Maya Pindyck

White Abjections: Language and Feeling in the Urban English Classroom

This provocation explores the abjective e/affects of white ideology manifested as school language in the United States. Through recursive engagement and symbolic play with her memory of watching a student eat toilet paper during a College Essay Writing class, the author challenges the institutional grammars that shape a collective sense of “school.” Through a critical analysis of the shared “public transcript” (Scott, 1990) of many urban schools, the author considers the ways in which students and teachers get summoned into particular social existences in relation to whiteness as the dominant culture of power. She uses both written and visual languages to offer poetry as a site of theory towards reinscribing the relationship between language, feeling, and address in the urban English classroom and inciting new, socially just structures of learning. The author’s sketches of this memory drawn with ink on toilet paper intervene throughout the article, giving her provocation an added dimensionality.

“... decolonization is not only a political and military process but also an imaginative one—an enunciation of new possibilities and collectives, new names and identities, new structures of thought and feeling.”

—Jahan Ramazani

*The term provocauteur has its origin in then-NCTE President Sandy Hayes’s welcome to the CEE 2013 Summer Conference, during which she shared her wish that she could swap the “troublemaker” label she had been given for her name badge at the International Society for Technology in Education conference the month before with then-NCTE Executive Director Kent Williamson’s, who was fittingly labeled “provocateur.” We can think of no better inspiration than Kent for this section.
Keisha (a pseudonym) sits on a desk in the back row, unraveling her meal. She tears off each square and pushes it into her mouth. The toilet paper roll starts to shrink as the minutes pass. I can barely stand it. “Keisha, please stop. It’s making me sick.” Clarice raises her hand, excited to school me on Keisha’s behavior: “Oh, Ms. P., it’s a condition some people have—it was on the Tyra Banks show!” A few students murmur in agreement. Keisha grins. “Sorry, Miss. I won’t make you look.” She turns her enormous body to face the windows. Now we share the same view: telephone wires, a gray sky, the rooftops of housing projects. Only my view includes Keisha’s back as she continues to eat this ass-kissing promise, this terrible, white (sc)roll. My stomach churns inside my bony frame.

Keisha eating toilet paper in the back of College Essay Writing class seven years ago surfaces in my memory as a grotesque idiosyncrasy, or an unusual condition that she apparently shares with some of the men and women on the Tyra Banks show. Meanwhile, such television shows condition those who watch them to accept conditions like Keisha’s as normal abnormalities; in other words, we shouldn’t be too surprised that some people eat weird shit. It feels (un)easy to observe these anomalies from a distance. However, upon a subsequent re-membering that involves my consciously projected meaning onto this memory, my own white frame that cannot visually contain Keisha at this stomach-wrenching moment frames me as a part of her condition. What makes me a recognizable English teacher remains unnamed in the face of Keisha’s condition. Similarly, “urban” (code for poor, minority [Popkewitz, 1998]) schools, many of which espouse “zero-tolerance” policies for any infraction to a school rule, function as “unwaved flags,” or enhabitated routines (Billig, 2005, p. 42), that generally go unrecognized in their identity-productions. Such policies, incompatible with a “Restorative English Education” (Winn, 2015) that explicitly addresses racial injustices, have come to constitute an urban school norm. In this sense, the school validates my inability to tolerate Keisha’s disruption to my everyday well-being as an English teacher reproduced by and reproducing school ideology. Inevitably, I am what I have become at this moment: trained teacher who pleads for her student to stop realizing (making real) an intolerable horror that re-frames the classroom as an abjective, rather than objective, site of learning.

