Review

"Y'all Don't Hear Me Though": Insight on Culturally Responsive Teaching from Scholarship on African American Language

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Abstract: While culturally responsive teaching is widely acknowledged as essential to student success, a lack of consistency in what it is called, what it looks like, and how to enact it can present a challenge for educators. Further, the trend toward political polarization has spread fear and misunderstanding of critical race theory and is now taking aim at diversity, equity, and inclusion (DEI) efforts in education and society, including culturally responsive teaching. Thus, it behooves scholars and educators to assert unequivocally that culturally responsive teaching is not an approach that silences or condemns any group of students' cultural knowledge, beliefs, or perspectives, be they mainstream or underrepresented. Rather, one essential component across multiple nuanced definitions of culturally responsive teaching is a focus on identifying and leveraging all students' cultural strengths in service of learning. One well-established cultural asset of many African American students, who consistently experience inequitable outcomes in U.S. schools, is their language. As African American Language (AAL) has been identified as the most widely studied language variety in the world, the body of scholarship identifying and exploring its strengths is rich and robust. Using the framework of Foster et al.'s Heuristic for Thinking about Culturally Responsive Teaching (HiTCRiT), this review explores scholarship on the use of AAL in three spheres—everyday discourse, literature and expository texts, and popular media—to illustrate both the challenges and potential of enacting asset-focused pedagogies by leveraging a broad and diverse variety of texts.

Keywords: African American Language; culturally responsive teaching; asset-focused pedagogies

1. Introduction

Leaning on my desk in the unsettled silence left by a particularly unruly class, I breathed a sigh of some relief. The day was not quite over, but almost. And the last class, seventh period, was always by far the most pleasant 50 min I would spend in that damp, crowded trailer on any given day. These were my seniors, too mature or just too kind, to extend the chaos that five classes of sophomores and an often-frantic "planning" period covering unstaffed classes had made of the previous 6 h. They were a breath of fresh air. As they trickled in on this day, I was glad to see Mr. Lilac. His first name was James, but he told me I could use his last name since I liked it so much. Mr. Lilac had, as Shirley Brice Heath would describe it, a way with words. Whenever he felt like it, out of the blue or during a lull in our work, he would erupt in verbal artistry. I do not know if he would have called it spoken word, rap, or something else, but whatever it was, I always listened. I never asked him to stop. And on this day, I directly requested it: "I'm so glad you're here today, Mr. Lilac. It's been a day. Say something beautiful, would you?" He smiled lightly, humoring me. Then, as casually as someone else might read a magazine headline, he just opened his mouth and spoke poetry.

I have not taught high school for many years, but I think about Mr. Lilac often. I am glad that he must have known he made our class more enjoyable. But, despite my open appreciation, I missed an opportunity to engage in culturally responsive teaching. I had allowed my pleasure in listening to him to mask my inability to really hear him—to

understand and build upon his strengths. How had I not written his words on the board? Why had we not studied them together? I was his language arts teacher! And yet, I had missed the opportunity to engage with his language and his art. Although I was mindful of my positionality as a white educator of primarily Black students, and I strove to serve as an ally, I did not treat his words as a text worthy of study, as Foster et al.'s [1] Heuristic for Thinking about Culturally Responsive Thinking (HiTCRiT) suggests it could be. And, years in the field of education have convinced me that such missed opportunities are all too common, and that even many culturally aware and appreciative educators can create or condone an artificial distinction between the diverse bodies of knowledge, critical facilities, and ways of understanding that students carry within them from the materials and work of learning. And, as an educator, I am dismayed to see this distinction made prominent in the rash of legislation across the U.S. that seeks to exclude diversity of texts, perspectives, and critical approaches from classrooms. The model legislation crafted by Rufo et al. [2] that supports this legislative trend proposes four reforms to organizational efforts to address diversity, equity, and inclusion, justified by the idea that "Administrators in public institutions of higher education should maintain institutional neutrality on controversial political questions extraneous to the business of educating students" (p. 2). While this model legislation suggests that its reforms apply to program and institutional administration rather than classroom instruction or research, the idea that "controversial political questions" are "extraneous to the business of educating students" is often in conflict with the principles of asset-focused, culturally responsive teaching practices. This is because understanding students' perspectives, ways of knowing, and other cultural strengths as assets rather than deficits to be fixed or overcome is at times both politicized and controversial. This conflict is perhaps nowhere more evident than in the rich and robust body of scholarship, spanning several decades, on African American Language (AAL).

Unless I am discussing the work of someone who uses a different term, I use the term AAL throughout this work to refer to what Green defines as the "linguistic system of communication governed by well defined rules and used by some African Americans (though not all) across different geographical regions of the USA and across a full range of age groups" [3] (p. 77). Other names for this widely used language variety include African American English, African American Vernacular English, Black English, Black Vernacular English, Black Communication, and more. AAL has a long and rich history. Features unique pronunciations like final consonant deletion ('in' instead of 'ing'), distinct grammatical structures like the habitual be ('they be playin"), and an extensive vocabulary with words and phrases like 'ain't' and 'fixing to.' Beyond its linguistic features, AAL holds deep social and cultural significance within African American communities that can serve as a marker of identity and shared history. Green provides a thorough but succinct overview of the different designations [3]. I use the term AAL to reflect acceptance of the research establishing the validity and completeness of the language system. I further believe that in the context of education, avoiding the terms "vernacular", "dialect", or "non-standard" helps to challenge the othering of student speakers of AAL. Ultimately, however, the definition is more important than a particular designation.

