

The Power of "No": Buddhist Mindfulness and the Teaching of Composition

Marlen Elliot Harrison

Ain't nothing in a long time lit up the English teaching profession like the current hassle over Black English. One finds beau-coup sociolinguistic research studies and language projects for the "disadvantaged" on the scene in nearly every sizable black community in the country. And educators from K through grad. school bees debating whether: 1) Blacks should learn and use only standard white English (hereafter referred to as WE); Blacks should command both dialects, i.e., be bidialectal (hereafter BD); Blacks should be allowed (?????????) to use standard Black English (hereafter BE or BI for Black Idiom, a more accurate term). The appropriate choice having everything to do with American political reality, which is usually ignored, and nothing to do with the educational process, which is usually claimed. (Smitherman 828)

The First Mindfulness Training: Openness

Aware of the suffering created by fanaticism and intolerance, we are determined not to be idolatrous about or bound to any doctrine, theory, or ideology. (Hanh 23)

As I begin reading Shanee's¹ paper, I find myself immediately feeling angry. "Why would she turn this in? What's with this language?" I get my pen out and in blue ink I note the fragment:

Despite the many theories about Fraternal and Identical twins and what really distinguish these two groups of people.

I continue reading and I continue to feel frustrated. Why does she split the thought into two sentences? Next line:

I truly believe that there is know real distinction between the two other then there definitions.

"How in the world could she have passed College Writing 101," I consider, "and how could she have passed high school English?" I immediately feel lost, as if there is suddenly no ground to stand on. "What do I do?" I wonder. "Is this language significant? Do I need to pay attention to it?"

¹All names have been changed to preserve students' privacy.

I tell myself that Shanee is an African American, inner-city student who is obviously not aware that her language choices are wrong.

Wait.

Wrong? Is that what I mean?

No, not wrong. But, *not right*.

But, but, but, wait a minute. I read the sentences again, this time substituting a few of Shanee's choices with my own words:

Despite the many theories about fraternal and identical twins and what really distinguishes these two groups of people, I truly believe that there is no real distinction other than the definitions: Both fraternal and identical twins can share similar bonds.

That's better. And you know what? That's actually a pretty great way to start her paper! Here come the "buts" again. Can it be a great opening sentence if the errors in language stand in the way of the message?

I consult with Anne Lamott. She often helps me out when I'm feeling confused: "Very few writers actually know what they are doing until they've done it. In fact, the only way I can get anything written at all is to write really, really shitty first drafts" (93). I then consult with Donald Murray who explains that "When a draft is completed, the job of writing can begin....Most writers share the feeling that the first draft, and all of those which follow, are opportunities to discover what they have to say and how best they can say it" (161).

I tell myself that because both of the above authors were required reading for our course, this may be Shanee's shitty first draft and I have no reason to be too critical. Though this eases the sting of seeing a student *butchering* the English language, a student that I've actually grown quite fond of over the last year, I still feel a little uncomfortable. It's as if I've just watched my twelve-year-old sister do a really sad cartwheel for the 187th time but praised her effort anyhow. Is it ok if the intent is effective but the execution is not?

The Second Mindfulness Training: Nonattachment from Views

Aware of the suffering created by attachment to views and wrong perceptions, we are determined to avoid being narrow-minded and bound to present views. We shall learn and practice nonattachment from views in order to be open to others' insights and experiences. We are aware that the knowledge we presently possess is not changeless, absolute truth. (Hanh 26)

But isn't there really only one way to write? The *right way*? How can a student be so *lazy* as to not even proofread her work, or for that matter, have someone else proofread her work, especially considering that I constantly encourage students to have their work proofread?

How could she think that using "know" instead of "no" is ok, even if it is only her first draft? I pause for a moment and picture Shanee sitting in class smiling at me.

"Maybe she didn't even realize it," I tell myself, "maybe she was so concerned about *what* she was saying that she didn't stop to consider *how* she was saying it in this draft." As she previously discussed in class, Shanee will apply to a Master's program eighteen months from now. Is she ready? Can I help her? *May* I help her?

I think about Kachru and Pennycook and discussions of World Englishes. I think about language use and social contexts and I think that maybe for Shanee, this is her best effort. Again, the elephant jumps off my shoulder...but only for a moment. Then I revert back to "No! This is just not acceptable. There's a difference between *excusing* one's style as a linguistic variety and simply being lazy."