**Subject Matters**

As I write this, I wonder whether Keisha ever “overcame” her “condition.” I also wonder why this disturbing memory keeps bubbling up in relation to my obsessive questions about language and feeling in the urban English
classrooms at which I have taught. The social injustice that hides behind the seemingly innocuous reproduction of what is commonly called “Standard English” emerges as a double-edged pencil: the simultaneous force-feeding of institutionalized, standardizing language and the unequal, racially skewed distribution of discipline to student mouths. As an effective English teacher—a teacher who efficiently prepares her students to score well on standardized tests, to improve their usage of Standard English, and to develop literacy skills based on quantitative assessments—at a Title 1 high school in one of Brooklyn’s poorest and blackest neighborhoods, I am implicated in this injustice through my own repeated performances of the ideological norms of the institution that both produces and measures my English teacher effectiveness by the accountable whiteness that my students read, write, speak, and perform on insidiously “neutral” tests. Hence, I use the word effective bitingly. Even though I feel that I connected with my students in ways that evaded, exceeded, and often resisted school moves, my teacher effectiveness was intimately linked to systemic beliefs and expectations of what a good teacher is supposed to achieve in relation to, and as a means of propelling, current institutional ideology. Just as students internalize school labels, discourses, and, as is often the case with minority students, presumptions of failure (Nygreen, 2013), teachers internalize the historically contingent professional languages, discourses, and defining images of what it means to be a teacher (McWilliam, 1999). This construction determines what counts as an abjective sight/site in need of objection and cool control. Pervasively institutionalized, whiteness shapes what it means to be a good student and a good teacher; as a result, students and teachers “desire” its language, which is intertwined with school “success.”

Unlike her peers, Keisha refuses to eat the institution’s seemingly clean language and instead devours a material meant for cleaning un-oral orifices. We could read into this metaphor the possibility that Keisha (mis) uses that which is made whiter against her dark hands in such a way that viscerally resists and casually dismisses the institution’s tolerance level. After all, neither toilet paper nor foul language belongs in a person’s mouth; each gets read as the language of assholes rather than of scholarly students and professional teachers well versed in the pristine language of “accountable talk” and “Standard English.” Keisha’s unexpected behavior re-defines her “condition”: a decision to digest the unthinkable inside a zero-tolerance
institution while acknowledging her teacher’s pain in the face of their interlaced conditions.

As strategic (re)producers of whiteness, or the myth that there exists some pure, correct, and normal language that promises equal opportunity to anyone who grasps it, schools simultaneously dispossess urban youth by inscribing them as criminals (Fine & Ruglis, 2009) who need to be managed, disciplined, and tongue-tamed. The “punitive ideology” (p. 26) that oils urban school machines also demands its students read, write, and speak a disembodied whiteness—an imagined discourse wrung free of personal values, feelings, and conflicts (Powell, 1997), ultimately unattainable. What kind of school manifests when the language of whiteness promises economic capital with mastery and black youth using nonwhite languages are conditioned to bow corrected?

Even if students need to acquire that “literate discourse” (Delpit, 1992) to succeed in society, the everyday languages valued in schools and the impulse to teach language as a fixed entity that fits certain contexts need questioning, rattling, and re-assessing. As Vershawn Young (2009) shows, many teachers embrace codeswitching, which they have difficulty seeing as inherently racist ideology—one that bolsters an understanding of languages as separate but (not really) equal and encourages minority students to become chameleons, changing their language to fit the “appropriate” context. Young’s argument for code meshing—“the blending and concurrent use of American English dialects in formal, discursive products” (p. 51)—resonates with Jahan Ramazani’s (2009) description of poetry’s hybridity and the messy routes that constantly shape and shake it. Poetry’s long history of transnational reassemblages and regenerations of forms reminds us that language, at its brightest, mutates, cross-dresses, and breeds bastard and “mongrel” (p. 2) offspring.

Language, like toilet paper, lives as a banal, unnoticed part of everyday life until it gets publicly and contextually (mis)used. Extending from Young and meshing his claims with a belief in poetry’s “subversive pulse” (Rich,
1993, p. 222), I argue that we need code meshings that persistently and insistently misuse the grammars they play. After all, made “natural,” whiteness goes unnoticed in schools until confronted with nonwhite grammars. Through code meshings that creatively misuse each code’s rules, language becomes a site of active resistance to institutional whiteness, and also a way to “enlarge our national vocabulary, multiply the range of available rhetorical styles, expand our ability to understand linguistic difference” (Young, 2009, p. 65). As an alternative to preparing students to linguistically assimilate to different sites, educators ought to work with them to make new sites, new spaces (Gutierrez, 2008) through language moves springing from students’ lives—moves that unsettle the predetermined and push students to reconceive and critically remake the borders that constitute their dreams. This requires a dangerously free imagination and a desire to bravely meddle with language, but also an acknowledgment of the self as both “rooted and routed... between styles, between histories, between hemispheres” (Ramazani, 2009, p. 180). Instead of asking students to master an existing language, educators can push students (and themselves) to remaster and remix language with an understanding that grammars need to be stretched and boldly molded to avoid desiccation. No body owns language.

