

“I said what I said’ - Black women and argumentative politeness norms”

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This paper seeks to complicate two primary norms within argumentation theory: 1- engaging with one’s interlocutors in a ‘pleasant’ tone and 2- speaking directly to one’s target audience/interlocutor. Moreover, I urge argumentation theorists to explore various cultures’ argumentative norms and practices when attempting to formulate more universal theories regarding argumentation. Ultimately, I aim to show that the two previously mentioned norms within argumentation obscures and misrepresents many argumentative practices within African American Vernacular English – or Ebonics, specifically the art of signifying.

KEY WORDS: AAVE, Feminist Argumentation Theory, Intersectionality, Modus Tonens

When we dissent, ideally, we enter an argument in which each interlocuter approaches and engages holding argumentative civility norms in mind. Within the argumentation theory literature, it is not uncommon for reasonable dissension to involve civil words (Aikin and Talisse 2008, van Eemeren and Grootendorst 2004, Burrow 2010) and treatment of interlocutors as epistemic peers (Cohen 2002, Hundleby 2013, Aikin and Talisse 2008), which includes properly addressing arguments towards interlocutors rather than using proxies or argumentative surrogates. To deviate from these practices and to intentionally subvert these norms is considered at best an argumentative faux pas and at worse vicious. However, such norms are specifically modelled after ‘dominant’ Western argumentative practices and conceptions.

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This paper will proceed in the following manner: first, because many within my audience will be unfamiliar with the practice of signification within AAVE, I provide a brief description along with a few case examples to highlight the ways in which signifying does and does not work. It is a practice that is not only appropriate, but in many ways within Black African-American women's communities expected to be mastered and deployed. Engagement with signifying is paradoxically a disrespectful signal of respect. From here, I give an exegesis on norms of engagement utilizing a 'pleasant' tone. I engage with Aikin and Talisse's conception of 'modus tonens' along with several different variants of non-adversarial feminist argumentation models (NAFAM). Aikin and Talisse conceive deployment of an incredulous tone of voice, which implies that the interlocutor is cognitively subordinate, as vicious. NAFAM also perceives such practices as vices; moreover, all the models attribute such practices to the furthering oppression of women.¹

I use signifying within Black African-American women's speech communities (BAAWSC)² as an example to show not only that such practices should not be construed as vicious (even though they are utilized to display dominance and support subordination), but that they are forms of argumentative bonding and empowerment. From here, I review the norm of proper addressment with an interlocutor/audience. It is considered rude and bad argumentation to not properly address the target for one's dissension, especially if some of the only acknowledgment is exercised in a demeaning or belittling way. I situate the BAAWSC practice of signifying against this commonly accepted norm and argue that such a norm is not the

¹ Elsewhere I have argued that upon further examination of NAFAM, the critiques along with the suggested remedies to the adversarial method focus on white women's oppression, rather than all women's oppression. See Henning (2018).

² I want to explicitly state, that not all Black African-American women engage in these communicative practices. These practices are neither sufficient nor necessary in order to consider oneself and be considered by others as a Black woman. However, there is a common historical narrative and cultural backdrop that we do share, which makes a category, such as BAAWSC, possible.

‘norm’ within many of our language communities. Signifying is often modelled after Niger-Congo call and response methods of argumentation, which relies of indirectness, surrogate interlocutors and ‘reading someone to filth.’ While such practices are indeed meant to ‘turn someone out,’ they are also meant as a civil means of argumentation. To not engage in such practices is either flat out rude behavior or the art of signifying is seen as too complicated for outsiders of our practices to deploy. That is to say, you play the game or you can’t hang.