This paper reviews relevant examples from that field to illustrate the potential of using student-centered texts that reflect students' full linguistic capacities to foster asset-focused culturally responsive teaching and learning experiences. This review demonstrates how AAL texts can support culturally responsive teaching that fosters active learning and critical thinking. To demonstrate both the ubiquity of potential AAL texts and their flexibility as a foothold into culturally responsive teaching, this article examines scholarship that references AAL in three spheres: home and community discourse practices; traditional literary and informational texts; and texts more commonly associated with popular culture, like contemporary music and social media. These explorations of AAL provide insight and inspiration for educators working to enact culturally responsive teaching by recognizing and leveraging the assets of their students' voices, perspectives, and passions.

2. Asset Pedagogies and the Heuristic for Thinking about Culturally Responsive Teaching (HiTCRiT)

Culturally responsive teaching refers to teaching practices that acknowledge and build upon students' strengths. While terms and definitions for this concept vary from scholar to scholar, commonalities of many popular definitions include the principle that culturally responsive teaching is student-centered and builds upon the cultural strengths of diverse students [4,5]. Beginning with students' strengths requires both teachers and learners to consider their own positionality in relation to learning goals as well as to one another as "[p]erceptions of deficiency and competence are socially and culturally constructed" [6] (p. 134). In the opening example, the mere appreciation of Mr. Lilac's verbal artistry presents a missed opportunity. While appreciating students' gifts is a necessary component, it is not sufficient for culturally responsive teaching. As Lyiscott [7] discusses, creating a false distinction between the text Mr. Lilac shared and the texts I had studied and was prepared to teach from implicitly affirms the literary canon as the material most worthy of academic study. Leveraging gifts for asset-focused pedagogies requires a teacher to really hear, or understand, those gifts and how they do or could relate to the learning goal and the teacher's own way of understanding. Only then are the benefits of those assets reflected in a learning experience.

Foster, Halliday, Baize, and Chisholm [1] present the Heuristic for Thinking about Culturally Responsive Teaching (HiTCRiT) as a way for teachers and teacher educators to recognize and understand culturally responsive teaching in relation to four overlapping realms: style, texts, socio-emotional connections, and institutional knowledge. The heuristic model allows educators to bring different perspectives, understandings, and resources involving cultural assets into their thinking and planning, without losing sight of the connections between these realms that foster the move from celebration or appreciation of cultural assets to their meaningful integration in learning experiences.

Foster et al.'s [1] discussion of texts addresses the way powerful culturally responsive practices often reflect a broad view of what educators can use as texts to engage their students in learning. The present paper illustrates ways that teachers and scholars have used AAL in ways that redefine what an educational text can be. This review demonstrates how AAL texts have been or can be used in ways that connect with the realms of style, socio-emotional connections, and institutional knowledge to foster culturally responsive teaching and learning in practice. First, however, it is important to understand what AAL is and its socio-historical connections to and implications for education in the United States' schools.

3. The Relationship between AAL and Deficit Models of Education

Language and power are inextricably tied. Influencing everything from kitchen table chat to community action forums, schoolyard games to academic endeavors, social media to literary culture, language communicates identity, connection, community, and more. And, in nearly all of these spaces, language finds a way of defining, revealing, or asserting relations of power. So, considering the United States's legacy of slavery, racial discrimination, and enduring racial inequality, it makes sense that linguists and social scientists have long explored the language of Black America, AAL. In fact, engaging scholars for more than 50 years, Godley et al. [8] cite AAL as "the most extensively researched dialect of American English in linguistic and educational scholarship" (p. 30). And, just as a student's ability to master white mainstream English (WME) (often called standard English, standard American English, or academic English; I borrow the term white mainstream English (WME) from Baker-Bell [9] "to emphasize how standard English gets racialized as white and legitimizes white, male, upper middle-class, mainstream ways of speaking English" (p. 18)) has a direct effect on his or her academic success, educators' perceptions of AAL and other home or heritage languages have a direct effect on the academic success of the students who speak them. Those who perceive WME as the only acceptable language in the classroom see home language varieties like AAL as simply flawed or broken. This

perception reinforces or exacerbates deficit views of the speakers of these language varieties, a connection that has been long and clearly established.

Labov [10] outlines the basis of the linguistic deficit view that still pervades in the U.S. educational system today:

> [D]eficit theory appears as the concept of 'verbal deprivation': Negro children from the ghetto area receive little verbal stimulation, are said to hear very little well-formed language, and as a result are impoverished in their means of verbal expression. They cannot speak complete sentences, do not know the names of common objects, cannot form concepts, or convey logical thoughts. [10] (p. 2)

Labov [10] goes on to debunk this deficit view of Black students' language based on a field of research that he and other linguists had established even before this time. And yet, scholarship that continues to peddle cultural racism and classism as the roots of educational inequity remains widely read in educator preparation programs and accepted in both schools and public debate. (Because this piece is not focused on establishing cultural strengths, but rather takes the well-established strengths of AAL as a starting point, the author purposely does not cite contemporary scholars who continue to perpetuate cultural and linguistic deficit models of thinking founded in racism.) [11]. Noting a major victim-blamer of his own era, Labov [10] reflects that part of the draw of the deficit view is its apparent actionability to well-intentioned educators who want to help struggling students and "are looking for something concrete to do" (p. 40).

However, attempts to blame the disparate success of Black and Brown children in American schools on cultural and linguistic deficits have been refuted by countless researchers on AAL, in addition to this foundational work by Labov [10,12]. Foster [13] notes decades of AAL researchers, from Turner [14] and Abrahams [15], first published in 1964, to contemporaries of Labov and beyond [16–18]. This rich field of research makes clear "that rather than being impoverished, this language is a complex, rule-governed, functional system for communication" [13] (p. 303). So, as the language itself is not flawed, its connection to its speakers' failure to thrive in U.S. schools may lie not in its form or function, but rather in how it is heard or perceived.

