The Spirit and Voice of Langston Hughes within the College Composition Classroom: Incorporating Humor and Code-Meshing into Student Writing

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Abstract

Through a close examination of Langston Hughes’ rhetoric of humor within his works of fiction and non-fiction, I seek to question the pedagogical implications Hughes’ work might have within Composition courses, specifically with beginning writers. Looking at the texts of Hughes might help students break away from their preconceived notions of writing as one of those “dread courses.” Writing and reading can be transformative, and as an instructor, I need to begin forming new pathways for my students of looking at reading and writing differently, and I think this can be achieved through the humor of Hughes’ texts. This paper illustrates an endeavor to reinvent my beginning writing classroom to reflect the needs of the students who sit before me, dreading the writing they will have to do throughout the semester. As a result, I look at Hughes’ humor texts in two specific ways. On the one hand, I examine Hughes as a social humorist, who, through his poetry, prose, and newsprint, ultimately endeavors to expose and moderate the complex fears and anxieties about racial difference. In addition, I will look closely at African American Vernacular English (AAVE) and code meshing through the lens of Hughes’ humor texts in an attempt to foster alternative ways beginning writers can start to think about language and writing. By incorporating Hughes’ modular texts, AAVE, and code meshing into the beginning writers’ classroom, it is my primary goal to assist students in creating writing that is alive, meaningful, and challenges the current concept of what acceptable writing is within higher education.

Key words: Langston Hughes, Composition Pedagogy, Humor Pedagogy, AAVE, code-meshing
“Like a welcome summer rain, humor may suddenly cleanse and cool the earth, the air, and you.”
~Langston Hughes, “A Note on Humor”

“They don’t have to learn the rules to write right first; the blended form or code meshing is writin right”
~Vershawn Ashanti Young, “Should Writers Use They Own English?”

“The word in language is half someone else’s. It becomes ‘one’s own’ only when the speaker populates it with his own intention, his own accent, when he appropriates the word, adapting it to his own semantic and expressive intention.”
~Mikhail Bakhtin, The Dialogic Imagination
Introduction

I believe the study and practice of a language should not be reduced solely to its most mundane parts (grammar), nor should it be examined as a mimetic performance that is judged only by a master-teacher. Instead, the study of a language should be a point of departure for students to experiment and play with in order to make it their own. This is something that is echoed in the Bakhtin and Young epigraphs, which ultimately represent what I believe are the key components of how writing should be viewed and expressed within the composition classroom. While these might be ideal suggestions, as is true with any form of theorizing, I sincerely perceive a strong connection between students’ dread of writing classes and their performance in those courses with the ways in which we approach teaching the subject. This cause of dread, fear, and anxiety for such a class should be considered seriously, especially when these students end up retaking a course that should be passed the first time around. From a pedagogical perspective, we as English teachers in higher education, hold tremendous responsibility in understanding why writing poses such a hurdle to the beginning college student. One of the reasons that seems plausible, based on my own experience of teaching beginning writers, is the disparity between the writing expectations of the administration and the students’ expectations of what academic writing entails. Chairpersons of English/Writing departments often expect these beginning writing courses to be taught in a specific way, sometimes choking grammar down the throats of students, but does such a method foster any real sense of writing growth and engaging in discussions about the language we use on a daily basis? The answer unequivocally is: no! The pedagogical texts that frame my argument and the call for change in teaching beginning writers in college include Paulo Freire and James Berlin, but neither one of them even touch upon the notion of pleasure and excitement within the classroom. bell hooks, however, is one of the first feminist authors I have encountered who actually wants to embrace a form of excitement in the classroom. According to hooks, “Excitement in higher education is viewed as potentially disruptive of the atmosphere of seriousness assumed to be essential to the learning process,” (7) but as someone who sees education as a liberating force, hooks wants to disobey the ways in which higher education views the classroom, just as I am proposing to do in my English 100 courses. hooks refers to her own pedagogy as an “engaged pedagogy” that is steeped in political activism that seeks to address the concern she has for higher education’s unwillingness to promote teaching that “works against the grain, to challenge the status quo […]” Ideally, education should be a place where the need for diverse teaching methods and styles should be valued, encouraged, seen as essential to learning” (203). Like hooks, who wrote this exactly ten years ago, I too see the same issues at work in the college writing classroom specifically, where the freedoms of using and practicing language have been limited to SAE and fails to recognize any other forms of voice, or life in writing. Our contemporary writing classrooms require reimagining, reinvention, and reconsideration, and this is where Langston Hughes can make his way into the worlds of beginning writers.

