

PRESERVING PARTS OF OURSELVES: RETHINKING WHAT MAKES ENGLISH GOOD AND ENGLISH TEACHERS GREAT

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On the first day of tenth grade, Mr. Reese looked like a substitute teacher to me. His teaching attire consisted of Adidas sweatpants, a soccer zip-up, and black sneakers—not the collared shirt, slacks, and dress shoes that I had expected based on how all the other teachers dressed. I had also anticipated a white teacher, partially because I assumed that the last name “Reese” was Dutch or German, but more so because I had only ever had white English teachers before. From kindergarten until twelfth grade, I went to the same private school. In all that time, Mr. Reese, a half-black and half-Korean man, was my only non-white English teacher.

Mr. Reese was also my only English teacher to use what he called “hood language” in class, often saying phrases such as “that’s messed up, yo” and “quit playin’.” Still, *how* Mr. Reese spoke wasn’t as surprising as *what* he spoke about. Mr. Reese talked about his personal life almost every single day, unlike my previous teachers who never dared to muddy the line between their private and professional lives. My previous teachers connected in-class texts to societal problems such as racism or gender inequality, but Mr. Reese connected academic readings to his own personal experiences and memories.

The newness of Mr. Reese and his teaching style intrigued me, and, by the end of the year, he was my favorite English teacher I’d ever had. For my last assignment of tenth grade English, I wrote a letter to my younger self who had not yet met Mr. Reese. In the first line of that letter, I wrote, “Victoria, you might not know this yet, but English 10 Honors is much more than another academic class” (Ngai 1). In other courses, I simply completed classwork with the course material that I’d been taught in class. In Mr. Reese’s class, I looked at writing assignments as a chance for self-expression. I replaced my mechanical essays that simply got the job done with passionate essays that I felt excited to write. I discovered the joy of writing. For this reason, Mr. Reese was my most effective English teacher, even though he didn’t look, speak, or act the way that I had expected.

Mr. Reese is not the only teacher to understand the power of deviating from expectations. In his chapter “Casualties of Literacy” from *Your Average N****: Performing Race, Literacy, and Masculinity*, black literacy teacher Vershawn Ashanti Young argues that “code meshing” of black English vernacular (BEV) and white English vernacular (WEV) in classrooms ought to replace the normalized “code switching” pedagogy—an approach that permits only WEV to be used at school and sidelines BEV to the home and playground. Young practices what he preaches by incorporating BEV at the beginning of his chapter, writing, “BEV ain’t goin’ nowhere” even though

WEV has been the norm in academic writing (105). Similarly, Mr. Reese used “hood language” in the classroom even though this wasn’t the norm at my school. For both Young and Mr. Reese, an adjustment to WEV was expected. By “code meshing,” Young and Mr. Reese set an example for their colleagues and students to be inclusive of non-white vernaculars, expanding the idea of what qualifies as classroom language.

But, if code meshing could so easily be implemented in classrooms, everyone would do it. The persistence of a norm suggests that there is difficulty in deviating from the standard of code switching. Richard Rodriguez, a Mexican American second-generation immigrant, sheds some light on this difficulty. As the only non-white student in his elementary school, Rodriguez recalls that he was “fated to be the ‘problem student’” (25). The word “fated” implies that Rodriguez’s race and culture doomed him to be involuntarily viewed as problematic because he differed from his classmates who were white and spoke English. Rodriguez believes his native culture and language prevented him from finding a sense of belonging among his classmates. Mr. Reese faced similar difficulties fitting in as the only half-black, half-Korean teacher in an otherwise majority-white English department. Unlike how Rodriguez saw his difficulties as a reason to assimilate, Mr. Reese resisted the impulse to assimilate, even when other teachers reported him as unprofessional for using “hood language,” wearing sweats, and not tying his afro into a man bun. Though Rodriguez avoided his fate of being “the problem student” by learning and speaking English, Mr. Reese continued to dress and act in the way that made him most comfortable. Thus, he remained the problem teacher.

To be honest, the ease with which Mr. Reese spoke “hood language” in class was also concerning to me at first. I had never considered the possibility of an effective English teacher using “hood language” in class, just as Rodriguez never believed it “possible for a child . . . to use his family’s language in school” (26). The purpose of English class, I thought, was to help me achieve a sense of belonging in intellectual and, eventually, professional environments by elevating my formal diction from my casual diction. Similarly, Rodriguez advocates for students to replace their family language with English in the classroom because he believes learning English will help students find the sense of “[*belonging*] in public” which he himself previously lacked before switching to English (31). Like Rodriguez, I believed that separating an everyday way of writing and speaking from the proper English taught in class was a necessity for acceptance amongst our peers and, especially, our superiors. However, quoting Victor Villanueva, another linguist, Young points out that “[l]imiting the student’s language to the playground and home . . . still speaks of who’s right and who’s wrong, who holds the power” (112). Considering both Rodriguez’s and Young’s thoughts, we realize that, though the intention behind promoting a formal English is to help students feel confident in academic and social spheres, doing so still creates a hierarchy of language which encourages certain dialects to be viewed as inferior. Attempts to extinguish Mr. Reese’s nonstandard teaching language were carried out

with the belief that his “hood language” was inherently lesser-than and ineffective for teaching students the English skills they needed for success as future scholars.