I have to ask myself what I *should* be attending to as the instructor. Is it the message and higher order concerns, is it grammar and expression or is it both? Shanee is a sophomore college writer in a college research writing/pre-graduate course. And going back to my earlier "should," I continue, "Where the heck do all my ideas about writing come from, anyhow?"

I continue to read Shanee's paper. Page two:

My goal is to try and prove to my readers that their isn't really a difference between African American or accession identical and fraternal twins. The reason why I am so gear to prove that their is no real distantion between the two because if you do not already no I am a fraternal twin but if I was not to tell you that you would think that me and my sister are identical twins.

I'm disappointed. And I feel guilty.

Shanee is from inner city Philadelphia. Shanee is lucky she's alive. Her cousin Lola wasn't so lucky. Shanee is here because of student loans. Shanee kicked ass in our previous literature course. Shanee sometimes doesn't finish her homework. Shanee complains a lot. But, Shanee is here and Shanee did turn in a paper.

"How do I help Shanee?" I ask myself. I take out my pen, finish reading the paper and make notes on the back of the page:

Both your argument and your authority as researcher in this paper are greatly weakened by your language choices. This is not college level writing, Shanee. I'm surprised you would give this to me in its current condition. I encourage you to not only have your work proofread by someone else but that you have it read aloud to you so that you may hear what your writing sounds like from an audience's perspective. Please make a stronger effort to consider how you are expressing yourself with language.

Shanee is a black girl (or is she an African American woman?). I am a white boy (or am I a Caucasian man?). There is a power differential here that because of North American political and social histories I feel sensitive to. I don't want to tell her "no" or "wrong" or "fix it" but I have to. If I tell her "no", will she feel a rejection on a soul level? What is it like to be told that one's language is wrong? This is the first time in my early career as a writing instructor that I have *felt* this issue so deeply and I have an uncomfortable sense that my written comments are not exactly what I wanted to say...nor are they likely to be viewed as useful to Shanee.

Two days later during our mini-conference about her paper, Shanee looks upset. She is growing ornery as I continue to show her page after page of her errors.

True, Shanee speaks differently than I do. Shanee *writes* differently than I do. Is her method of rhetoric equally valid even though it is not similar to mine? Can a rhetorician construct an effective argument if the words are not carefully chosen? Can I really say that Shanee has not been *careful*? This last question makes me nervous...value judgments are difficult.

I think of bell hooks and return to my worry that this is not merely a conversation about a research paper: "No other group in America has so had their identity socialized out of existence as have black women..." (7). If I tell Shanee that *I am right* and *she is wrong*, if I take away Shanee's right to her own linguistic expression and ask her to replace it with my own, a white man's, am I encouraging Shanee to disappear? *What is it like to feel the power of "no"?*

The Third Mindfulness Training: Freedom of Thought

Aware of the suffering brought about when we impose our views on others, we are committed not to force others, even our children, by any means whatsoever—such as authority, threat, money, propaganda, indoctrination—to adopt our views. We will respect the right of others to be different and to choose what to believe and how to decide. We will, however, help others renounce fanaticism and narrowness through practicing deeply and engaging in compassionate dialogue. (Hanh 27)

The next paper I read is from a student in the same class, Marvetta. Here is an excerpt from page two of Marvetta's research about college students' sexual behavior preferences:

I do not believe in anal sex at all, and when it comes to sex with guys sometimes when you get too freaky you are labeled as a slut or hoe. So I put my men to a test three months before intercourse, and then they get the basics and if we are together long enough they can get

a little more of my freaky side. (LOL) But that has to wait until I can tell that they are not one of them fake dudes. I know for sure that if girls knew that their name was going to be put out as a slut or hoe some of the things they do in the bedroom would come to an end. Being a college woman things that happen on this college campus sex wise are so predictable when it comes to having a friend with benefits. Some of the guys will never take you serious if you just say that is your intention. You automatically a hoe. Yeah it is crazy but it is so true. We as women are not allowed to just be us in the bedroom without worrying about our reputation later.

I've encouraged this topic because Marvetta was excited that she had finally found a teacher who would not only allow but encourage her to "do my thang" as Marvetta liked to joke. I am not shocked by her candor. Rather, I am very happy that she feels comfortable enough to walk down that path, especially considering that inquiry into sex and sexuality is one of my main research interests and I understand that it can be a dubious topic for a college research classroom.