1 bell hooks does not capitalize her first and last name and she publishes all of her scholarship this way, so it is important I do the same here.
Down-to-earth language, humor, and the subsequent laughter that springs from such humor are the two most apparent elements found in Langston Hughes’ writing. Whether one is reading his blues poems, novels, newspaper columns, or plays, there will always be something to laugh about, whether joyfully or sadly, and it is in this moment of amusement when Hughes is trying to tell us something important. But what exactly is that? According to Onwuchekwa Jemie, Hughes used African American forms of expression, one of them predominately humor, as a means “to record and interpret the lives of common black folk, their thoughts and habits and dreams, their struggle for political freedom and economic well-being” (95). While I do agree with Jemie here, I would even further argue that what Hughes is doing through his texts, and specifically through the rhetoric of African American humor, is to catalogue the spirits and voices of the African American community; voices that reach out into both a black and white audience, and attempt to create a dialogue between these two worlds. Hughes’ humor texts are unmatched in their ability to use language as the vehicle for discourses about the problematic issues that still matter today: race, gender, politics, economics, education, culture, etc. One such example comes from one of his longer pieces of fiction entitled Not Without Laughter, in a particularly important scene for the protagonist of the novel, Sandy. Sandy is not someone who does a lot of laughing throughout the text, but he is surrounded by the noise of laughter quite regularly. In what I would argue is the most pivotal scene for young Sandy, he comes to an understanding of how laughing fits into his life and his social world through his experience in the pool hall:

Sometimes they would create a racket that could be heard for blocks. To the uninitiated it would seem that a fight was imminent. But underneath, all was good-natured and friendly—and through and above everything went laughter. No matter how belligerent or lewd their talk was, or how sordid the tales they told—of dangerous pleasures and strange perversities—these black men laughed. That must be the reason, thought Sandy, why poverty-stricken old Negroes like Uncle Dan Givens lived so long—because to them, no matter how hard life might be, it was not without laughter (Hughes 267).

This is a moment of enlightenment and there is a strong emphasis on the cohesion of the spirit of laughter and the African American experience that is not mentioned anywhere else in the text. From this moment on, Sandy knows for the first time what he wants and where he needs to go. The transformative powers of laughter demonstrated by this moment indicates the fact that there is both an external and internal mechanism at work that involves the community of participants (the pool players) and those outside of that laughing community. The important thing to note here though is that Hughes wants those on the outside to make an effort to understand that there is something else going on inside of the pool hall besides rowdy laughter and noise; that this moment serves as an invitation where Hughes is encouraging us, whether we are black or white readers, to listen and pay attention to what constitutes this modern African American voice. Sandy’s voice is not solely represented throughout the novel, but that of his grandmother, Aunt Hager, is also a powerful influence throughout the narrative in terms of considering the issues of outsiders/insiders and blacks/whites. In one of her longer lectures to Sandy, Aunt Hager reflects on her memories of working for white people, and she tells Sandy that:
But I’s been sorry fo’ white folks, fo’ I knows something inside must be aggravatin’ de po’ souls. An’ I’s kept a room in ma heart fo’ ‘em, ‘cause white folks needs us, honey, even if they don’t know it […] White peoples maybe mistreats you an’ hates you, but when you hates ‘em back, you’s de one what’s hurted, ‘cause hate makes yo’ heart ugly […] There ain’t no room in this world fo’ nothin’ but love.” (Laughter 194).