I conclude this paper with some remarks as to the stakes of not properly nor seriously taking into account other argumentative practices within academia’s argumentation theories, especially the norms for dissension. Given the precarious depictions of Black women within the United States (and globally) coupled with a misunderstanding of our communicative norms and practices, it is all too easy to write off standards that deviate from the dominant Western norms as rude and the Black women deploying them as angry, brusque, or ‘difficult to deal with.’ I rely on Collin’s (1998, 2009) notion of ‘controlling images’ to show that this particular form of oppression in conjunction with a lack of engagement with our argumentative practices within the literature forces many of us to resort to practices such as code switching. If code-switching is not properly mastered and our practices of argumentation is utilized within dominant Western settings, then we become more susceptible to what Bondy refers to as argumentative injustice (2010).

I. ‘TALKIN LIKE A MAN WITH A PAPER IN HIS HAND’

The art of signifying is a practice that falls within the highly contested conception of Ebonics – also known as African American Vernacular English (AAVE), Black English, Black Vernacular English, or Black English Vernacular.³ The language practice incorporates English

³ Ebonics is a conglomeration between the words ‘ebony’ and ‘phonics,’ pertaining to the linguistic practices found in West African, Caribbean, and United States African slave descendants. It encompasses both verbal and non-verbal linguistic practices. Several scholars are still in disagreement as to whether Ebonics should be classified as a dialect or a language. For the purposes of this paper, I choose to remain neutral on this matter as the outcome of this debate does not bear on whether or not the practices of signifying within BAAWSC should be considered as counter examples to the two norms of argumentation theory that I examine. The point is that these practices occur, and such practices do not rely on Ebonics being a language, dialectic, or something else entirely. What is important for my purpose;

words, but retained syntactic features found within Niger-Congo languages and follows distinct linguistic rules including but not limited to: negative concord, deletions of verb copulas, habitual aspect markers, semantic bleaching, and 'it' for the dummy explicative 'there' (Smitherman 2015). Rules such as these are regulated and maintained. There is a proper and improper way of speaking Ebonics, or AAVE, so it is not merely 'in vogue' bad English, or simply reducible to slang. So those who speak it are not using poor English enunciation or grammar, nor is its usage signs of cognitive disorders. "Language use is disordered or defective when one's skills register lower than one's peers" (Kirk-Duggan, 141). With AAVE containing regulative rules and practices enforcing proper usage, its utilization is not a sign of deficiency in linguistic nor argumentative skill. In fact, quite the opposite. I say all of this to stress that the practice and art of signifying is not bad argumentation run amok, but rather illustrates particularized structured and enforced norms of engagement.

Signifying or signification⁴ is a specific type of speech act within AAVE that utilizes exaggeration, irony, and indirection to partake in coded messages, riddled with insults, during discourse (Morgan, 2002). It heavily relies of indirection and the focus can be either "on a person, thing, or action either for fun or for corrective critique" (Kirk-Duggan, 142). Gates, Jr. characterizes signifying as a practice that "subsumes other rhetorical tropes, including metaphor, metonymy, synecdoche, and irony, and also hyperbole, litotes, and metalepsis" (686). One subset of signifying that the reader may be familiar with is the practice of 'playin the Dozens,' where "the one signified usually is a person's mother" (Kirk-Duggan, 142). And examples of such would be 'yo momma so dumb, I gave her a penny fo her thoughts, and I gots change.' Within a 'Dozens' exchange, an indirected discourse takes place where, in my example, the personal being signified is acting as a surrogate or intermediary for the targeted exchange – they are an associated or ancillary target, while the real target is the overhearer. Morgan states "speakers who use indirectness actually mean to target certain individuals and they mean to do so indirectly" (2002, 47). The dissension is coded, and at face value might not be seen to others outside of BAAWSC as targeting someone other than 'their momma.' Morgan notes that often within AAVE, indirectness can take two forms: pointed

however, is the understanding that Ebonics is not merely 'bad' American English. For more on the Ebonics debate, see Blackshire-Belay (1996), Crozier (1996), Smitherman (2015) (2000), and Williams (1975).

