English grammar, which the teacher felt we had not yet mastered. Our reading assignments included the works of Shakespeare, *Beowulf*, *The Canterbury Tales*, and *A Tale of Two Cities*. We also read American classics, which included African-American greats such as Richard Wright, Langston Hughes, Frederick Douglass, and Paul Laurence Dunbar. While I didn't think it remarkable at the time, I now find it fascinating that one of my most brilliant and articulate English teachers read Paul Laurence Dunbar's dialect poetry with a power and facility that I have not witnessed before or since. She could also bring an audience to its feet with her rendering of Edgar Allan Poe's "Annabel Lee" or Shakespeare's sonnet number twenty-nine: "When in disgrace with fortune and men's eyes / I all alone beweep my outcast state." Even those with only minimal education could

sense and understand the import of an “outcast state” and its relevance to them. To me, this teacher was magic, and I wanted to be able, one day, to articulate with the artistry she possessed.

While our teachers and community leaders constantly reminded us that our public selves had to be projected in Standard English, I remember one incident where this was not so easily negotiated. I was a cheerleader for our high school football team, and we cheerleaders prided ourselves on the originality of our cheers. One of our favorites was, “Our boys gon’ shine ta nite, our boys gon’ shine, when the sun goes down and the moon comes up, our boys gon’ shine.” After one of our home games, my English teacher confronted me about my use of improper grammar in the cheer “gon’ shine.” We were, after all, in the public spotlight, she said, and we needed to put our best foot forward. I explained to her that I knew the grammar was “unofficial” but that “Our boys are going to shine tonight” would throw off the beat and just wouldn’t work. That explanation didn’t work, however, and we abandoned the cheer. Afterwards, she continued to monitor our on-field performances to make sure we didn’t cross our languages and negatively reflect on our school and our teachers.

There were also specific times when the community reveled in the public use of Black English. One of these was during the celebration of the twentieth of May, the date when people in the Ocala area heard the news of the Emancipation Proclamation. The school was closed, and teachers, parents, ministers, deacons, and children gathered at the communal picnic grounds for baseball games, field races, card-playing, and barbecue. For such an occasion, the formal workday roles could be set aside, and the rhythmic ebb and flow of Black English dialect could be heard everywhere.

Many years later, I would become a scholar and professor of the Harlem Renaissance, that flowering of African-American literature and art in the 1920s and 1930s. I came to read the works of W. E. B. Du Bois, James Weldon Johnson, Alain Locke, and other key architects of the Renaissance who recognized that language cannot be separated from issues of power — and that language could be seized to create a “new” Negro. I came to read

authors such as Zora Neale Hurston and Arna Bontemps, who helped shape the literary generations that followed: Toni Morrison, Gloria Naylor, Alice Walker, Toni Cade Bambara, to name a few. I studied the work of theorists such as Michel Foucault, who has observed the power of language to categorize, distribute, and manipulate those perceived as different from the majority. But in retrospect, much of this was not new. It was merely a continuation for me. Indeed, in Ocala, Florida, I learned my first — and most lasting — lessons about language, power, and identity.