While this is not a language of laughter, Hughes makes a decision to use a different English from the English Sandy narrates with, creating a much more realistic world where language is consistently changing. As a result, in looking at the pedagogical implications for Hughes’ humor oeuvre, I am also highly interested in Hughes’ abilities of incorporating code-meshing into his writing, as just evidenced in Aunt Hager’s advice to young Sandy.

When considering my own teaching experiences, the writing I receive from students, whether it comes from my Developmental Composition courses or Research and Writing courses, always tends to have some version of code-meshing present. By code-meshing, I mean a version of writing that I see as something extremely positive and promising to include within a composition classroom. There are multiple definitions, but the definition that reflects the one I most closely associate with comes from Canagarajah when he says that code-meshing is a “strategy for merging local varieties with standard written Englishes in a move toward gradually pluralizing academic writing and developing multilingual competence for transnational relationships” (586). Typically, multilingualism is something that is not taught and practiced within a college composition course, and as an instructor, it is my “duty” to assist these students in becoming aware of this particular code’s presence and to work on writing that out instead of considering its relevance and what it can teach us. Standard Written English (SWE) is what my students are supposed to be able to perform when they leave my class. But what about all the other Englishes that get left out? Should code meshing be something useful in the composition classroom where we can engage in a discussion about such differences in language? Langston Hughes’ works have sincerely helped me answer this question because so much of his writings serve as inspiring examples that demonstrate the powers of humorous code meshing that could be brought into the classroom and used as learning tools to consider, question, and recognize the various englishes that surround us. One such variant to Standard American English (SAE) is African American Vernacular English (AAVE), which is a highly controversial due to its deviation from formal, written standards. Simply stated, AAVE is a form of English that African Americans claim as their own, encompassing its own grammar and linguistic signs (Gates xix). Variations of AAVE are commonly found within my composition classrooms, and to ignore such writing would be to ignore an entire community of thinkers. As a result, within the context of a beginning writer’s composition classroom, there needs to be a strong emphasis on inclusion instead of exclusion. In what follows is an endeavor to reinvent my beginning writing classroom to reflect the needs of the students who sit before me, dreading the writing they will have to do throughout the semester. In combatting this dread, we will look closely at AAVE and code meshing, primarily through the lens of Hughes’ humor texts.
Humor as a Form of Learning

If one were to peruse the textbooks available to teachers of beginning college writers, almost all of them would be some form of workbook designed to conduct and perform various grammar tasks and exercises to help wash away the grammatical sins of the students. Pearson’s *Essential College English* boasting about its state-of-the-art feature that calls students’ attention to important grammar rules throughout the chapter. The text also has “Find the Error” activities sprinkled throughout the chapters where students are challenged to identify errors in sample sentences. Is that what we want to train students to do? Find all the wrong things that are happening in a piece of text? I then went to the table of contents for another book severely promoted by Pearson, *In Harmony: Reading and Writing*, and read through some sample chapters, only to find the same old material presented: mimicking modular texts, traditional writing genres (writing to narrate, describe, analyze, argue, etc.), and editing writing. While these elements are important in any college language classroom, I do not think it should be the backbone of the learning environment. I tend to adhere to the pedagogical approach offered by Sean McDowell in his article, “To Grammar or not to Grammar?” where he posits that teaching the technical aspects of writing should be “proactive and not reactive. Instead of dwelling on what students do not know about writing, begin with what students do know” (254). And what students do know is humor, comedy, satire, etc.