Despite the scholarly consensus amongst linguists about AAL's validity as a language system, Godley et al. [8] point out that "research on language attitudes and language-related controversies has demonstrated that negative beliefs about the grammaticality, logic, and even morality of stigmatized dialects are widespread in U.S. society" (p. 30). This deference for a socially constructed "standard" language variety is described by MacSwan [19] as the "dominant language ideology", which still dominates educational policy and practice in the U.S., and "which positions the language of the educated classes, often called Academic English, as a more advanced and more complex version of varieties of English used in non-school settings" (p. 29). And, just as these attitudes are widespread in the public arena, they are also evident in the school system. Ball and Muhammad [20] suggest that despite the wealth of research on AAL, there are still many "preservice teachers who reflect an attitude of zero tolerance about the use of language variation in their future classrooms" (p. 87). Peele-Eady and Foster [21] explore the cultural and historical context of such deficit perspectives and their implications to establish both the immediate need of the educational system to acknowledge and build upon the linguistic strengths of its student speakers of AAL and its persistent refusal to do so. And, deficit notions of AAL are not the only barriers to its uptake in classrooms that reflect this ideology.

Dominant language ideology likewise influences teachers who identify as AAL speakers, albeit in a different way. Greene [22] reflects on personal experiences as a Black teacher in majority Black public schools using AAL in interactions with students but maintaining DAE as the standard for academic use, explaining, "I loved a language and the people who spoke it, but my teaching practices showed the prioritization of another" (p. 2). Greene's description of interacting with students in AAL to foster connection and build trust and comfort reflects what Foster et al. [1] classify as the realm of style, and Black teachers' successfully employing styles that involve welcoming elements of AAL are likewise well

established in scholarship on culturally responsive teaching. However, as Greene reflects, the distinction between the use and enjoyment of AAL and the dominant or standard English that determined classroom expectations can produce tension. Greene [22] notes, "I encouraged children to learn under circumstances where I suppressed their most natural form of expression, while I continued to use the very language I discouraged" (p. 3). This tension serves as additional support for asset-affirming practices built around texts that feature or explore those assets.

However, as educator preparation programs rarely include explicit instruction on AAL [20,21], overcoming dominant language ideology to put the insights of research and scholarship into practice may remain both a practical and philosophical challenge in the classroom. But, as educators continue to grapple with this challenge, the rich and robust body of scholarship surrounding the decades of research and debate provides insight into how employing texts that feature AAL in everyday spoken discourse, in literature and expository texts, and in popular culture and media can empower AAL speakers to bring their full linguistic repertoires to bear not only in their social interactions, but also in their learning.

4. Scholarship Featuring AAL as Spoken Discourse

Whether or not educators welcome and leverage it for learning, AAL is present in U.S. classrooms because AAL speakers bring it from their homes and communities. As Greene [22] describes it, despite attempts to silence AAL in schools, student speakers continued to bring it with them: "Their self-expression rang through the hallways louder than any school bell" (p. 1). Thus, scholarship that features spoken examples of AAL as or within "texts", simultaneously highlights the language and affirms its merit as discourse worthy of study. This dual purpose is evident in a naming convention that appears frequently in scholarship in this category—the use of a speakers' voices and words in titles. For instance, titles such as, "Is October Brown Chinese?" [23], "It's cookin' now" [24], and "I'll speak proper slang" [25] include quotes from the students involved in the research that present the learners in the piece as active and engaged from the very first lines. This practice not only challenges what Politzer-Ahles et al. [26] suggest is a bias against non-dominant language variants in scholarly research, but it also subtly pushes back against deficit-based notions of speakers of AAL as passive or lacking in some critical capacity, rejecting a narrow focus on what students are missing and opening the door for further exploration of what many common perceptions about AAL, and AAL speakers, have wrong. In addition to this common naming convention, scholarship in this sphere often includes not only the linguistic assets of AAL speakers, but also the context or conditions under which those assets become apparent.

Michaels's [27] exploration of sharing time in an early elementary classroom, for instance, demonstrates how the teachers' perceptions of the African American students' styles of storytelling can block the students' access to important literacy-building events that both support and develop the discourse that will be expected of students throughout their educational experiences. Michaels [27] demonstrates that teachers' attempts to "correct" the story-telling practices of African American students, negate what Heath [28] recognizes as the ability of African American children "to render a context, to set a stage, and to call on the audience's power to join in the imaginative creation of story" (p. 67), and simultaneously removed those students from the narrative-development-based coaching that students with more traditionally linear storytelling styles received during these sharing events. Subsequent research on narrative pedagogies supports and extends this notion to argue that the variety of voices invited into learning spaces through storytelling is a benefit to everyone involved. Cordi [29], for instance, describes the "ensemble of narratives" that a learning space can become "when the many voices in the classroom actively contribute to the curriculum" (p. 41). The authenticity and variety of these voices fosters the connection amongst participants that collaborative learning demands.

And, indeed, in classrooms where students are given autonomy over their story or sharing time, as in Foster [30] and Michaels and Foster [31], the strengths of AAL are confirmed. In these studies, African American students contributed engaging texts, learning from their creation and telling as well as from the community engagement that resulted from their presentation. The teacher did not actively participate in the sharing-time experiences discussed in these studies. Instead, "the children themselves evaluate sharing time turns, and determine what counts as appropriate or 'good' talk . . . Thus left to their own devices, sharer and audience together control what gets talked about and how a given topic is developed" [31] (p. 145). Building on Foster's [30] identification of lecture demonstration and performed narrative styles of sharing, Michaels and Foster [31] note that of the styles that emerge, that of African American students is often "characterized by the use of stylistic features similar to those used in a dramatic stage performance" (p. 146) such as dialogue, gestures, sound effects, asides, repetitions and shifting to present tense for emphasis. While the student sharers are able to explore and develop the discourse styles they have brought from their homes and communities, the student listeners are engaged and entertained, often digging in to learn more about points of interest that emerge from the stories they enjoy. Importantly, these insights arise only in the freedom characterized by the absence of the traditional teacher's gaze where "[c]ompetence . . . becomes narrowly defined" (p. 144). The authors conclude "In this child-run sharing time activity, where implicit notions about correctness are absent and with an audience that is interested, children are free to learn from one another. They are free to explore ideas by reliving the past, describing the present, or creating a new world, to entertain, amuse, or inform" (p. 157). And the competencies demonstrated by these children when no one was around to correct them are indeed reflected in the communicative assets established elsewhere in scholarship involving AAL speakers.