⁴ It is also referred to as sounding or snapping.

indirectness and baited indirectness. Within this paper, I focus on pointed indirectness, which is enacted either when a speaker is acknowledged to say something to a surrogate receiver, but the target is different, or when local knowledge is drawn upon to target someone seemingly ancillary to the discussion.⁵

Within the following segmented conversation, I hope to highlight some of the key features within signifying. The conversation takes place between three members of my paternal family and myself: Sherry – also known as Baby Alice (a 62-year-old social worker), cousin Deborah (a 61-year-old social worker), and my grandmother Geraldine (an 84-year-old retired factory worker). The argument involves why Sherry, who is older than Deborah, is referred to as the baby of the family, despite being my father's older sister and older than her cousin Deborah. We are sitting around my grandmother's kitchen table, with everyone directing their responses towards me, despite me only speaking twice and raising two questions.

Tempest: Just gettin' somethin' straight – Aunt Sherry, you're older, yea? Than

Deborah?

Sherry: Older and wiser hon, but *none* would know just by lookin

Tempest: So, why we call you 'baby Alice'?

Deborah: No, no, no, now now Tempie... Baby Alice gets mad when we call *it* that

Sherry: Don't *you* be listenin to that nonsense now, *some peoples* just mad cause I'm the

baby with baby privileges

Deborah: Nah she means *she* gets babied... Tempie, now listen here...

Geraldine: But she *aint'* the baby – that's your daddy

Sherry: Right, but *I'm* my momma's baby

Deborah: "I'm my momma's baby" [mocking tone] - Nah, Tempie *it gets babied*

Sherry: [cackles] Tell her Tempie, I get babied because I'm the baby. There's a *whole*

⁵ Conversely, baited indirectness is "when a speaker attributes a feature to a general target and audience that may be true for a segment" (Morgan, 2002, 47). This tactic is often used to see which members of the audience 'speak up' or 'fess up' to the generalized feature and in doing so, exposes themselves – hence the name "baited indirectness."

lotta peoples who get jealous of that fact – gotta watch out
for ems
Deborah: Whatchu gotta watch out for are peoples who get dems
special treatment and
favoritisms. They end up not being able to do nothin fo
demselves
Geraldine: uh...watch out now! Girl [addressing Tempest], why you
gone and start up nonsense?

Within this dialogue, Sherry, Deborah, and Geraldine all offer competing conceptions of what it means to be the baby of the family – an obvious case of dissension. Sherry views being the baby as specialized treatment – pampering and attention, Deborah expresses conflicting notions stipulating that such special treatment marks the individual as incompetent, while Geraldine offers up an interpretation of being the baby of the family as someone who is literally just that – the baby of the family. The signification specifically occurs when all three members engage in the argument through me, the surrogate receiver, but each of these women’s comments are signals to one another. Sherry and Deborah are arguing with one another through my presence initiated only by my preliminary questioning.

Moreover, the indirectness discourse and reference to one another as ‘that,’ ‘it,’ or ‘a whole lotta peoples’ utilizes unambiguous referents commonly used within AAVE. Such referents are often used to signal who the specific target is regarding the signifying – in one case it’s a pointed indirectness when Deborah refers to Sherry as ‘it,’ and in another case towards the end of this segment, Sherry deploys baited indirectness invoking ‘a whole lotta peoples’ to illicit a response from Deborah and Deborah responds in turn. But each woman directs their responses to one another through me, the surrogate receiver. Sherry also ‘reads’ Deborah in her initial response to my question, by insinuating that while she is older than Deborah, Sherry looks better. The conversation ends with my grandmother shaking her head and criticizing my initial line of questioning.