Using humor in the classroom brings enthusiasm, positive attitudes, and optimism for the students, while at the same time, it opens up the learning environment to include critical thinking and writing that might not have been considered before. During her research on learning and humor, educator-researcher Mary Kay Morrison, author of *Using Humor to Maximize Learning*, looked at brain scans that showed high levels of activity in multiple areas of the brain when humor was used in conversation and instruction. Morrison comments that “We’re finding humor actually lights up more of the brain than many other functions in a classroom. In other words, if you’re listening just auditorily in a classroom, one small part of the brain lights up, but humor maximizes learning and strengthens memories” (McNeely 1). This argument for humor in the classroom is dripping with references to language. While it is not clear whether the participants, both teachers and student alike, in Morrison’s study were reading humorous texts, discussing humorous texts, or both, it is evident that students know how to respond to and interact with one another in a more comical environment. That being said, it is essential that the texts chosen for my composition classroom reflect the type of humorous language we want to be looking at. I envision our main textbook to be a collection of Hughes’ writing selections, along with some articles on AAVE and code meshing. The humor writing we will investigate might seem a bit simplistic at the onset, but as we explore more fully the content and context of Hughes’ writing, we will soon learn that beneath all the joking and laughter, there can be insight hidden beneath the humorous layers of language.
Humor as Communal Consciousness Creation

One of the most profound ways of looking at humor as a form of language comes from Joseph Boskin when he writes that

“Like all language, humor organizes and correlates experience by seeking and creating order and meaning; it strives to clarify the vague through analogue conversion, and as different experiences are absorbed into social awareness, translates them into folk stories and tales. In doing so, humor creates a communal consciousness, building the generations while at the same time enabling each person a singular connection” (18).

A “communal consciousness” that is simultaneously “singular” is one of the characteristics that makes Hughes’ writing so approachable for a writing course. As beginning writers, their own sense of community awareness is at a junction because they are now thrown into an academic community where they are not necessarily sure where they fit just yet. Reading, discussing, and writing about this issue of “communal consciousness” that springs from the rhetoric of humor is something that will hopefully push beginning writers’ anxiety toward the back of their minds so that they can focus on and engage more with the actual language of the text. Too many times as teachers, we tend to talk around the text instead of really delving and talking with the actual text. An excellent example of this “communal consciousness” creation can be found in the short, comedic elements of Hughes’ Simple story, “Jazz, Jive, and Jam.”

In this story, Simple’s simple solution to the boring academic lecture his wife dragged him to makes a lot of sense, particularly for beginning college students who would certainly agree with Simple’s views on the often dull lectures of academia. But the unique thing about this specific solution is that Simple holds on strong to his idea instead of dismissing it as another one of his whimsical philosophies. The story begins by poking fun of the Negro History Week lecturer by calling him a “Negro hysterian” (Return of Simple 239). The comedic linguistic element here is alluding to the speaker’s hysteria or madness, and even giving voice to the fact that those who attend such lectures are hysterical or mad, which is why Simple wants to clearly state his loathing for such a performance. Simple’s attitude on racial integration is completely different from his wife, Joyce, who has “been pursuing culture since childhood” (240). Joyce rejoices in lectures on racial justice, and does not see the dryness that Simple does. Simple argues for a more upbeat and less serious approach to handling the racism crisis. In a lot of ways, Simple’s solution is the absence of language. He validates more of a lyrical language of song and dance that has tones of laughter and pleasure. In other words, the universal language of music is something that can create fusion more so than any stifling lecture hall. The belief that the music hall is where transformations can take place is something Hughes would advocate because there is community there in that moment. What Simple does in this story is recognize an alternate “communal consciousness” that could reach more people than the exclusionary lecture hall. For Hughes, the racism crisis is not so much about understanding all the words and the language, but more about the community coming together as a single force.
Combatting the Trouble with Humor in the Classroom

Claudia Cornett asserts that “many educators still think laughter and humor are frivolous and obstruct serious scholarly pursuits” (Sobiech 46, emphasis added). Highlighting this word serious is highly important because there is a distinction that is often made by society in reference to studying or teaching humor between working and playing. Working is considered something that must be treated seriously, while playing equals having fun and “never the twain shall meet.” In other words, to take writing seriously means to avoid humor altogether, but is this not an injustice to our students? Are we not surrounded by comical texts on a regular basis? So why exclude them from or writing classrooms? One of the reasons might have to do, again, with the lack of access to pedagogical texts that almost altogether ignore the rhetoric of humor. In looking at some popular texts, it is evident that humor is not a current pedagogical concern:

The Bedford St. Martin’s Everything’s an Argument contains one chapter devoted to humor, including a description of satire and parody, the equally prominent Norton Field Guide says nothing. And some authors, when they do mention humor, emphasize caution. In Classical Rhetoric for the Modern Student, Edward P. J. Corbett and Robert J. Connor warn that “[h]umor is an extremely difficult art, and if students do not have a natural gift or an acquired skill for humor, they would do best to avoid the use of this available means of persuasion.” (Sobiech 283)

How will we ever know if our students actually possess such a “gift” as humor writing if we never allow a space for it to happen in our writing classrooms? What it comes down to is the fact that humorous texts, like Hughes’s, play a subordinate role to the writing of more serious authors who practice Standard American English (SAE) and write in ways that can confound the most brilliant of scholars. The prestige of a particular author lies in her/his ability to dance with language, not describe a night of dancing, which is what Hughes sometimes does in his own writing. But to which author would our beginning writing students most respond: the serious performer, or the joking juggler of words? Most likely these students would choose the juggler, and such an act might even be a little bit more memorable for them as well. What I am most strongly urging is that we need to consider multiple ways of looking at writing, and that if we solely limit our beginning writing students to view language and the process of writing as a performance of mastering a way of writing that is not their own, then I fear our roles and goals as instructors of writing have somehow failed our students because to look at language monolinguistically is to help reproduce and reinforce the linguistic hierarchies that are currently in place.

As a result, my role as an instructor of writing is to challenge students to dare to write against the formal guidelines and rules of English in order to produce a form of writing that is all their own, where they have complete ownership of the language they have chosen to use, and do not have to justify their choices to anyone. If a student desires to write humorously about a particular issue or event s/he recently experienced, then why stop the student? What is the harm? The only harm is limiting a student’s chance and choice to experiment and play with language in order to create something meaningful to read. An example of this can be linked with the
prewriting strategies we work on in class. Some of the language that comes out of these prewriting stages is not the desired form of writing in higher education (SWE), but writing full of energy and emotion that could not be captured by following the rules of SWE. Hughes’ own humorous writing also stands as a testament of writing against the institutions of power in an attempt to circulate a more genuine and accessible form of expression, which is something beginning writers should certainly be exposed to.

What Code-Meshing Can Teach Beginning College Writers

In my classroom, writing well does not only mean that a student can perform grammatically correct sentences, or mimic the five-paragraph essay, but a strong writer is able to have the confidence to experiment with language, and be aware of the diverse varieties of English that surround her/him on a regular basis. Who else was more aware of the multiple languages surrounding him than Langston Hughes? In his travels around the world, Hughes catalogues the different languages that are revealed to him throughout his two autobiographical texts, The Big Sea and I Wonder as I Wander. While Spanish, SWE (Standard Written English), and AAVE take the primary stage for the languages present in these two texts, it is clear that Hughes was no stranger to code-meshing, and his ability to cause his readership to think of English as a plural language that belongs to multiple communities. One such chapter from I Wonder as I Wander that is called “Salud Madrid,” we see Hughes talking in Spanish with his friends, Ernest Hemingway among them, as well as singing Spanish songs in a bar late at night:

Madrid, que bien resistes,
Madrid, que bien resistes,
Mamita mia, los bombardeos! (Hughes Reader 454)

As soon as the song is finished, Hughes comments that the people then “asked us to sing something in our language” (455). This union of language is a powerful moment in this chapter, and Hughes’ ability to not only describe and reinvent it as realistically as possible is just a small glimpse into how vital experimentation and exposure to code-meshing can be for students. After reading this chapter, students will be able to experience the linguistic power of code-meshing, and realize how much it is a part of our own lives.