Research conducted in communities of AAL speakers also offers insights about the value of spoken instances of AAL as texts for study. For instance, one particularly effective example of an exploration of AAL that has been tied directly to education is Heath's [32] widely cited ethnography of the linguistic beliefs, practices, and abilities of three communities in the Piedmont region of the Carolinas. She writes in the register of academic discourse for academic audiences but is meticulous in her presentation of the language of the community members she is discussing. For instance, her analysis of the prosody of the spontaneous poetic eruptions of Lem, an African American, preschool-aged child whom she studied in the community of Trackton, presents his words as a poem on the page to display a facility with and mastery of language moves not generally displayed or expected in elementary schools, if at all in K-12 settings. Upon hearing a distant bell, Lem erupts, "Way/Far/Now/It a church bell/Ringin'/Dey singin'/Ringin'/You hear it?/I hear it/Far/Now". Heath's presentation of Lem's words in free-verse form calls attention to his use of rhyme and repetition. She elaborates, "His story. . . is like a poem in its line-like prosody" [28] (p. 67). Further, she notes, "This story, somewhat longer than those usually reported from other social groups for children as young as Lem, has some features which have come to characterize fully-developed narratives or stories" (pp. 67–68). In putting the strengths of Lem's creative and fluid speech into the language of academic discourse, Heath effectively debunks the notion that AAL is a less effective form of communication than DAE and illustrates the strength of AAL texts as learning materials.

In describing the community approach to early education as a natural and experiential process, Heath [28] invokes compelling explanations from her adult informants: "As one parent of a two-year-old boy put it: 'Ain't no use me tellin' 'im: learn this, learn that, what's this, what's that? He just gotta learn, gotta know; he see one thing one place one time, he know how it go, see sump'n like it again, maybe it be the same, maybe it won't'" (p. 67). While this plain-spoken and succinct explanation might arguably be left to stand on its own, Heath translates, "Children are expected to learn how to know when the form belies the meaning and to know contexts of items and to use their understanding of these contexts to draw parallels between items and events" (p. 67). Far from belittling or

apologizing for her informant's explanation, Heath's translation here may be viewed as serving a dual purpose—it establishes the clarity and power of the linguistic practices of the Trackton community and invokes the language of academic achievement to directly disrupt the deficit-based thinking that clouds Trackton children's school experiences and teacher education in general, helping outsiders really "hear" the complex point the Trackton parent is making. In this way, Heath engages spoken instances of AAL as texts to challenge the dominant language ideology.

Still, while Foster [30], Michaels and Foster [31], and Heath [28,32] demonstrate that student speakers of AAL were never, in fact, without language or literacy, as they are often portrayed or perceived to be in educational settings, most formal school experiences do not enjoy the freedom from an evaluative teacher's gaze, even, as Greene [22] demonstrates, when that teacher's gaze is appreciative. Thus, as they progress in school, AAL speakers learn to navigate multiple worlds with different and often conflicting measures of linguistic competence. As Baugh [33] describes his own experience, "most of the 'cool brothers' could 'talk the talk'—and those who exhibited urban eloquence never did so in standard English" (p. 6). The tension Baugh articulates is likely present from children's earliest school experiences, in what Dyson [34] calls the "multiple social worlds of the classroom" (p. 3), but Baugh's adolescent recognition and attempts to navigate the tension directly mark what may possibly be the beginning of this now world-renowned linguist's critical perspective of language. And Baugh's recognition of the critical insight on language and linguistic competency afforded by examining AAL "texts", is reflected in research on pedagogical approaches designed to help AAL speakers succeed in academic settings. Such scholarship explores texts and practices that do not encourage critical engagement with language as well as those that do.

Baugh's recognition that the language competencies he perceived in his social group were not considered competencies in the classroom is evident in scholarship describing interventions or practices for helping AAL speakers develop WME competence. Greene's [22] qualitative study of Black teachers in the rare position of working in predominantly Black schools with predominantly Black colleagues all had different teaching philosophies and employed very different practices. However, Greene reports the following:

> [A]ll of the teachers in this study (1) used AAL as a valuable tool for building rapport and trust with their students; (2) were aware of their positions as linguistic role models; and (3) encouraged AAL-speaking students to use *SAE due to concerns about racial and linguistic profiling. (p. 9)

These teachers noted that "students would not receive formal summative assessments from state agencies that would allow students to utilize their full linguistic repertoires, even if they sounded natural", and, therefore, felt responsible, as teachers, to equip students with "standard" English (p. 13). The conflict Greene's subjects describe relates to the exploration within the field of AAL of code switching, as established in Delpit [35] and Young and Barret's [36] development of that concept, code meshing. Whereas Delpit's code switching is presented as the explicit teaching of a common practice among members of marginalized linguistic communities—switching from AAL or another language variety into WME in academic or professional situations—Young and Barret [36] argue that the widespread resonance of Delpit's insight creates space for the next logical step—an approach to teaching and learning that acknowledges AAL speakers' right to employ their full linguistic repertoires to bear in learning experiences as in their everyday lives.

