M. K. Asante is a young writer, filmmaker, professor and hip-hop artist whose memoir *Buck* opens like this.

> The fall in Killadelphia. Outside is the color of corn bread and blood. Change hangs in the air like the sneaks on the live wires behind my crib. Me and my big brother, Uzi, in the kitchen. He's rolling a blunt on top of the *Source*, the one with Tyson on the cover rocking a kufi, ice-grilling through the gloss. Uzi can roll a blunt with his eyes closed.
>
> Cracks, spits, busts. (3)

I'm with him instantly, but there are words I don't know. I google "kufi," which means a Muslim skullcap, and "ice-grilling," which is a prison term for the look of one who is about to attack you, as well as the jewelry one wears in one's teeth. The *Source* is a Hip-Hop magazine. I'm not sure about "gloss." Does it mean the shine of the page? In this context, maybe it means something else. In 73 words, I've entered a culture both familiar and strange, through the vibrant voice of a writer who is "code-meshing," as linguists call it, mixing standard English and vernacular. "Me and my big brother Uzi, in the kitchen." "Are" is unnecessary. "Zero copular," as linguists say.

The destabilizing quality of the writing is part of its power for me--though of course Asante is not writing for me. He dedicates the book "To all the young bucks" like himself, like his brother Uzi, who is in prison. Uzi's rage is pointed at his father, an African American scholar with "a dashiki for every day of the year" (10). "*If we made it from all that . . . from projects and plantations--what's your problem?*" his father asks. It is, Asante says, his constant

refrain. But Uzi wants a part of the white culture--the Luke Skywalker doll, not the Lando Calrissian doll, the "corny black dude" played by Billy Dee Williams. He wants the special weapons, the special powers. (13) He also wants to be part of the energy of the street. He has been kicked out of several schools and at 17, his parents send him to live with a relative in Arizona. Shortly thereafter, he is arrested for sleeping with a 13-year-old white girl, who, he claims, said she was 16. He is sentenced to 10 years in prison.

Malo is living dangerously as well. His parents send him to a Friends school in Philadelphia, which he calls Foes. At Quaker meeting, children speak from the silence to say that they like the school. Malo says, "I don't like this school because this school don't like me" (34).

How does one begin to sort out the painful pieces of this story? The causes and effects? Malo's mother, brutally abused by her first husband, neglected by Malo's father, tries to kill herself and is hospitalized. She writes letters to Malo, and her voice is a constant reminder to him of the responsibilities inherent in being alive. Her son is in prison and she is half-mad with anger and grief. The misogyny that haunts this narrative is part of the larger world-wide problem for most civilizations, regardless of color. Charles Blow, for example, remembers men asking him at age 12 if he'd "gotten any" yet (Radio interview, 9/24/2014). Kristof's and WuDunn's *Half the Sky* documents the misery and poverty of societies that subjugate women and documents the ways that progress follows their empowerment. Malo struggles to sort out the allegiances that pull at him. His father is angry at him for his continual rebellion and can only tell him, You don't know the whole story; you don't know what it feels like to be me. This is what all parents say, to one degree or another, to account for our decisions, our limitations, our mistakes. Growing up is thus

a continual act of understanding, interpretation, forgiveness But there are too many voices and Malo is having a hard time holding it all. He regularly lays in rap lyrics as the background commentary on his young life. "I'm a lyrical destructor, don't make me buck ya/ Because I'm a wild muhfucka" (Big Noyd, 1995), 109. The ultimate insult, "muhfucka," is deep in his consciousness. The mother is the primary object, the one who gave him life, the source, the first beloved, and the ultimate taboo; as psychoanalysts tell us, the boy must separate from her and identify with the father, that first motherfucker. And then one cares for the mother, and makes threatening noises at someone else's. The mother—like the mother of Henry Adams's narrative, like my own mother—is both all powerful and without agency, the first madonna, the first slut. She is someone always vulnerable to being "fucked," someone who in her powerless state may well consider suicide.

As he dwells in this ferocious and confusing state of mind and body, suspect authority figures, impatient with his (resulting?) disdain and rule breaking, stiffen their backs in talking to him, and he moves further away from the safe havens his father tries to provide. If the father is not above suspicion, how can his suggestions be trusted? How can his care be accepted? If the world of power that Malo is forced to enter is white (filled with men who historically raped black women), clueless, racist, how can he settle in? So he deals drugs, feels the power of a roll of cash in his pocket, thus alleviating the financial burden on his mother, and also showing that he doesn't need her, which, of course, adds to her sorrow. His heart is with Uzi in prison and he needs something to turn him around.