"Do it!" I told her!

"Really?" she asked incredulously.

"Why not? It's interesting, it's unique, you're curious about it... that's a great way to start out as a researcher!"

"Damn! This is gonna be one freaky-ass paper!" she announced with glee.

Now here I am with an interesting explanation about college students' sexual behavior, the very writing itself an ethnographic artifact, and once again I am back to the same questions that I had wrestled with when reading Shaneé's paper: "Why would she turn this in? What's with this language?"

Marvetta's writing is cleaner than Shaneé's in that there are fewer spelling errors, she seems to have a stronger voice overall and a vocabulary with which to use it. This time, it is the vocabulary I am most concerned about. What's a "hoe", "too freaky", "fake dudes", "friends with benefits"? As a sociolinguist, I should have been thrilled by her identification of sexual slang... what a cool paper that could have made! But, I pull out my pen and begin to note my need for clarifications of terms. I point out that there is an awful lot of slang - "an awful lot"... Wow. Finally, I ask her who her audience is.

My meeting with Marvetta, who happens to be another black girl, an African American woman from inner city Philadelphia and Shaneé's roommate, goes much like my earlier meeting with Shaneé. As I explain to Marvetta that the topic is very interesting, but that her authority is weakened by her language use, the word "POWER" scrolls before my eyes as if flashing on a Wall Street light board:

BLCKPWR 1899.99 -0.29 ▼ 0.02% WHTPWR 4961.69 +99.55 ▲ 2.05%

Marvetta is not happy. Marvetta wants to be commended. Marvetta doesn't want me to tell her "no." She's not interested in "no." Marvetta is interested in "yes."

Again, I think of bell hooks: "If I do not speak in a language that can be understood there is little chance for a dialogue" (78).

And then, Adrienne Rich: "This is the oppressor's language, yet I need it to talk to you" (149).

And finally it hits me: As a writing instructor I seem to have been blind to the fact that this is an *audience* issue. Marvetta and Shanee are their own audiences. Maybe this is where I need to go next. Perhaps instead of arguing about "not college level" language use, what I need to be talking about with them is "performance." No, I don't mean "you're not performing on a college level," but rather "writing is as much a performance as acting on a stage, and sometimes you've got to create a performance that fits the role that was...."

Uh oh. Wait. No. That is telling them to be inauthentic. That is telling them, "No, don't be you, be me instead because this is what will allow you to succeed." And maybe it was the communicative style that I am criticizing that actually helped them to succeed in their own communities to begin with.

And then something miraculous happens. An African American woman who calls herself "Pepsi," a friend of Shanee and Marvetta's who has overheard these conversations, speaks out.

"You writing in Ebonics, girl. That ain't the style of this paper! You supposed to be writing a research paper for an academic journal. You ain't writin' for the right audience, Marvetta!"

Marvetta replies emphatically, "But that's how I write!"

The Fourth Mindfulness Training: Awareness of Suffering

Aware that looking deeply at the nature of suffering can help us develop compassion and find ways out of suffering, we are determined not to avoid or close our eyes before suffering. We are committed to finding ways, including personal contact, images, and sounds, to be with those who suffer, so we can understand their situation deeply and help them transform their suffering into compassion, peace, and joy. (Hanh 29)

Pepsi's words have made sense. They ring true. I look at her and embrace her with my gaze. I hope my whole body is saying "thank you" and that she can hear this message.

Marvetta looks at Pepsi, speechless. I speak up with "What an awesome observation!" One of Marvetta's own has slapped her with some truth. A few months later, Pepsi will tell me during a private conversation that Marvetta likes to bully people so that she can get her

way and that Pepsi herself had read Marvetta's paper and told her that she had better think more carefully about the genre of this paper and her intended audience.

A note about these papers: the course is a research writing course for sophomores and juniors at a mid-sized, public university in Western Pennsylvania. The paper is the main project and the course activities include discussions and writing about intended audience. We begin the course with Linda Flower:

The goal of the writer is to create a momentary common ground between the reader and the writer. You want your reader to share your knowledge and your attitude toward that knowledge. Even if the reader eventually disagrees, you want him or her to be able for the moment to *see things as you see them*. A good piece of writing closes the gap between you and the writer (139).