Within BAAWSC there is a saying “Talking like a man with a paper in his hand” which refers to individuals who lack the skill and know-how to understand that raising questions within social contexts need to be grounded in contexts “which incorporate or reflect their reasoning, rather than simply satisfy[ing] institutional or intellectual curiosity” (Morgan, 52). Directed discourse, within the art of signifying, is devoid of any notion that discourse is co-constructed intent. Morgan demarcates directed discourse

from indirect discourse not only via the lack of indirection, but also the lack of audience collaboration along with lack of nuance and attention to varying social contexts (1989). At the end of this conversational segment, my grandmother was critiquing my direct question and insinuating that I should have used better reasoning for my questions.⁶ Directed discourse is seen as a 'work' or 'school' communicative style,⁷ and the proper employment or shifting from indirected discourse within AAVE to directed Standard English discourse is known as code-switching. More will be said on this phenomenon later.

Direct discourse is seen, within Standard English and the literature involving norms of argumentation, as the agreed upon (and preferred) intent of the interlocutors. That is to say, within these dominant frameworks of argumentation, parties enter into argumentative discourse with the understanding to reach some kind of truth or compromise. And this intent is seen to be understood by both parties, but such an intent within BAAWSC is perceived to be merely institutional ways of known, so lines of questioning enacted directly are "confrontational, intrusive, and presumptuous" (Kochman, 99). Jones takes a stronger stance and asserts that directed questions are potentially harmful to the respondents (1988). Within the following two sections, I will expand more upon the argumentation literature that endorses 'polite' directed discourse.

II. MODUS TONENS

Within the previous section, I outlined the basic practice of signifying and having given the reader a basic understanding of how the practice functions, I will now give an overview of the argumentative vice within argumentation theory regarding politeness, 'modus tonens,' which stipulates that condescending tones and inflections should not be used in insincere manners. I view the vice of 'modus tonens' originating from the conglomeration of adhering to both the virtues of the sincerity principle and the politeness principle.

Below is an illustrative example of 'modus tonens' entitled "Gun Control":

⁶ Specifically, I should have known better than to have asked such things given what all I know about each woman and the family dynamics.

⁷ In full disclosure, I initiated this conversation in hopes of eliciting examples of signification, so my grandmother's critique was apt. The communicative style of directed discourse here was indeed used for work.

Speaker 1: You see – if we allowed more people to carry handguns, then we would have fewer cases of gun violence. Arming people has a deterrent effect.

Speaker 2: so, let me get this straight – *more* people with guns will *reduce* gun violence?

(To the audience): *More people with guns will reduce gun violence?!?* (Aikin and Talisse, 522, emphasis in original).

‘Modus tonens’ refers to the aversive use of tone in a speaker’s voice, which is used to manipulate the audience/overhearers. While Aikin and Talisse acknowledge, that certain viewpoints are so ludicrous that we may react out of surprise, what makes ‘modus tonens’ particularly insidious and vicious is that “it controverts the goals of argumentative exchange” (532). This tactic does not adhere to the goals of argumentative exchange because it 1- shifts the burden of argumentative proof in an inappropriate way and 2- epistemically subordinates one of the interlocutors. Within the Gun Control case, Speaker 2 rejects Speaker 1’s claims, but does so without offering up reasons why they reject the claim or reasons why the audience should reject the claim. As a consequence, Speaker 2 has placed the argumentative ball back in Speaker 1’s court without having to ‘dirty their hands.’ Moreover, Speaker 2 has not only steered the argumentative ball away from their court, but they have done so in a manner that “one’s interlocutor is cognitively subordinate” and gives “an assessment of the dialectical situation disguised as a directive within it” (Aikin and Talisse, 524). So, these speech acts are not a form of commissives that displays non-acceptance of a standpoint or argumentation.⁸ Directives such as these not only assert that the interlocutor is not to be considered an epistemic peer, but also does so in a manner that offers up the claim that the interlocutor is not to be considered an epistemic peer by using *non-argumentative means*. Given this, ‘modus tonens’ not only shifts the argumentative burden, but also puts interlocutors, such as Speaker 1, in a position to defend their cognitive ability.