**(Dis)embodied Language and Unstable Transcripts**

Usually, public transcripts, or the “open interaction between subordinates and those who dominate” (Scott, 1990, p. 2), suppress the emergence of hidden transcripts, or discourses that exist “‘offstage,’ beyond direct observation by powerholders” (p. 4). In urban schools, un-schooled students threaten the hegemonic public transcript that insists on perpetuating the status quo. In effect, schools try to tattoo these public transcripts onto black and brown bodies, inscribing and re-inscribing them in efforts to shape standard subjectivities. When compliance dissolves and gets substituted by public defiance, the fragility of power relations bares its breakable body (Scott, 1990).

My visceral objection to Keisha’s abjective action signals a refusal to engage in the
school’s public transcript, which requires me to assert a school rule—“No eating in class!” “No sitting on desks!”—rather than admit my own queasiness, as such admission makes the issue unavoidably subjective. Instead of hiding behind the public transcript of school rules, I shamefully make public my hidden transcript of nausea and blurt out an intensely felt plea to stop. Keisha seems to respect that, sort of, by turning the other way, implying that as much as she may like to stop, her condition compels her to continue. She also turns her back on the classroom’s nonverbal, public transcript that insists students face the teacher standing at the front of the room. The simultaneously affective and ineffective quality of this interaction might be said to agitate the school’s public transcript. Furthermore, in the scene with Keisha, what we/they fear to name—Keisha’s large blackness—rests on rather than behind the desk; she physically repositions herself above the class, refusing to sit behind the banal structure for student bodies. Also, by turning her back to me, she obliges a personal favor and asserts an act of power: *I won’t make you watch, but I won’t stop eating.* Ironically, the College Essay Writing class in which this scene occurs aims to help its students gain acceptance into an academic institution that will most likely further devalue its nonwhite students (Powell, 1997).

The devaluation of nonwhite students also manifests in educational discourses that construct “failures” in correlation with notions of individual, rather than systemic, responsibility. For example, efforts to close the “achievement gap” between white and black students ignore that this gap is largely socially determined. The gap gets painted as the responsibility of individual teachers, bad schools, poor test preparation, and ineffective classroom management when, in fact, the ethos of code-switching and the excessive distribution of language correction to black youth are a large and largely overlooked part of what constructs an “achievement gap.” Moreover, schools need an achievement gap to create success stories of white martyrdom and to keep black students in constant pursuit of achieving whiteness.

In 1974 the Conference on College Composition and Communication
asserted “Students’ Right to Their Own Language,” a decree stating that schools should serve the multiple, changing dialects belonging to students. Since then, scholars have reaffirmed the resolution (Smitherman, 1995; Kinloch, 2005), but the problem of institutional whiteness persists. The fact that we are still trying to complicate, redefine, and/or reject “Standard English” decades later suggests a need for radical language re-vision in schools. Insofar as schools delineate language as “correct” or “incorrect,” value answers over questions, teach code-switching, and refuse what Deleuze and Guattari (1987) playfully refer to as “lines of flight,” or unexpected breaks from a given path or logic, such institutions remain socially unjust sites.

**Affective Grammars in Effective Institutions**

Poetry can be a door into theorizing these issues. As a way of bringing theoretical connections between tender structures, embodied languages, and unformatted forms in conversation with the social injustices pervading and reproduced by school ideology, I focus on a few of the formal elements that tend to distinguish poetry from other genres: line breaks, enjambment, and the use of spoken word as a way to forcefully articulate hidden transcripts. The definition of poetry I ride is Robert Frost’s: poetry is “the shortest emotional distance between two points” (Richardson, 1994, pp. 521–522). I translate this affective sense of poetry—electric, felt, and able to collapse distance—as an alternative to eating whiteness and as an opening toward moving (as adjective and verb) curricula.