Scholarship on the importance of welcoming students' full linguistic repertoires in learning experiences is not limited to AAL. Indeed, in a related discussion of students who speak multiple languages or varieties, Wei and Lin [37] reflect on a decade of their own scholarship and that of others in the field of translanguaging, noting that "the tensions and conflicts between everyday flexible multilingual practices of the individual, including teachers and pupils, and the societal-imposed policies of language-of-instruction in schools still remain in most parts of the world, despite all the efforts by researchers and practitioners to promote the benefits of multilingualism" (p. 209). Their frustration with the educational

status quo that remains somehow impervious to the insights of research and scholarship echoes Wheeler's [38] summation of the issue at large "that while linguistic scholars and critical language theorists have developed intricate analyses, knowledge, and responses to vernacular dialects, these advances have not taken root in the schools of America" (p. 367).

It is unsurprising, then, that the ubiquitous construct of standard language proficiency is sustained by common classroom practices that do not profess to address language ideology at all. Well-meaning teachers without the proficiency in AAL to recognize its strengths and potential may not even recognize how language ideologies support their practices and vice versa. Too often, classroom practices, even of educators who profess a respect for linguistic variety, perpetuate a less-than-critical perspective of linguistic competency. Godley, Carpenter, and Werner [25], for instance, explore the practice of a popular grammar activity widely known as Daily Oral Practice or Daily Oral Language. In this approach to explicit grammar instruction, a teacher shares a flawed (by WME standards) sentence on the board, and students work together to figure out how to "fix" it. The researchers conclude that, while some AAL speakers are able to assert the power of their own language from within this activity, as a whole, this approach supports the damaging view that WME is the single, correct variety of English, delegitimizing home and social varieties spoken by students. And, this is not to say that grammatical and mechanical mistakes are not possible. Rather, as practices like these may rely on what teachers consider common errors or problems that they see frequently in their students' speech or writing, AAL constructions become prime targets in some classrooms. And, as Wheeler [38] concludes about a related problem, standard language ideologies foster a falsely simplistic understanding of language and practices that fails to "require teachers to distinguish *pattern* in vernacular dialect from *error* in Standard English" (p. 367, italics added). Further, the deficit prescriptivist ideological basis for error correction practice, in removing segments of language from their purpose and context, suggests that even "proper" language is monolithic and lacking nuance. This combination of inauthentic texts, prescriptivist and oversimplified understandings of the targeted content-knowledge, and a top-down, right or wrong, evaluative style is particularly dangerous. The negative socio-emotional connections promoted by such uncritical notions of linguistic competency may affect students' perceptions of self. Baker-Bell [9] acknowledges the importance of combating linguistic deficit perspectives, even among speakers of AAL: "The only thing worse than Black students' experiencing anti-black linguistic racism in classrooms is when they internalize it" (p. 10).

Unlike well-intentioned but often deficit-based approaches to language instruction, other scholarship that uses everyday AAL speech events as "texts" works to make the communicative competence of AAL speakers more explicit and/or applicable in schools by amplifying the intellectual capacity and sophistication of the language. Just as Heath [28] demonstrates the power of AAL to her audience of scholars and educators, Carol Lee demonstrates the importance of engaging AAL speakers with their own linguistic assets. Carol Lee's [23,39] Cultural Modeling Project is a program of high school literacy instruction that builds upon a profound knowledge of and respect for the linguistic wealth of Black students. Her work establishes home languages as classroom resources, not deficits. Her methods illuminate the potential of AAL in classroom practice in part because of how she positions herself. Unlike the researchers who maintain a distance from the AAL they examine, Carol Lee embeds herself as a teacher/researcher who is an expert in and speaker of AAL. Lee's approach involves using well-established strengths of AAL, like the fluency and creative facility described by Heath [32] as footholds or scaffolds into literary analysis of traditional canonical literature. Students explore their strengths through analytical exploration of texts in "cultural data sets" as the teacher re-voices their analytical moves to make them more metacognitively aware of what they are doing. These data sets include familiar AAL practices like the ritualized insult competitions known as "playing the dozens". Lee [39] views this co-exploration of the cultural data sets as a type of apprenticeship to literary analysis. Unlike Heath's translations that serve to legitimize AAL

and persuade an audience of outsiders, Lee's "re-voicing" of her students' analytical moves is intended to empower and encourage the speakers themselves. As Akua [40] notes, just like teachers in diverse classrooms, students whose cultural assets have not traditionally been acknowledged in learning spaces may need help recognizing their own assets and the connections between those assets and the content and ideas they are exploring in the curriculum. Further, Massó [41] calls upon practices like Lee's as a strategy educators can use to address the misconception that all student readers will experience and interpret any given text in the same way. Rather, because they bring their cultural understandings to bear in comprehension, different readers do not experience or interpret texts the same ways. Thus, connecting diverse texts and nontraditional texts in a way that explicitly connects them with other texts or curricular elements can broaden all readers' comprehension and competency.

Another approach to bringing texts featuring AAL everyday discourse involves bringing scholarly texts from this body of research into classroom discussions to help students develop critical language awareness. Hankerson [42] reports evidence of "written language growth" "macro and micro level of writing", "syntactic fluency", and "rhetorical virtuosity" from a qualitative study of a composition course for African American students using a curriculum that calls upon the extensive scholarship on AAL, including much of the foundational research referenced above, which generally targets academics and researchers, and using it to engage students in the complexity of the issue, including the implications of research on AAL as a spoken language variety for courses on academic writing (p. 1). In this curriculum, "class activities were designed to expose students to the power dynamics and privilege associated with [white language] grammar and vocabulary and empower them to value their own linguistic grammar and vocabulary in talk and text" (p. 5). In this way, the tension or frustration noted by Greene [22] and Wheeler [38] serve students by welcoming them into the authentic and complex discussions happening in the field and making those tensions and the underlying ideological conflict explicit. Engaging students in discussions of language use through AAL texts in this way also aligns with Lyn's [43] discussion of "an approach to teaching called agency pedagogy in which Black students are viewed and positioned as meaningful agents of their culture, language, and identity within their classrooms" (p. 792).