However, not all cases of ‘modus tonens’ are created equal. Aikin and Talisse distinguish between using this tactic at the opening and closing of argumentative exchanges. If modus tonens is deployed at the closing of

⁸ Van Eemeren and Grootendorst define commissive speech acts as “acts in which the speaker or writer undertakes vis-à-vis the listener or reader to do something or to refrain from doing something” (64). I will say more later as to whether or not signifying should be viewed as commissive or directive speech acts. I argue that Aikin and Talisse wrongfully see ‘modus tonens’ as strictly directives.

arguments, then the conclusion “still registers non-acceptance, but its vice is that it does not provide any reason for rejecting the conclusion beyond its supposed *prima facie* implausibility” (525). It merely is a failure of good argumentative cooperation. If the tactic is used at the opening of argumentative exchanges, then Aikin and Talisse deem it to be vicious, because the stage has been set, without proper justification, that we should reject the interlocutor's standpoint and arguments.

Returning to signifying, we can better see how at first glance such a practice might be construed as falling under the category of ‘modus tonens.’ Recall my previously mentioned exchange – the majority of the comments were laced with incredulous and sarcastic tones directed towards me, regarding the other interlocutors (namely Sherry and Deborah). Deborah clearly restated Sherry's comment “I'm my momma's baby” with well-placed inflections to dismiss and render Sherry as epistemically subordinate. Deborah even takes it one step further and directs me not to listen to my Aunt Sherry and corrects Sherry's interpretation of the topic at hand (why Sherry is called Baby Alice) stating “*It gets babied.*” The argumentative ball also gets thrown around a few times without actually addressing each other's objections or claims. My assenting to one view of the argumentative claims was a test to see where exactly my loyalties lie – with my cousin or with my aunt. Although as a quick aside, the surrogate interlocuter or overhearer, is typically not to be heard, only seen. Any obvert interjections would have been perceived as engaging in directed discourse, which would have been rude.⁹

Strong or extreme cases of ‘modus tonens’ involves using the tactic as “purely oratorical...in which the speaker is actually making a gesture wholly for the sake of the onlooking audience” (Aikin and Talisse, 527). One could easily (albeit mistakenly) surmise that the art of signifying is done for the overhears or surrogate interlocutors, especially since all the comments within the aforementioned example were directed towards me. The women were speaking to me, yet I was not the target for their claims, rather I was serving merely as a proxy or surrogate. I was the audience. But signifying is not just for the audience, the practices are done for the speaker, hearer, and overhearer. The practice is one in which not only the audience is taken into

⁹ Also, I will note that seniority plays a salient role within signification exchanges. Although I am a grown woman, with a household of my own, compared to my older matriarchs I am still a girl and it would be inappropriate for me to interject myself in such an argument. For more on the roles of BAAWSC in terms of ‘rites of passage,’ see Morgan (2002).

consideration, but also the interlocutors along with the speaker themselves. It is a collaborative endeavor that requires all parties assenting to the rules of AAVE.

I would hardly classify such an exchange as vicious or derailing of argumentation itself. Aikin and Talisse purport that speech acts which are laced with incredulous tones and assert epistemic subordination are best construed as directives rather than commissives; however, I disagree. Commissive speech acts can serve various roles within argumentation including:

- (1) accepting or not accepting a standpoint, (2) accepting the challenge to defend a standpoint, (3) deciding to start a discussion, (4) agreeing to assume the role of protagonist or antagonist, (5) agreeing to the discussion rules, (6) accepting or not accepting argumentation, and – when relevant – (7) deciding to start a new discussion (van Eemeren and Grootendorst, 68).

The start of signifying, on my view, serves as a commissive since it fulfills van Eemeren's and Grootendorst's points 3 and 4 – the onset and agreeance to play particular roles. Within my example, the onset of signifying began with Deborah's entry into the conversation and by continuing the argument, both Sherry and Geraldine assented to the rules (5) and roles (4). Later within the argument, we can see how directives do come into play, and on my view, the directives serve more than just articulating or settling of a difference of opinion.