Synthesizing Hughes into the Writing Classroom
Beginning of the Writing Course

Hughes begins his Book of Negro Humor collection with a note on humor where he says: “Humor is when the joke is on you but hits the other fellow first—before it boomerangs. Humor is what you wish in your secret heart were not funny, but it is, and you must laugh. Humor is your own unconscious therapy” (Negro Humor vii). While this is an interestingly unique definition of humor, it would be exciting to see what my beginning writers might think about this specific quote during the first week of our beginning writing course, or English 100. Not only
will this frame the foundation of our course that focuses on Hughes’ humorous and code-meshing texts, but it will alert them to the fact that there is so much more to humor than the act of laughter, and that the eye-brow raising that sometimes might spring up on us is what Hughes wants us to be aware of. He uses the metaphor of the boomerang here to signal that humor’s effects and intentions can reach multiple audiences. That being said, in terms of introducing Hughes to the class, I would like to begin by using some of the writing from the first two parts of *The Book of Negro Humor*: “Cool Comics—Contemporary Comedy” and “Jokes and Jives—From Then to Now.” In choosing these two sections, I want students not only to ease into the language Hughes is using throughout, but I also want there to be enough content they can pull from these short, humorous pieces. One such example would be Right-O:

“Mirandy,” her mother addressed the daughter who had just returned from having graduated at Fisk University in its early days, “you want some ‘lasses on yo’ hoecakes?”

“Mothaw, you should say ‘mo-lasses,’ not ‘lasses.’”

“Gal, don’t talk foolishment to me. How kin you have mo’ ‘lasses, when you ain’t had no ‘lasses yit?” (*Negro Humor* 16).

In having students read something like this snippet, it will help set the tone of the course, and might also spark some interest into context. What is Fisk University now and what was it like “in its early days?” Just what is a hoecake exactly? While these questions might not necessarily be vital to understanding the significance of how Hughes is using humor and code-meshing, it allows a point of entrance into Hughes’ oeuvre, which up until now will be quite foreign to students.

**Moving Toward the Mid-way Point of the Course**

At this stage in the game, students will be well aware of the two themes/topics running throughout our course: humor and code-switching as seen through the lens of Langston Hughes’ texts. We will have discussed the use of and generated definitions of “the folk” that is consistently mentioned throughout Hughes’ writing. We will also have done some considerable work with Hughes’ Simple character and how the folk gets played out in this character, specifically as evidenced by the code-switching that goes on between the SAE of the narrator, and the AAVE of Simple. Toward the middle of the semester, it is my hope to move beyond prose and into discussing poetry and the blues. As a teacher of Hughes’ work, I cannot separate him from his blues because they were such a vital part of his life and rhythm as a writer. For example, while Hughes was observing and absorbing life in Harlem, “Hughes encountered a piano player in a cabaret whose music captured the rhythm of the lazy sway of jazz musicians. This rhythm became an integral part of ‘The Weary Blues,’ as well as much of Hughes’ work” (Williams 42). While students might have already sensed the lyrical language of Hughes’ prose, we would not have discussed his language of blues specifically until now. The first poem we would tackle is “The Weary Blues.” Listening to Hughes himself read the poem, students can get a sense of the ways in which he shifts language:
I got de weary blues
And I can’t be satisfied
I ain’t happy no mo’
And I wish that I had died. (Weary Blues 23)

The poet ends the piece after the musician goes to bed in language much different from much of the poem’s non-standard English:

The singer stopped playing and went to bed.
While the Weary Blues echoed through his head.
He slept like a rock or a man that’s dead. (24)

Despite this code-switching, which students would be able to recognize right away, the rhythm refuses to be silent, and is maintained until the very end. In order to further root students in the blues tradition, they will be required to bring in some blues music on their own and we will share some selections in class. As the students’ exposure to these sounds increases, they will hopefully see beyond and dispel the notion that typically defines the blues sound as depressing. As Hughes so eloquently says: “the mood of the blues is almost always despondency, but when they are sung people laugh” (Williams 43). The humor and the dialectal conversations of the characters in Hughes’ poems provide a flavor for the community that surrounded Hughes and his work. Such a community might remind students of their own back home, or the new one they are forming as new college students.