Fortunately he finds it: the alternative school Crefeld, "like an island of misfit toys . . . manufacturer rejects" where there are "no bells, no guards, no metal detectors" (197). His first reaction, of course, is suspicion. When his teacher says, "Write anything," he writes "Fuck

school"--the universal solution: fuck the thing you hate. But she is not indignant. She allows the rejection that finally gives him permission to flourish in the place he needs to denounce. She respects that he is young, vulnerable, unformed. Of course he'll push against the rules. She laughs, kindly, and says "Keep going."

And in this present moment, born of but separate from all others, he begins to trust. There is suddenly, in this place, nothing to struggle against--only his own consciousness, the story of his life, what he has seen, heard, done and felt, all the contradictions, all the sadness, all the rage and guilt. But rather than letting his past drive his actions today, he can inhabit this safe place and explore his own experience, right now. "I am a blank page. . . . So many things I want to write, but my pen is stuck" (202). Just one word, says his teacher. "*B-U-C-K,"* he writes. Almost like *F-U-C-K,* but very different. An asterisk at the bottom of the page defines the word: "fashionable . . . hell-raising young man . . . a racial slur . . . a young black man . . .the act of becoming wild . . . to fire a gunshot . . . a rebel" (203). Can he be true to all of that and still be someone who writes and feels at home in the world?

The next chapter, entitled "Circle of Love," opens: "After free write, we share." He is now part of the "we" of the community of outcasts, and though it takes him time to read aloud, he is on his way to finding himself (204). "I write sentences that flow, like water, then I ride the word waves into new perceptions, new ideas" (208).

The sentences he writes contain the fullness of his language--the vernacular, the standard, the words defining intersecting worlds, the syntax and rhythms that are truest to his voice. We can, to give it a name, call it "code-meshing"--which is a little like allowing that Bach, Mozart, Beethoven, in writing their "classical music," could rightfully call upon folk melodies. We could call it plagiarism, as Beethoven learned and made use of all the patterns, the sonorities, the

musical advances of Mozart. As Ariel says in *The Tempest,* the father's bones, with all his virtues and sins, have been transformed. He is lost and found.

> Those are pearls that were his eyes;
>
> Nothing of him that doth fade
>
> But doth suffer a sea change
>
> Into something rich and strange. (I.ii.397 - 402)

II

In his educational memoir, *Voices of the Self*, published in 1991, Keith Gilyard described his two linguistic identities. He had two names: Keith for home, Raymond for school. He tells how, despite his obvious intelligence, he lost his way in the classroom. By the third grade, his sense of alienation was growing. And as a teenager, like Malo, he made himself dangerous—using heroin and breaking into cars to support his habit. Fortunately, he had people looking out for him, and ultimately they helped him to make his way through the courts and graduate from high school.

His attention now, as an English professor, poet, scholar, administrator, and former chair of the National Council of Teachers of English, is on the pivotal role of language use He recommends code-meshing in classrooms, because he knows that one reason teenagers become dangerous, passive or absent from school is that the language and attitudes of school seem beside the point of their life.

In the discussion that has been ongoing since the 4C's publication of their declaration of Students' Right to Their Own Language, Gilyard establishes himself as a "pluralist." Let all versions of English be. "Educational initiatives that fail explicitly to consider or address social

relations and student perceptions are impoverished . . . and are geared to fail students, like many of those of African descent, who feel reasons not to melt on into the program" (rpt. in DeLuca, et al, 91). At the time, this position was encouraging to me. So as a teacher of many writing classes and a graduate class in how to teach writing to freshman, I looked for other theorists who would represent both more conservative and radical positions on the subject.

On the conservative side, I discovered Lisa Delpit's essay "The Silenced Dialogue" which appeared in the *Harvard Educational Review* in 1988, and later became part of her book *Other People's Children.* As a bi-dialectalist, her position was that while dialects have their place in the heritage or home community, standard English is the language of power. Thus white teachers, whose pedagogy tends toward process and is not often explicit and directive, need to put aside their allusive and ultimately unhelpful ways in order to make clear what their standards are and to teach those forms directly. "Skills and drills," is the short hand for her position, though it narrows and misrepresents her. Still, she clearly favors explicit rules. She quotes one parent as saying, "My kid knows how to be black--You all teach him how to be successful in the White man's world" (572).

Delpit presents in her essay "five aspects of power" that need to be acknowledged:

1. Issues of power are enacted in classrooms.
2. There are codes of rules for participating in power; that is, there is a "culture of power."
3. The rules of the culture of power are a reflection of the rules of the culture of those who have power.
4. If you are not already a participant in the culture of power, being told explicitly the rules of that culture makes acquiring power easier.

5. Those with power are frequently least aware of--or least willing to acknowledge--its existence. Those with less power are often most aware of its existence. (Cross-Talk)

My first response was, Yes, she's right. White teachers need to give black students the "correct forms," "the goods." Standard English grammar. And how is that best taught? Upfront and clearly, Delpit says.