But the opening of the signifying, would improperly be viewed as a 'modus tonens,' despite possessing all of its characteristics. It should more properly be construed as a commissive, because like some commissives, "such as agreeing to discussion rules," is only feasible when "performed in collaboration with the other party" (van Eemeren and Grootendorst, 68). Signifying is a collaborative enterprise that involves not only the participation of speakers, but also hearers and overhearers. Aikin and Talisse assert "just as incredulous stares cannot be refuted, one cannot refute a modus tonens" (526). However, I believe the practice of signifying is a way to refute 'modus tonens,' due to its affiliative properties and onset agreement of indirectness, misdirection, and subordination 'play.'

III. WHOSE POLITENESS NORMS?

Stressing the importance of affiliative and communal argumentative practices has often fallen under the purview of non-adversarial feminist argumentation models (Hundleby 2013, Rooney 2010, Cohen 2002, Burrow 2010). Many variants of NAFAM object to the decontextualized practices

that many scholars working on signification have argued those within the BAAWSC find discomfoting or downright rude (Kochman 1981, Jones 1988, Morgan 1989). While both the BAAWSC and NAFAM purport to engage in more contextualized communicative and argumentative styles, NAFAM views many of the practices within BAAWSC to be hostile and partaking in the adversarial method.¹⁰ Within this section, I highlight some of the ways in which NAFAM, while calling for more intersectional and affiliative argumentation models, alienates and would consequently render the practice of signifying as oppression and adversarial. For the NAFAM, not only would the brusque language and culturally toned diminutives be problematic, more importantly the act of indirected discourse would be construed as disrespectful and rude.

Under the NAFAM, "feminine politeness strategies aim at cooperation through connection and involvement, reflecting values of intimacy, connection, inclusion and problem sharing" (Burrow, 247). What exactly are "feminine politeness strategies? Argumentational and communicative styles that are affiliative, bereft of rude language, name calling, direct engagement with one's targets, and non-dismissive tones (Cohen 2002, Burrow 2010, Hundleby 2013). Govier stresses the importance of direct interaction, because "[w]hen others speak to and argue *directly to us*, we can interact with them, challenge, hear their responses, and conduct a genuine, real, critical discussion" (191, emphasis my own). That is to say, communication and discourse should be oriented directly towards our interlocutors, rather than an ancillary communicator.

With such a brief introduction to NAFAM, I hope it is clear to the reader the problems the model would have with signifying. As previously stated, both NAFAM and many BAAWSC practices are in agreeance that argumentation in many cases should be affiliative and communal. However, one person's politeness norms, is another one's disrespect. Crude and even obscene language is acceptable within many of our exchanges. As is the practice of name-calling. Recall my primary example of signifying, Deborah on a few occasions referred to Sherry as 'it' or 'that.' Such name calling and demeaning language would be unacceptable under NAFAM, due to its function of subordination and display of dominance. Sherry's opening response would also more than likely be problematic for such a model, due to her insinuation that she was better looking than Deborah.

¹⁰ For more on the ways in which BAAWSC practices are in general counter intuitive to numerous goals and ideals within NAFAM, see Henning (2018).

Moreover, there was no direct interaction between the interlocutors of this debate. Each interaction was addressed towards me, but I served the role as a surrogate interlocutor. Morgan (2002) likens such examples akin to 'talking behind someone's back.' Both Sherry and Deborah were speaking to me about one another as though the other individual was not also sitting at the table. Other than my opening questions, there was no direct engagement. And at the closing of the argument, I was even chastised by my grandmother for engaging in such a direct and inappropriate manner.