Line breaks from striated language-spaces threaten those formatted constructions wed to whiteness. These “lines of flight” (Deleuze & Guattari, 1987) in schools might be recognized as efforts by teachers and students to play with the rules of language, disrupt routine formats, refuse packaged literacy programs and standardized tests, make hidden transcripts public, and engage embodied languages with feeling. Sudden movements away from rooted conceptions of language can interrupt, re-appropriate, and re-form language as nonlinear, intensely colored, and deeply marked engagements. As
Adrienne Rich argues in her essay “Form and Format” (1993), formatting structures and approaches can extinguish language’s poetic power. She advocates for “poetry that is nonassimilationist, difficult to co-opt, draws on many formal sources” (p. 227), evoking the shifting, striking presences of poetic forms as they traverse transnationally, unlike the rooted, inorganic structures of schools that hold in their hard bodies resistance to change. Poetry’s valuing of enjambment, from straddling in French, is also useful here. As Deleuze and Guattari (1987) write, “One does not conform to a model, one straddles the right horse” (p. 316). Finding the “right horse” to straddle is often a matter of feeling out the language line and choosing to run with or against it. This straddling slips away from the linear model of schooling and the striated school spaces in which language “learning” occurs. To break the circuits of language dispossession in urban schools (Fine & Ruglis, 2009), we cannot continue to force-feed whiteness under the illusion of a nutritional norm. Schools ought to value, above all else, imaginative approaches to the English language that decolonize it in processes of re-appropriation and vibrant use.

Furthermore, a particular quality of language-conditions—verbal, nonverbal, structural, visual, etc.—summons teacher and student in visceral ways. How do urban students get institutionally addressed and what are the a/effects of that quality of address? How do dominant discourses that position urban teachers as disembodied managers shape teacher subjectivities? Poetry’s qualities can be extended to these questions of address and power implicit in the structures of schools, classrooms, and curricula. Oftentimes, hidden transcripts point to precise feelings that long for accurate expression while public transcripts tend to keep language general, inaccurate, and thereby easily reproducible. Spoken word poetry lends itself to the public invigoration of hidden transcripts. As a way of resisting eating the public transcript of whiteness, members of school communities might work to preserve the poetic powers of irreproducible language, embrace articulations of hidden transcripts, and recognize the conditional a/effects of address.

Most schools and English language arts classrooms remain shaped by institutionalized discursive structures of whiteness, which have palpable e/affects including the devaluation of nonwhite students and the colonizing of public imaginations. It is crucial that teachers and educators be aware of these institutionalized conditions (both the current state of schools and modes of influencing school members), recognize that they make injustice likely for minority students, and notice the ways they position teachers to continue enacting these injustices despite best intentions to the contrary. Additionally, teachers and educators should (continue to) reshape classroom
language conditions and advocate for systemwide changes. The linguistic conditions of school success need to change for students’ right to their own language to materialize on an institutional level. Breaking school lines, enjambing language expectations, and delving in multidirectional dictions is one way to start.

Lingering Trails

I leave the bathroom in time for class, failing to notice the trail of toilet paper stuck to the bottom of my shoe. When Jason points it out, I try stomping on the paper with my other foot, but the paper stubbornly stays. Slowly, I make my way to my desk. An incongruous tail/tale follows.

References


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**Maya Pindyck** is a doctoral student in the English Education program at Columbia University’s Teachers College and has been a member of NCTE since 2012. She teaches writing in New York City, in part through Teachers & Writers Collaborative and Sponsors for Educational Opportunity. Her most recent collection of poetry, *Emotion*, is forthcoming from Four Way Books in 2016. Maya cofounded Project Voice, an effort to destigmatize abortion through a growing archive of personal stories (www.projectvoice.org). She can be reached at mayapin@gmail.com.