But what are the repercussions of such teaching? Delpit, who is black, can be as directive as she likes. Her students will know she is on their side. She teaches from the double consciousness of her community. But I don't. My directive voice may seem intolerant. Moreover, I find myself intuitively repelled by the rigidity of her position. And as a white teacher, I'm also curious about my students' language: how do YOU say it? Why isn't that okay? Also, my observation is that black students can and do acquire the standard, when they decide that it is not a threat to their identity, when they find themselves in an intellectual community that includes their voices and addresses their concerns. Standard English is all around us, available to be acquired. Students just need to find it useful. "Code switching" presumes one can and should keep the two dialects separate. and for my older students that is fairly automatic, though it may not be so for younger children.

And where do I stand in the culture of power myself as a middle-class white woman from Brooklyn? Yes, I speak standard English and can explain the use of "s" on third-person, singular verbs in the present tense (though why should an "s" indicate singularity in a verb and plural in a noun?), but I remember and still recognize slights from others who think that Italians are figures of comedy or violence. And as far as my students are concerned, do I know the fine difference in usage between "is" and "be" and the zero-copula verb in Black English, or the five

present tenses that Morrison outlines? Do I know a hundred other nuances of Black English vernacular that African American students have acquired in their lifetime? And as far as the culture of power goes, many people can make me feel intensely like an outsider. So I don't feel particularly righteous about the voice of the privileged. My father, one may be quick to point out, got with the program immediately, learning English readily in school. But he carried with him a resentment of many teachers for the rest of his life because they made him feel that he was less than they were. One could say that everybody has to accommodate. But some people accommodate more than others, and my sympathies are with the child he was.

Can I say, then, as Richard Rodriguez's teachers said to him, if you want to get ahead, you have to forsake your first dialect for someone else's? Is this a tragedy? Often, yes, because it goes along with a thousand other ways in which black students are asked to accept second best and are treated as lesser beings by the culture of power. Do I say, you must always accommodate, go against your own gut? Hide a part of yourself? That's precisely what I don't want to say. I want to say: Let's change the culture of power. I want to say: In my classroom, you are safe. You may know how to be black, but I don't. And since you are the students, I need you to tell me what you need because the goal is not for everyone to fit into the white paradigm but for all of us understand and respect one another. I want to say, You, my students, are a part of the curriculum. You are part of the future that I will never see. What do you see when you look at the world? I will try to be patient with you, try to meet your needs. Please, in exchange, be patient with me because nobody has all the goods. I will try to eliminate as much bad faith as I can. If you think I'm lost in it anyway, you can say it--though I hope you will say it kindly. I will hear you. We, the class, will hear each other. We will talk about it. We will recognize that we're all struggling together. The classroom is a world unto itself. It is a place of

preparation, yes, but it is also our present life. It has as much reality as any other place and experience we come to. Let's not pollute it with bitterness and elitism that will only hurt the world we go on to build.

Each of us has to find her own way, based on observations that continue over years. When do we connect with students and when do we not? When does the light go on for any of us? For Asante, the light went on when the teacher in his alternative school told him to write anything and he wrote "Fuck school" and she laughed and said, Keep going (200). If our first thought is "Fuck school," then by all means, we should write it. What comes next? Can everyone write their own unique blend of black, white, and in between, from positions of increasing equality, with increasing levels of proficiency and grace? "The crucial work for pluralists is expressly political," Gilyard writes.

> Shake up school and society so language variation doesn't play out so negatively in the classrooms. Pluralists wouldn't ignore Standard English, but they do feel that in a more equitable societal arrangement and school situation, students generally would want to expand their use of Standard English and, in fact, do so very well (90 in *Dialogue*; from *Let's Flip the Script*).

The most radical of the three scholars, carmen kynard, rages at the idea of neatly separating out language from race and community. Responding to Delpit, she writes:

> I am . . . not interested in providing formulas for grammarizing/skills-traditionalizing Other's People Children because they need the explicit, direct, tough instruction (which sounds like slavery to me). I refuse to be a chocolate or honey-dipped Miranda of Shakespeare's *The Tempest* who will give students, as the embodiment of

> the savage Caliban, THE language of the university. Whether or not I speak THE language remains questionable and if I do so without a social critique or demand for social change, then I was better off mute." ("new life in this dormant creature" from *Alt Dis,* 34).

Her article describes her arrival at orientation for adjuncts at the college where she is teaching part-time and where the administrator, a black man, denigrates the students. They "do not know how to think, have no work ethic" (i.e., do not come to class, turn in work late, etc., 33). Kynard observes that one can make some of the same complaints about graduate students, "who often seem to take Incompletes" (32). But those same graduate students, the adjuncts, fail to see themselves as another group whose real life needs are ignored. "[They] do not align the constraints imposed on their intellectual work by the exploitation of their part-time labor with the similar constraints imposed on the time of working, single mothers in their classrooms" (32).