The End of the Course

At this point in time, students will have been exposed to almost every genre Hughes was writing, with the exception for his plays (inclusion of his plays will be considered for further courses and ideas). Their final project for the course will then become a collection of writings and genres, similar to the magazine, Fire!! In 1926, Langston Hughes, among other young black writers of the time, joined together to create a magazine that was unique to the literary and artistic growth of the Harlem Renaissance writers (Long 1). The contributors of this one-time, published issue wanted to provide a different image of what black artists were capable of creating. I use the term “different” here because contributors wanted to create something that was uncensored by the white press, so some of the material took up taboo issues like homosexuality, bisexuality, interracial marriages, etc. (Samuels 14). As a result, the magazine received scathing reviews and could not support itself, so the remaining copies of the magazine were burned. Langston Hughes wrote that the name of the magazine itself was intended to symbolize the contributors’ goals:

to burn up a lot of the old, dead conventional Negro-white ideas of the past […] into a realization of the existence of the younger Negro writers and artists, and provide us with an outlet for publication not available in the limited pages of the small Negro magazines then existing. (Johnson 77)
Students in this class will be given the opportunity to create their very own version of *Fire!!* This calls for students to follow their own artistic aesthetics and to produce art in their own way, as the original contributors once did.

**Final Project: Magazine Collection**

Each student’s magazine should have its own, unique name, and should incorporate as many forms of genre writing as they like. While some students may prefer writing in a certain genre, they must include at least one sample of writing that reflects a connection to Hughes’ own writing genres. These required writings will include a newspaper column, poem, and short story. Their magazines could take a hybrid form that blends multiple genres, and could even include visual and audio as well. They are in charge of how they would like to compile their magazines, and could do so digitally, or even by hand. Basically, the students can be as bold as they wish, but their magazine collection must reflect their own work and relationship to the texts of Hughes. I imagine that humor and code-meshing will most likely take center stage for a lot of these magazines, but how they choose to use them rhetorically should be extremely interesting. The topics and narratives of interest should also be exciting to experience. And who says teaching and learning writing cannot be an exciting endeavor?

**Conclusion**

My own pedagogical journey has taken me to a moment of considering the college writing classroom as a space of excitement, enjoyment, and fun. Too many of my classrooms, both as a student and as an educator, have lacked this tone and mode of instruction, which is unhealthy and detrimental to any sense of sincere learning that should be taking place. To teach a class how to perform research is dull and dreary, but connecting that research to writing that is alive, beautiful, and linguistically powerful, as Hughes’ is, seems to promote a more effective use of class time and focus on language within the college writing classroom. Instead of showing students what they do wrong as writers, we should be giving them the opportunity to show us what they can do well as writers, and from there, they should be able to grow as language producers both inside the classroom and out. In focusing on humor and code-meshing in the works of Hughes and in their own writing, students will be able to conquer their fears and anxieties of college writing.

When I was working on my Master’s Degree, one of my professors said something to me that will always stay with me. The course was a requirement for my program on critical theory, and the assignments in that class were unlike any others I had had up until this point in my degree program. He encouraged us to write freely and to not be afraid of letting the “I” voice trickle into our writing responses. He wanted us to “write with a pulse.” That phrase: *writing with a pulse*, is something that will always be with me, not only as I write my own work, but as I teach students. When I first began teaching college courses, I soon realized, very sadly of course, that not many students have a heartbeat to their writing, and for the life of me, I could not
understand why this was! After a few solid years of working at teaching, I soon realized that the fear and anxiety students felt about their pre-conceived notions of college writing were holding them back from infusing life into their writing. Writing should not be about writing for the teacher, or writing for a grade, or writing for a system that excludes multiple voices, but it should be about finding that pulse. Hughes’ writing provides an excellent example of a sustained heartbeat, or pulse that resonates throughout his entire repertoire of texts, which is clearly demonstrated in his poem, “African Dance:”

The low beating of the tom-toms
The slow beating of the tom-toms […]
Surs your blood […]
Like a wisp of smoke around the fire-
And the tom-toms beat […]
And the low beating of the tom-toms
Stirs your blood. (Weary Blues 105)

My hope and goal is that the students in my English 100 course will be stirred by Hughes’ work to create texts that are alive with their own voices.
References