Pepsi's comment tells me that my attention to Linda Flower has not gone unappreciated. Something within me shifts. But I still have a problem. Something is still bothering me. I don't feel quite right. Shanee and Marvetta are both unhappy. It feels like summer where the daylight is forever trying to keep away the night. I'm the daylight and yet I'm worried about the lack of night.

The Eighth Mindfulness Training: Community and Communication

Aware that lack of communication always brings separation and suffering, we are committed to training ourselves in the practice of compassionate listening and loving speech.... We will make every effort to keep communications open and to reconcile and resolve all conflicts, however small. (Hanh 39)

As a doctoral student, I use my classes selfishly to get what I need out of them. I use my community of classmates and colleagues to help me work through thorny ideas that attach to my mind, unable to float away either dismissed or embraced. As a student of rhetoric and composition, I am constantly trying to decide what the traditions have to say about various themes that emerge in my learning and teaching.

One evening during the Wednesday rhetoric class in which I am a student, I bring up the story of Shanee, Marvetta, and Pepsi. My chest feels tight as I relate my difficulties to my peers. I'm curious as to what others can offer, sure that I'll most certainly get advice. We read Quintillian on rhetoric:

This profession, then, distinguished as it is, most compendiously, into two parts, the art of speaking correctly, and the illustration of the poets, carries more beneath the surface than it shows on its front. For not only is the art of writing combined with that of speaking, but correct reading also precedes illustration, and with all these is

joined the exercise of judgment, which the old grammarians, indeed, used with such severity that they not only allowed themselves to distinguish certain verses with a particular mark of censure and to remove, as spurious, certain books which had been inscribed with false titles, from their sets, but even brought some authors within their canon and *excluded others altogether from classification*. (Book 1, Chapter 4, italics my own)

While Quintilian goes on to discuss changes in language, letters replacing other letters and derivations in words, I tell the group how I reacted to my research writing students. The name "Geneva Smitherman" enters the discussion and I consider how my ideas about writing might be *excluding others altogether from classification*...as in "they have no class."

I conclude that there will forever be Marvettas and Shanees and that this struggle about writing assessment will present itself over and over again. There is nothing I can do to prevent sentences like

The reason why I am so gear to prove that their is no real distant-
iction between the two because if you do not already no I am a
fraternal twin...

and I see that there are a number of issues here: this work has not been proofread...or maybe it has and both Shanee and her proofreader believe that the above sentence is fine.

There is no evidence that Shanee has considered the audience she had initially stated she was going to write for—the Lifetime cable television channel's website—or had she? Would she normally use words like "distantiction"? Perhaps she is experimenting with another voice?

I don't think anyone has ever talked to Shanee about how her language use says something about her identity. Maybe that's because others ignored it or maybe that's because others spoke the same way.

Part of the challenge in giving a student feedback is the power dynamics inherent in the identity relationships between instructor and student. Identity involves race, age, sex, etc. My main concern is not so much with changing Shanee, but changing the manner in which I give feedback to Shanee.

I need to celebrate Shanee's own voice and style, but also show her the realities of writing for an academic audience and in a specific genre, no matter how oppressive or conformist they might be. Shanee is black, I am white. Shanee is a woman, I am a man. Shanee is a research writing student, I am a research writing instructor...yes, *that* is my job. And so far I may not have been very successful.

The Eleventh Mindfulness Training: Right Livelihood

Aware that great violence and injustice have been done to our environment and society, we are committed not to live with a vocation that is harmful to humans and nature. We will do our best

to select a livelihood that helps realize our ideal of understanding and compassion. (Hanh 44)

So this is what happens that next week: I ask my students to gather together in a circle of chairs, a common enough request. I ask if there are any comments about the feedback they received on their first drafts.

I look over at Marvetta, her lips are pursed and her head is turned away. Her legs are crossed and her arms are crossed. Her limbs are her armor, her closed lips a sign of preparation for battle.

"Something has really been bothering me," I announce. "I'm aware that we all express ourselves differently, and that I can't expect you all to write like me, or for that matter, for everyone to write in exactly the same voice."

Marvetta's head turns towards me and her eyebrows rise as if to say, "Well, go on. Let me hear what you have to say for yourself!"