These examples from scholarship involving texts that feature AAL in everyday spoken discourse demonstrate insights that AAL speakers, both as teachers and learners, can bring to classroom learning experiences. Scholarship also includes inspiration for culturally responsive teaching in explorations of AAL featured in texts more traditionally associated with learning experiences—literature and expository texts.

5. Scholarship on AAL in Literature and Expository Texts

And, just as texts that comprise or feature AAL in everyday speech can support powerful learning experiences, asset-focused practices built on more traditional classroom-type texts that feature AAL, such as literature and expository texts. Meier [44], for instance, discusses the benefits of using texts that are "designed to emulate rhetorical and stylistic patterns associated with the speech of AAE speakers and with the African American oral tradition as this is represented in recorded speech and in written text" (276). Using Andrea Davis Pinkney's biographical children's books as examples, Meier argues "that close reading of exemplary children's literature that incorporates an AAE speaking voice offers children models of excellence that support their progression from oral to written expression" (276). Meier illustrates this point with her analysis of the strengths of the AAL features, noting how these features, "convey subtle shades of meaning. . . where Pinkney's use of voice-like pausing—'Big. Black. Beautiful. True.'—makes the reader have to stop ever so slightly and savor the richness of each individual word before moving on to the next" (278). As a teacher educator, Meier's analysis reflects how an adult that recognizes and understands AAL might engage a student with the linguistic richness of an AAL text, whether or not either of them was an AAL speaker.

An important note from the approaches above is that while ensuring that students have the opportunity to have teachers from a shared cultural background is certainly important and beneficial (see [13] for more on this), the true cost of admission to culturally responsive teaching for educators who would leverage their students' strengths is a determination to learn about students' cultures from an asset-focused perspective. Indeed, Smitherman [45], describing the federal case brought by Black parents from Ann Arbor, Michigan against the school system for failing to equitably educate their children, asserts that "the failure was demonstrated to be the result of traditional pedagogy, *derived from an inadequate knowledge base*, that did not take the children's language into account in the teaching-learning process" (p. 142, italics added). In considering how to encourage and foster the drive to understand AAL and its potential in education, it is useful to note additional examples of written AAL texts that represent ways that educators and learners can engage with the work of scholars to learn about AAL together, learning about and examining AAL and its strengths at the same time.

For instance, Alim and Smitherman's [46] exploration of Barack Obama's use of language on the campaign trail, *Articulate while Black*, is enlightening and accessible to AAL experts and neophytes alike. The text centers an internationally recognized public figure whose speeches and patterns of speech are widely known and admired, making the discussion of linguistic features that might otherwise intimidate lay audiences much easier to engage with and understand. In connecting multiple aspects of Obama's eloquence to well-established elements of the African American oral tradition, the authors demonstrate that Obama was viewed as a gifted speaker not *despite* his Blackness, as many white listeners unfamiliar with the assets of AAL assumed, but rather *because* of his fluency in AAL. This approach is not new to asset-driven arguments about AAL; for instance, Ball's [47] analysis reveals the roots in AAL of the text patterns employed by several successful African American high school writers. However, the scope and reach of the Alim and Smitherman [46] text and its premise, considering the broad acknowledgement of Obama's communicative gifts, represents a real and relevant challenge to the entrenched deficit perspectives that continue to prevent speakers of AAL, and other non-dominant varieties of English, from, as Smitherman herself is known to do so well, comfortably and confidently using their entire linguistic repertoires in educational settings or scholarly or professional communication. Further, work like this scholarship, that connects the scholarly understanding of AAL with a broad audience, increases the likelihood that when speakers of AAL bring their language with them into scholarly and professional settings, more people will have the capacity to hear what they are saying.

Baker-Bell's [9] discussion of texts featuring AAL advocates for the critical analysis of language through a variety of literary and other texts, offering, "*Anti-Racist Black Language Pedagogy* as an approach that English Language Arts teachers can implement in an effort to dismantle anti-black linguistic racism and white cultural and linguistic hegemony in their classrooms using Angie Thomas' (2017) novel *The Hate U Give*" (p. 8, italics in original). Baker-Bell [9] stresses the importance not simply of providing texts that incorporate AAL for the sake of representation alone, but of hearing, or understanding, and *using* those texts as a foothold into discussions about language and linguistic discrimination and competencies. The variety of texts she suggests as supplements to the primary Thomas text help students dig in to critical discussions of language, even when that language feels familiar already. Her approach relies on the capacity of literary analysis to foster insight on the topics it explores and suggests that educators can use AAL texts to help students develop critical literacies through engagement with multilingual texts. And, indeed, much of the scholarship featuring the use or potential of spoken and written AAL texts discussed in this review so far reflects how Foster et al.'s [1] broad perception of educational texts can help support the other realms of culturally responsive teaching—style, socio-emotional connections, and institutional knowledge—providing learning opportunities where those realms overlap in the sweet spot of culturally responsive teaching.

Largely, these approaches to exploring texts that feature AAL in everyday discourse as well as literary and informational texts serve as opportunities to consider what language varieties are deemed appropriate in which situations, why, and by whom, fostering the critical thinking and metacognitive practices that are necessary for deep, meaningful learning across disciplines. Approaches that push back against standard language ideology, such as Seltzer's [48] study or a translanguaging-based pedagogy, demonstrate that welcoming linguistically diverse texts into learning spaces has the potential to engage "language minoritized students—bilingual students as well as those students traditionally viewed as monolingual—in metalinguistic conversations, literacy activities, and writing that delved into the role language played in their identities and lived experiences" (p. 986). And, as Seltzer's work and scholarship on translanguaging at large demonstrates, the discussion of standard language ideology, like that of culturally responsive teaching, is not limited in focus to AAL. Indeed, discussions of relegating minoritized language varieties to non-academic/professional spaces do not begin or end with AAL or with the United States. Shakespeare's practice of shifting away from the formal or courtly iambic pentameter to freer prose when his characters found themselves in greenspaces, and Jane Austen's tendency to use grammatical missteps to signal a character's lowness or lack of gentility are built on the same ideological foundation. AAL was not the first and will not be the last language variety to be perceived as a moral or intellectual failing. Steele, Dovchin, and Oliver [49], describe parallel treatment of the language use of Aboriginal students in Austrailia. And Smith [50] adds complexity and nuance by exploring the implications of this discussion for the literacy learning of Black Caribbean immigrant youth who find that they must simultaneously learn dominant and minoritized varieties of English.