NAFAM proponents could contend that my exemplary case, and signifying in general, is done out of jest or fun. If all parties know the rules and all privy to insider information, then their conceptions of politeness norms are still maintained. However, within signifying, there are elements of explicit and intentional dominance. It is *play play*, but also for *real for real*. Signifying is paradoxically an act of endearment and empowerment, but there are real stakes in the game. Sights are meant, and the verbal jabs do sting. Even though all three women have a deep respect and love for one another, they (especially Sherry and Deborah) were legitimately attempting to assert epistemic dominance over one another and purposely did not directly engage one another during the argument. Similar to back-handed compliments, signifying is meant to be fun, but at times painful. It is riddled with burns or 'playin by the dozens,' but done so out of love and affection. Practices like signifying within BAAWSC aren't typically used unless it is with those whom we share an affinity. This is due to the communicative and affiliative nature of indirect discourse. If one is to immediately turn to directed discourse, especially with the knowledge that the interlocutor knows the game, then that's a pretty keen signal that they really don't want anything to do with you. We turn to directed discourse when we don't feel a community bond with our interlocutor.¹¹

I am sure to many readers, this seems paradoxical or counter-intuitive, but because there aren't many instances of such exchanges within Standard English, it can be a bit difficult to explain to those without local knowledge of these communicative practices and the reasoning behind them. Focusing on this difficulty, within the next section I will highlight how incredibly salient these communicative and argumentative and argumentative practices are to us within BAAWSC.

¹¹ Either that or we have good reasons to believe that our interlocutor does not know the art well enough to hash out any dissension.

IV. HOW..?

In a passage, quoted by Brown (2001), writer R. DeCoy asks:

How...can you ever hope to express what you are, who you are of your experiences with God, in a language so limited, conceived by a people who quite helpless in explaining themselves? How can you, my Nigger Son, find your identity, articulate your experiences, in an order of words? (59-60).

While DeCoy is addressing his son regarding the lack of effectiveness within Standard English and their argumentative practices, I believe such a passage serves our daughters as well. How indeed can Black African-American women express themselves and offer dissent in such a way that is restricted by Eurocentric white norms that do not adequately encapsulate our argumentative norms? In what ways does learning Standard English and argumentative practices serve us? Within this section, I give an account of the benefits and downfalls of us utilizing and adhering to the argumentative norms outlined within the previous two sections. While there are a few pragmatic upshots to us adhering to such norms, ultimately, I argue that in constantly and permanently doing so, we forgo a large understanding of ourselves and our cultural roots.

The mastery of Standard English can be truly transformative within Black African-American lives. Over the centuries, we have learned that mastering this linguistic style and language can make or break us in specific courses of study and fields of employment that are dominantly white. This realization has led to the practice of code-switching, which is the ability to invoke Standard English rules and intonations.¹² However, while code-switching has been fiscally beneficial and has generated mobility with white spaces, the practice is one that is a coerced engagement. Young argues that code-switching is an oppressive survival tactic to Black women and does not accurately track cognitive abilities nor achievements within diversity (2009). Fordham and Ogbu have noted that while the 'burdensome benefits' of code-switching is largely known within Black African-American communities, Black girls have reported on being hesitant to engage in the practice in fear of losing their blackness in favor of 'sounding or acting white.' It is semi-interpreted as cosigning dominant white linguistic and

¹² That is to say, we have mastered the ability to 'sound white.'

argumentative practices.¹³ Some opponents of AAVE may concede that code-switching is a necessary adaptation to mainstream dominant American culture, but I argue that this is a failure of understanding the centrality of such argumentative and communicative practices, such as signifying. “These opponents of Ebonics failed to recognize the extent to which Ebonics is celebratory of African American life. They failed to acknowledge its distinctive fluidity, the way in which its speakers use intonational, stylistic, and often indirect methods in order to make a point” (Kirk-Duggan, 150). As Lakoff states “Language uses us as much as we use language” (54). The utilization of signifying and some of its key features that fly in the face of many dominant argumentative norms pertaining to viciousness and politeness are vital aspects of many Black African American’s cultural and socio-historical understanding. It shapes us as much as we shape them.