Nevertheless, because of my transformative experience in Mr. Reese’s class, I have come to agree with Young when he argues that “[o]ur job should be educating students, not refashioning them into what we imagine the ‘marketplace’ demands they should be” (112). The “marketplace” is the professional world that students enter post-education, a place that we typically assume rewards formal language. Our solution, however, should not be to sift out the unique parts of our dialects in an attempt to produce cookie-cutter formal voices. If teachers continue teaching students to be like one another, then we lose diversity and the valuable knowledge founded in it. For example, Young tells us about Guamán Poma, a skilled thinker who wrote in his native language, Quechua. “[T]hose who used [Quechua] were considered illiterate,” and, because Guamán Poma used Quechua, “it took 350 years for Guamán Poma’s letter to be recognized as the ‘extraordinary intellectual tour de force that it was’” (119). The reason scholars didn’t recognize Guamán Poma’s brilliance until much later is because they let their reluctance to deviate from the standard language limit their reception of new knowledge. Likewise, my initial reluctance to Mr. Reese’s “hood language” and casual classroom attire prevented me from seeing the value of his style of teaching.

You would think that my bias, on top of the fact that I knew it was Mr. Reese’s first year teaching, would have prevented me from learning from him indefinitely. However, I’ve since realized that, along with Mr. Reese’s “hood language” and hoodies came something more. Because he chose not to assimilate, Mr. Reese did not face (or at least face to the same extent) the “‘self-annihilation’ and ‘cultural suicide’” described by English professor Keith Gilyard in relation to Richard Rodriguez’s rejection of bilingual education (Young 111). Mr. Reese brought an aspect of himself to class that my previous teachers did not. Prior teachers connected literary texts to broad universal themes—topics that would help me write essays that were socially relevant—whereas Mr. Reese connected texts to his mother’s passing, his love life, and his experiences with God. Mr. Reese’s stories told in his “hood language” were specific, which made them more engaging than the general lectures on racism, misogyny, and social structures that I received year after year from my previous English teachers. Just as I compare Mr. Reese’s way of telling stories to my previous teachers’ lectures, Rodriguez compares his father’s speech in Spanish to his father’s speech in English. He notes, “Using Spanish, [his father] was quickly effusive. . . his voice would spark, flicker, flare alive with varied sounds. In Spanish he expressed ideas and feelings he rarely revealed when speaking English” (Rodriguez 33). Mr. Reese’s stories, told in “hood language,” had an immediacy that would have been missing if he tried to speak in the same vernacular as my previous English teachers—vernacular that was not his own.

Beyond the initial engaging aspect of Mr. Reese’s “hood language,” it also felt personal, as if I were not just a student but a friend. Rodriguez experiences a similar sensation when reflecting on his Spanish interactions with his parents: “To hear

[Spanish's] sounds was to feel myself specially recognized as one of the family" (28). When Mr. Reese taught, I felt like our class was special compared to the other English classes that I'd been in, as if we were being let in on secrets about Mr. Reese that only his students had the luxury of knowing.

The difference between Rodriguez's situation and mine, however, is that Rodriguez and his parents were both comfortable with Spanish. I, on the other hand, had never spoken "hood language." My connection with Mr. Reese's way of speaking, though different from my own, is not unique. Citing Gerald Graff, a white American English professor, Young recounts a similar situation. As Graff comments on American linguist William Labov's interview with Larry, a black teenager, he describes Larry's BEV as "powerful, cogent, and interesting" (qtd. in Young 106). Despite the difference in Larry's vernacular from his own, Graff extracted value and meaning from Larry's interview answers. However, the answers were "powerful" *because* Larry's vernacular differed from Graff's, and it allowed him to express himself. Similarly, even though I never spoke "hood language," I was able to connect with Mr. Reese more deeply because he did, so I was even more receptive to what he taught.

And why wouldn't I be? Rodriguez argues that "[i]ntimacy cannot be trapped within words; it passes through words" (41). So even Rodriguez might see that I connected with Mr. Reese's personality and voice that was so present and passionate in his language. I think Mr. Reese would be pleased to hear this. He once explained that English class isn't just a place where you learn how to write. It's a place where you learn *to care about* what you write. As an author himself, Mr. Reese told me that the difference between a writer and an author is that an author cares enough about what they write that they feel other people have to know about it. For Mr. Reese, this meant writing and publishing poetry about his personal life. He showed me that our personal lives are something worth authoring. What impressed me as I read Mr. Reese's poetry was that the universal themes that my previous teachers had taught me—themes of family and love and death and heartbreak—were all present in Mr. Reese's writing.

His willingness to transcend traditional barriers, to upend the typical notions of what was "correct," and to explore his identity even in unforgiving settings inspired me. Because Mr. Reese was bold enough to author his own life, I realized I could do the same. I connected my essays to universal themes not by avoiding my personal input but by speaking through my own life. I grew invested in writing in a way that I'd never been before. I wrote to myself at the end of tenth grade, "[i]f you do nothing else, carry one lesson with you throughout the rest of the school year: writing requires a personality," because readers connect with the people behind the words, not the words themselves (Ngai 1).

At the end of my letter, I told myself, "[b]e passionate about the topics you choose. The prompt never confines you as much as your mindset does" (2). My old mindset was that a good teacher would be unlike Mr. Reese and that a good student would write about anything but herself. That mindset convinced me to hide the parts of

myself that would eventually make my essays exciting both to write and to read. Thankfully, Mr. Reese helped me realize the place that my personal life has in my writing. Without Mr. Reese, I wouldn't care about my writing as much as I do now. Now, I approach everything that I write with the hopes of having somebody connect with me through it. As an author, it is my job to put myself into my essays, to provide something for my readers to connect to, just as Mr. Reese gave me something to connect to by preserving the parts of himself that made him different.

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