AAL is, however, particularly well-suited to highlighting the inconsistencies between pedagogical approaches, and indeed educational philosophies, that are founded on deficit perspectives of non-dominant cultures and what is known from research about culturally responsive teaching that works. And AAL is an ideal case study, not only because it is widely studied and consistently unwelcome in professional or academic spaces, but also because of its position and role in mainstream, dominant popular culture. AAL, like many aspects of Black American culture, is of unquestionable value in the U.S. and beyond, as is evident in the widespread influence, uptake, and often outright appropriation of AAL in popular culture and media. Scholarship that explores AAL in popular media and culture demonstrates that arguments that present AAL as inferior or unintelligible to the majority of people in the U.S. are disingenuous at best. Further, such scholarship presents a wealth of promising potential AAL texts and ways to use them to support or enact culturally responsive teaching practices.

6. Scholarship on AAL Texts in Popular Media

Research from popular media may prove particularly important in combating deficit-based perspectives of AAL and African American culture at large. By virtue of their widespread popularity, these texts enjoy a broader audience than scholarly presentations of classroom or community discourse and in many cases a broader audience even than literature and expository texts featuring AAL. Unfortunately, not all depictions of AAL in the popular media reflect its strengths or potential for learning. For instance, Godley and Loretto's [51] discourse analysis builds on established research to assert that "master narratives about the English language, also called language ideologies, work as strong mechanisms through which educational inequities and racism are bolstered" (p. 317). They use this assertion to empower students to rethink and challenge social identification practices and "master narratives" of race and language that affect their lives, essentially agitating students to take their literacy learning from the classroom and into the world. The authors affirm the complex role of language and language narratives on identity development, and the potential for narrative disruption that can result from exploring the implications of different perspectives on AAL in schools and home communities.

Baker-Bell, Stanbrough, and Everett [52] support a connected argument through the analysis of widely recognizable and accessible mainstream media narratives that promote anti-blackness. And, just as engagement with AAL texts from everyday discourse and literature and expository texts can illuminate the communicative strengths of AAL and foster critical reflection on language, this analysis of popular media narratives engages students in critical inquiry about the form and function of linguistic hegemony both within and beyond educational spaces. As the authors explore the effects of representations of Black culture, including AAL, by the white-dominated media, and the repercussions of those representations on the lives of Black people, they center the "so what?" of culturally responsive teaching, creating space for socio-emotional connections with authentic and socially relevant texts. Further, the tone of the piece represents a drastic shift from early research seeking to establish the importance and potential of AAL, seeming rather to echo James Baldwin's [53] declaration that "[t]here is no reason for you to try to become like white people and there is no basis whatsoever for their impertinent assumption that they must accept you" (p. 8). With this piece, Baker-Bell, Stanbrough, and Everett [52] establish an important perspective from which to develop future educational research on language varieties and power in that they "theorize about pedagogies of healing and critical media literacy as tools to encourage Black youth to investigate, dismantle, and rewrite the damaging narratives", (p. 130).

And, texts from popular and social media are well suited to this work as they often engage with multiple complex narratives at once. Ilbury [54], for example, highlights the communicative power of AAL across cultural groups through a discussion of "enregisterment", or "the procedure in which linguistic forms become ideologically related with social identities" (249). The study examines the way white gay British men on Twitter employ linguistic norms widely associated with Black women to present the persona that Ilbury labels "sassy queens". In this case, the language norms are used intentionally to reference a particular social identity that is celebrated in the white male gay community in which it is being used. As such, a social media data set becomes a rich and complex text with the potential to engage learners in critical media literacy, linguistic analysis, and explorations of stereotypes, enregisterment, and language ideology. Further, the text confirms AAL's ability to express meaning powerfully and efficiently, but it also confirms the widespread intelligibility of AAL and familiarity with its features that extend well beyond Black American communities.

Such scholarship that confirms the widespread influence and intelligibility of AAL demonstrates an intimate connection between this topic and related discussions like scholarly peer review in academic publishing and the debate involving construct variability in the standardized assessment world as well. Politzer-Ahles et al. [26] suggest a bias in peer review against otherwise high-quality scientific content that does not conform to standards of international academic English. Thus, while the data of this study must be confirmed and replicated, it is possible that even scholarship on the strengths of AAL could experience this bias if it fully embraced the language it affirmed. And, the bias against non-standard language is ubiquitous. Randall [55] explains that the standards of test development dictate that "test developers should use language in tests that is consistent with the purposes of the test and that is familiar to as wide a range of test takers as possible" (p. 64). As historical and social education norms rely on the language ideology of standard academic English, language variances deemed to be "cultural" are considered construct irrelevant, including features and norms associated with AAL. This notion of construct irrelevance refers to the content knowledge, or construct, that the test purports to measure. Removing irrelevant variances is presented as a distillation process of sorts, removing details or forms that might distract from the purity or clarity of the construct. The problem this practice presents in relation to AAL is two-fold. First, as noted above, AAL is widely, often even internationally, familiar, and second, the forms and functions of languages are not so easily separable. AAL features convey meaning, and barring those features from standardized testing only bolsters misunderstanding of the overall value of the language system. Further,

the exclusion of AAL and other "cultural" language varieties from high-stakes tests feeds the circular reasoning loop that continues to prevent speakers of non-dominant language varieties from bringing their entire linguistic repertoires to bear in their learning. A lack of applicability to testing and value in professional settings is used to justify exclusion from the classroom which in turn justifies exclusion from tests and the professional world. Lyiscott [7] likewise addresses "the malignant logic that Standard English is the language of power, rendering other language practices powerless and void of utility in K–12 classrooms" (p. 39).