Moreover, Yancy argues that his experiences being a Black man in America cannot simply be captured within Standard English. “Some forms of knowledge become substantially truncated and distorted, indeed, erased, if not expressed through the familiar linguistic media of those who have possession of such knowledge” (Yancy, 275). I, myself, within my own work on anti-Black oppression, specifically misogynoir, have struggled to put into words not only my experiences, but also my knowledge regarding misogynoir. Operating within the white academic framework, making particularized argumentative moves, and adhering to the norms has been a long and bumpy road. I am often misunderstood, deemed to be an ill-educated interlocutor, who is mean, brusque, and angry – reduced to yet another exemplar of the ‘angry black woman.’ Yancy poignantly articulates several of my sentiments in the following passage:

To write in this language is to reproduce the professional culture of philosophy, to perpetuate lines of power, and to show that you have been ‘properly’ educated and worthy of hire. Moreover, to engage in this discourse is to perform linguistically before an audience of gatekeepers who probably fear too much fat in their discourse, too much play, too much signifying, too much indirection, too much ambiguity, too much vagueness, too much concrete, everyday reality (276).

I urge philosophers and theorists delineating the norms of argumentation to consider alternative norms and argumentative practices. It is not merely

¹³ For an analysis offering conflicted findings regarding Fordham and Ogbu’s study, see Tyson, Darity, and Castellino (2005). For me personally, I often feel a tinge of sadness with my ability to code-switch, because I don’t want it to seem as though I’m a proponent of Standard English over AAVE.

out of my own discomfort that this call to action is made, but there are serious harms at stake, which will be outlined more explicitly within my concluding section.

V. "THEY DON'T THINK IT BE LIKE IT IS, BUT IT DO"

In lieu of a traditional conclusion, I offer up some closing thoughts on the lack of research done to incorporate AAVE practices, specifically signifying, within argumentation theory. I argue that having this particular lacuna within the literature can contribute to what Bondy refers to as 'argumentative injustice' (2010). Bondy construes argumentative injustice as "cases where an arguer's social identity brings listeners to place too much or little credibility in an argument" (265). The misconceptions pertaining to another's social identity are due to employing false stereotypes, such as Black women are angry or hostile. Particular false stereotypes such as these regarding Black women are often promoted and perpetuated within mainstream American media, which Collins denotes as "controlling images" (2009). These false stereotypes skew reality and attempts to render the falsity as natural and factual, in an attempt to justify Black women's oppression. Images and false external narratives depicting us as 'hot-head,' 'hard-headed,' 'rude,' or 'disrespectful' gives way to argumentative injustice, specifically credibility deficits. When we enact certain argumentative practices, such as signification, we are no longer interpreted as giving arguments, rather we are reduced to these controlling images. So instead of being viewed as a reason giver, an arguer, a dissenter, we are seen as just another rude, disrespectful, uneducated Black woman/girl.

Bondy asserts that argumentative injustice is harmful in three primary ways: 1- "it undermines the rationality of the endeavour [sic]," 2- "it can distort an arguer's status in the community of arguers," and 3- "if repeated enough, credibility deficits can damage the ability of the person to whom the prejudice attaches to engage productively in arguments" (266). Now, I am a bit suspicious as to how exactly Bondy is conceiving 'productive arguments,' but nevertheless, the model of argumentative injustices is useful to help illustrate the importance of accurate dissemination of our argumentative practices in conjunction with greater diversity within the academia's argumentative theories. Signifying, along with several of our other practices when engaging in arguments, are means of productive argumentation. Given our approach to community orientated discourse, we are incredibly aware of our interlocutors and overhearers.

Aikin and Talisse state “[g]iven that arguments are designed not only to gain the truth about some matter but to resolve disagreements, both parties should contribute to the discussion in ways that promote those ends” (525). Due to controlling images and misunderstandings pertaining to the practice of signifying, it commonly appears to outsiders of BAAWSC that the ways in which we argue does not contribute to disagreement resolution. But as I have shown, it is not merely an attempt to corrupt argumentation nor is it a corrupted argumentative practice. Such a practice is corroborative, paradoxically respectful, and celebrates our rich heritage of communication.

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