I continue, "Many of you had some basic mistakes in grammar, like switching *their* with *there*, or *would of* with *would have*. And I know that we call this first draft the *shitty draft* and that many of you might have felt as if you merely wanted to get your ideas down on paper and leave the cleaning for later. But I was concerned about a particular event that happened in class last week."

I explain to the class the comments I made on Shanee and Marvetta's papers. I discuss my struggle as their teacher with how to best provide feedback. I admit that I'm not sure that I gave feedback in the most constructive way. I further admit that I worry about being a white, male teacher and more painfully, I admit that I worry about encouraging the disappearance of important voices.

I look at Shanee and she looks at me. She knows where this is going. I turn to Marvetta, and Marvetta's lips begin to relax. Her arms begin to slowly move down her chest towards her lap.

"Geneva Smitherman," I continue, "an African American professor and writer," I pause again and read the following:

...a linguist and educational activist, has been at the forefront of the struggle for language rights for over 25 years. She has forged a writing style which combines academic discourse *and* African American Language that has become widely celebrated for efficacy in making the medium the message. (MSU.edu, italics my own)

I look around the room and see that Shanee wants to ask something.

"You saying that she writes research papers using Ebonics?" asks Shanee.

"I'm saying that she is interested in legitimizing her voice as an African American female in academia. She's interested in using her own voice as an acceptable form of expression." I look at the class and ask them what they think.

Marvetta gets a pen and asks "Geneva who?"

"Smitherman," I reply.

But I'm not finished yet. I continue by talking about Pepsi's comment to Marvetta. I look around and the class is silent. Everyone wants to see what the white boy professor has to say next.

"Shanee, I told you that you weren't writing on a college level. I want to apologize."

Shanee smiles at me, cocks her head and offers, "That's okay, Marlen. I know I can be a little lazy. I was just pissed because I worked so damn hard and then you were like 'NO!'"

But Marvetta interrupts, "Well, I ain't lazy and *you* told *me* I wasn't writing on a college level." The expression on her face also asks "Now what have you got to say for yourself?"

"I understand, Marvetta. I apologize for upsetting you. I kind of wanted to challenge what you thought was acceptable. My problem was with terms like "hoe" and "friends with benefits" and the fact that the style of your writing seemed too familiar. It's like Pepsi said, you were using Ebonics in a paper that you want to have published and read by the largest audience possible. You want to publish your hard work, right?"

"Seems like you were telling me that the only way to write is the white way! Ain't what's her name published?" she asks referring to Smitherman. "Don't she use her regular voice?"

"Yeah, but you ain't no established academic!" Pepsi shoots back. "When you a professor of language then you can do whatever you want to do. This ain't no black thing white thing. This is about learning to write effectively so people will actually read what you got to say, no matter what you look like."

The Twelfth Mindfulness Training: Reverence for Life

Aware that much suffering is caused by war and conflict, we are determined to cultivate nonviolence, understanding, and compassion in our daily lives, to promote peace education, mindful mediation, and reconciliation within families, communities, nations, and in the world. (Hanh 47)

And June will bring a lecture tour of Japan. Having been invited to no less than five different campuses to speak about my recent research, I have decided to ask *rhetoric*, *genre* and *audience* to travel with me. I will discuss this paper with friends and colleagues in Japan in the hopes of successfully changing the characters in this drama from Shanee and Marvetta to Tomoko and Yuki. I hope to discuss, in a land of Buddhist cultural and philosophical traditions, how the Fourteen Guidelines can be used to examine what second language writing instructors do (or

don't do). I will ask my fellow instructors to be mindful about power structures inherent in language teaching and how we impose our ideas about good writing on our students, as if our ideas are the only ideas that matter. I will talk about Shanee and Marvetta to help my fellow instructors examine how feedback is given, and then given again, and then followed up with discussion about the feedback. I will try to discover if there exists a Japanese Geneva Smitherman. Perhaps there is a writer in *Nihon* who hybridizes her or his writing style. This next step will lead to discussions of code-switching and second-language carryover in students' written texts and questioning whether or not this is acceptable. The issue must also address students' linguistic rights and the connection between language and identity. And this discussion will lead me back to the beginning:

The First Mindfulness Training: Openness—Aware of the suffering created by fanaticism and intolerance, we are determined not to be idolatrous about or bound to any doctrine, theory, or ideology. (Hanh, p. 23)



Marlen Elliot Harrison teaches at the University of Jyväskylä.

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