Scholarship on AAL in popular media also forges pathways to educational settings by establishing AAL "texts" as art, worthy, as such, of study and analysis holistically. Such analysis may embrace but is not limited to the origin of the text's linguistic features. For instance, years before Magro [56] explored the destigmatizing power of Hip Hop on non-mainstream language varieties, Alim [57] conducted an analysis of the lyrics of a Pharoahe Monch album with an eye toward revealing "the linguistic inventiveness and innovativeness of contemporary African American lyricists" (p. 60). While this research is certainly potentially applicable in classrooms to empower student speakers of AAL in a way that undermines the ideological premise that WME is the only variety of intellectual discourse, his analysis is not limited in scope to how AAL can be used to help African American students succeed in schools. Rather, Alim ultimately makes a case for considering the work of gifted Hip Hop lyricists as poetry, art for its own sake. And, while the work of poets like Paul Lawrence Dunbar and Gwendolyn Brooks and novelists like Alice Walker, Toni Morrison, and Zora Neale Hurston have established a place for AAL in the world of literary high art, linguistic and literary analyses of rap and hip hop constitute a move that promotes linguistic equality. Such analyses assert the legitimacy of art and artists whose medium is AAL, and whose intended audience is AAL speakers, presenting a lack of concern with the structures of power that deem language appropriate or not in a given situation. And, as contemporary scholars continue to explore rap and hip-hop texts [58–61]), their potential as texts in the classroom becomes ever more clear to those who are willing to hear it. Indeed, as "the most popular musical genre in the world" that "employs one of the most sophisticated vocabularies of any musical genre", hip hop and explorations of it in scholarship effectively lay bare the contradiction between the power and value of AAL and its place in contemporary educational and professional spaces [55] (p. 85).

7. Conclusions

Alluding to a phrase that appears frequently in Black music, the title of this piece addresses the challenge of enacting culturally responsive teaching practices that begin with and build on the strengths of culturally diverse students. The difficulty does not arise from a paucity of cultural assets or strengths in these students. Rather, the real challenge of enacting culturally responsive teaching practices is the inability of educators and the educational system to really hear or understand the value of those strengths in academic spaces. Non-dominant or marginalized cultures and cultural attributes are occasionally highlighted as a concession to a particular group rather than as a source of enrichment for the deeper learning of all. And the current rash of laws and policies across the U.S. illustrate a backlash to attempts, however justified they are by data and research, to codify non-dominant cultural texts and perspectives in curricula. Art, literature, and even history face threats or ejection from learning spaces for challenging the preeminence of the dominant culture. And, while decades of research and scholarship on AAL illustrate its richness and potential value to learning, its variance from an artificial standard continues to exclude it from classrooms. Asset-focused pedagogies acknowledge that cultural assets help students understand and navigate the world outside the classroom, so it stands to reason that they bring those assets with them when they enter. The challenge, again, is in the hearing, not the detection of sound, but rather in real, authentic hearing. Hearing in ways that understand, ways that trust and believe, if you will. The inability or unwillingness of educators to really hear AAL as an asset reflects the lip service often paid to the very idea of

leveraging the cultural assets of Black and Brown students in the U.S. educational system, lip service that has not and will not dislodge entrenched deficit perspectives of AAL and its speakers.

Still, while the scholarship discussed here constitutes only a fraction of the rich and relevant research on AAL, this exploration demonstrates that despite a variety of approaches and purposes, scholarship on AAL as it is used in the spheres of everyday discourse, literature and expository texts, and popular media reveals insights into ways to understand, use, and discuss AAL texts in the field of education to promote deep and authentic learning. These insights are important because though many in education acknowledge the importance of practicing culturally responsive teaching that builds upon the assets of students, the continual nature of cultural learning and discovery makes responsiveness a moving target. And entrenched deficit perspectives continue to exert a major influence on the field, perhaps because deficit perspectives of language and culture that define student needs and objectives in relation to a standard, however artificial, help educators define goals and measure success. In short, a standard helps both teachers and learners understand where they stand. Asset perspectives, particularly for teachers who do not share a common culture with their students, can be harder to understand and cultivate, requiring a shift in the teacher/learner paradigm.

Luckily, scholarship on AAL presents a variety of engaging and authentic texts that support or are likely to support culturally responsive teaching by complementing the styles, encouraging the socio-emotional connections, and connecting with the perspectives of institutional knowledge that overlap to create space for culturally responsive teaching to flourish in an educational climate that seems poised to lose ground in cultural responsiveness. Indeed, Zhao [62] suggests that "attempts to censor school library books and K-12 curriculum" represent evidence of a crisis of democratic education that must be met with yet "more various forms" and approaches to teaching and learning (p. 56). This demand for variety supports a broad understanding of what can and should be used as a text for learning. In exploring the ways scholarship on AAL identifies such texts and potential texts, this review offers insight and models to help educators identify, use, and discuss educational texts in ways that honor and build upon the cultural assets of learners. And, while the depth and breadth of scholarship on AAL provides a wealth of relevant scholarship that likely surpasses research on other cultural assets, fostering asset perspectives on AAL may contribute to disrupting deficit perspectives not only of AAL, but of AAL speakers as well as other home or heritage language varieties and their speakers, turning up the volume on the diversity and broad potential of the cultural assets of learners in general.

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