Kynard writes her article, then, to "intervene in dominant modes of understanding" and uncover the ways that the elitism of universities undermines the efforts and visions of poor and working class students. For example: it is often the case that students are eligible for tuition assistance only if they are enrolled full-time. So they sign up for more classes than they can study for, and if they are working--which is a necessity--they often do poorly. If they drop a course or their averages go below a certain level, their aid discontinues. She reminds us also of the language barriers they face:

> writing is the property that we stand at the door of. . . if we teachers allow students to hybridize on the page (which isn't really the problem. It's just that some folks hybrid is too hybrid), we gotta control it. (34)

Thus the emphasis on grammar and skills, and the subduing of the full expression of those voices.

> we never ask the questions: what the hell students writin? for whom? and for what? there is no interrogation here of social consciousness and change, just form over substance, seem like only a fool would see this lie as radical or revolutionary when it really just the same ole, same ole. (34-35)

After watching a video in class on domestic violence, one of kynard's students writes to her:

> My mother was abused.
> Almost every fucking boyfriend
> (including my punk ass
> father)
> beat her. I seen the shit
> go down. . . .
> Yo, Carmen I did
> everything for him. I thought
> it was real. No matter what he said or did I made
> excuses for his sorry ass . . .
>
> This is why my mother stabbed my pops. she got fed up with the cheating and the abuse.
> . . . I am breaking the cycle
> My son will not abuse women or anyone

He will respect his mother and wife and children. (40)

[and kynard writes back]:

April, I'm not even sure where to start.

Your letter/poetry takes me back to all those places. i feel you. i know what it means to have to pull a man offa your moma.

a different kinda lesson in our womanhood and motherhood, huh?

. . .

it was a long time before i could talk about

and write about and locate this politically . .

but at first it wasn't with the strength and dignity that i see in you. (p. ??)

I slept on this exchange for a few nights, wondering if, as kynard says, it was "too hybrid" to quote here, but then I thought about the news reports I hear all the time on radio and TV: that 20 percent of college women report having been raped. And there is the ongoing years-long, still unfolding scandal of the sexual abuse of children by priests and coaches and the ongoing sexual abuse of women in the armed forces, and the stories of football players abusing their partners. And we all know that under the veneer of uniforms, the smell of incense, the sound of marching bands, and the banners of sponsors draped on the walls of stadiums to sell sneakers (made by foreign workers for pennies a day), and adding to that the country's insistence on its right to bear arms and the stories too terrible to recount of school children and people in malls and movie theaters being murdered with those guns, and the ongoing murdering of unarmed black men, and the incarceration of so many young black men (one in three, Bryan Stevenson says), we understand that we are a rageful society addicted to cruelty of all kinds,

more interested in damage control after the fact than in addressing the sources of abuse and working to foster self-reflection, honesty, and compassion.

Why shouldn't April be outraged? And why shouldn't we listen to what she says and support her for having the courage to move out from under the secrecy that holds so much hypocrisy and corruption in place. One can only hope that her telling of her story and kynard's empathic response empower her to free herself from that terrible cycle.

At the end of the semester, kynard advises April:

> . . . whatever happens, keep experimenting with what you want to say and how you want to say it. I see you, now at the end of the semester, MAD OPEN on a spoken word kinda vibe. Do not accept any notions that academic writing can't be that. . . . Keep writing and if they don't like it, too bad. We know what they really scared of. They will try to disguise this by suggesting a lie to you: that your "dialect" is inappropriate for academic work because it is merely a stepping stone as you move UP to the sophistication of academic discourse. Puhllease! Your spoken word style is NOT about what you can't do but what you CAN! . . . (43)

April and carmen hold in their descriptions the complex conditions of the lives they know deeply, lives that are often fashionable as the plots of TV detective shows but are deemed too shocking to find their way into the classroom. If the "outcomes" of our classroom practice, to use a favorite term, are to further knowledge, to deepen self-knowledge, to change existing conditions of oppression, to move toward peace, then what is the point of telling a student she must change her lived language before she can write about her life? This recognition is what fuels Hip-Hop: the demand, after all these years of continuing injustice, for the forms and freedom to express the way one really lives in and views the world.

We all know this. And yet we frame our educational initiatives as part of the "Race to the Top." Why race? Why are we running? Why not a more level playing field? Why do we have to be on top of others? Think of the image of kynard's father. It's such an unimaginative and finally brutal way of describing achievement. How many people actually arrive at a place of satisfaction and equanimity in this ferocious world? If we teach April to tame her wild tongue, aren't we betraying her? As Asante says, "I know this trick. . . . Teachers always tell you to express yourself, then when you really do, you get in trouble" (200). Why would April trust a world that needs her to change the way she sees and describes the world? If she can say what she sees in her own language, if her experience is validated rather than denied or turned away from, won't she be more likely to find her way?